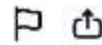




Chapter 36



POV: Draven

Susan was beside me when she explained, her voice carrying the particular steadiness of a woman who has already decided the situation is manageable.

"She got lost in the garden. She must've wandered too far and became disoriented. She says she doesn't remember much."

I turned my gaze to Isla. Or the woman standing before me, claiming to be her, holding the position with precision.

She looked like Isla. The silver-threaded gown. The crescent mark on her cheek, sitting in exactly the right position. Even the way she hesitated, just slightly, as if confused, was familiar in its quality.

But Raven had not stopped growling. She parted her lips, her voice soft, uncertain. "All I remember is changing my dress and wandering in the garden. I don't know how I ended up outside."

I studied her. Her hands were shaking. Not enough for Susan to notice — I filed that. Susan noticed most things, and the fact that she had missed this told me the tremor was calibrated, controlled, the precise amount of distress that read as genuine rather than performed.

My wolf pressed against the surface of my control, restless and unsettled, running the calculation Raven always ran when the situation did not resolve cleanly.

I exhaled and pushed the uncase into the space where I kept uncase when the situation required me to function, and I made the decision that kept the room stable.

She was here. That was what I was going to work with until I had evidence that required a different response.

My mate, or the woman standing in my mate's place, was looking at me with eyes that pulled at me to close the distance.

"Come." I wrapped an arm around her waist and kept my voice at the register it needed to be. "Let's get you to bed."

She leaned into me. Her body soft, her weight settling against mine with an ease that was almost right.

I walked her toward the Luna's chamber and I ignored the stiffness in my own limbs and the warning at the back of my mind that had not quieted once since I found the necklace. This was Isla. It had to be.

The moment the door shut behind us, the air in the room changed quality, and I read the change with the same attention I gave all rooms.

It was a specific quality of stillness, the kind a room produced when two people entered it and at least one of them had an agenda.

I had been in enough rooms to know the difference between the stillness of two people who were alone together and the stillness of a room being watched from the inside.

I led her to the bed and let my grip loosen. "You should rest." My voice was low, measured. "You've had a long night."

She sat on the edge of the mattress and looked at me with a

deliberateness I catalogued immediately.

Her eyes darkened, not the way I knew Isla's eyes darkened — the specific shift that came from feeling rather than intention.

This was different. This was the shift of a person who has arrived at the moment they have been building toward and is now executing it.

Her fingers curled around my wrist, and the grip had an intentionality that Isla's hands had never carried when they reached for me. My breath caught. She looked like Isla.

Raven was completely silent now. Not settled. Silent, the way he went silent when the situation had moved past warning into the territory where warning served no purpose.

"This is our night, Draven," she whispered, pulling me closer. "I won't let any memory gaps stop me from giving myself to you."

I held my position. Her hands moved to my chest, slow and deliberate, the motion of a person executing a rehearsed gesture.

My wolf bristled. Every muscle coiled into the specific tension of a man who knows what is happening and cannot yet prove it and cannot afford to act without proof.

She pulled me down before I had finished deciding, and the motion had the urgency of a person running out of time.

Her mouth found mine. The pressure of her lips was wrong, and the wrongness was the most specific and damning piece of evidence I had collected all night.

Not wrong in a way I could have articulated to someone who had not

been kissing Isla for weeks, who had not catalogued the specific quality of the way Isla kissed: tentative first, then full-commitment, all or nothing.

The way Isla kissed carried her history: the restraint before, the decision to surrender it, the courage of a woman choosing someone after a long time of choosing no one.

This was urgent, demanding, the kiss of someone who has arrived at a moment they have been planning and is now executing the plan. Nothing of Isla in it.

My hands remained at my sides. The refusal was not a decision. It was the body asserting what the mind had been slower to confirm.

My body refused to move. Raven had already run the conclusion I was not yet willing to say aloud.

I had been a fool, and the specific quality of this particular foolishness was one I would not soon forgive myself.

Not a complete fool — the necklace in my pocket was broken, and broken necklaces did not unclip themselves, and Isla would not have removed that pendant willingly. Unless she has lost it.

The fact that Raven had known from the garden and I had let comfort override intelligence was the specific failure I was going to carry for the rest of this night and every night after until I had corrected it.

I stepped back, one step, controlled, without the urgency that would have told her I knew.

I looked at her and she looked back with Isla's face, and the performance was extraordinary.

was extraordinary.

I was cold when I needed to be cold, and I had built twenty years of authority on that fact. I was cold now.

"Sleep." The word came out with the same controlled register I had been using all evening, giving her nothing. "We have time."

I walked to the window and turned my back to her. Outside, somewhere in the dark, the bond with Isla pulled at me, not gone, not severed, but distant and wrong and moving.

She was alive somewhere in the dark, and she was not here, and the woman on my bed was going to tell me where she was before this night was finished.

End *of* *The* **Chapter**

Chapter 36



Comments

4



Gifts

224

