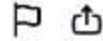




Chapter 38



POV: Draven

The fire burned low and the shadows it threw against the stone walls did not settle. Neither did I.

She lay beneath me, her body warm, her hands at my shoulders with the urgency I should have wanted to answer. Everything about the arrangement was correct.

My Luna. The ceremony completed. The pack's expectation fulfilled. The consummation that sealed a bond the whole of Crimson Fang had gathered to witness the beginning of.

And yet: I kissed her deeply and tasted honeyed wine on her lips and felt her arch toward me, her hands pressing at my chest. The warmth of her was real. The wanting was real.

But Raven had gone somewhere inside me I could not reach, somewhere deep and still and absolutely unconvinced, and his silence was the loudest thing in the room.

Her scent was wrong. Not absent — present, specific, but carrying the particular quality of a scent that had been constructed rather than earned.

The Isla I knew was fire and resistance underneath the restraint, the particular combination of a woman who had been holding herself back for a long time and was only beginning to stop. She met me as an equal. She pushed back. She surprised me, and that surprise was never

tentative.

This woman beneath me was waiting, performing a passivity that Isla had never performed, giving me the lead she had never given anyone.

I pushed the thought down and moved lower, dragging my lips down her throat, telling myself the trials had shaken her.

I wanted to believe it. I wanted this to be right. I wanted the bond between us to settle the way it should have settled, the clean solidifying weight of a claim completed.

She whispered my name in the specific register designed to make me lose what remained of my caution. It did not.

I growled low in my throat, frustrated with myself as much as with the situation. I forced the unease down and pressed forward because the pack expected this and Raven's silence was not evidence.

My instincts had been wrong before. Her fingers found my nape and pulled me closer. "This is our night," she murmured, her voice thick with need. "I won't let any memory gaps stop me from giving myself to you." I froze.

She had said those words before. In the corridor, when Susan brought her in. The exact same sentence, the exact same cadence, spoken with the quality of a line that had been prepared rather than arrived at.

I kissed her again. My hands moved and she guided me and I let her guide me and I moved forward into the space between us, and then I stopped.

Because I felt the truth before I had finished thinking it, in the specific way that bodies know before minds are willing to confirm.

A sharp breath left me. I went completely still, the way Raven went still when certainty had arrived.

She was not untouched, and the knowledge arrived with the precision of a realization I should have reached for earlier.

Seraphine tensed beneath me with an abruptness that confirmed what my body had just told me. "Draven?"

My eyes found hers. I searched them with the full attention I had been withholding all night, and what I found was the fraction of a second before calculation set in — shock, and then the deliberate smoothing of shock into composure.

"You..." My voice came out quiet. Controlled. "You weren't pure."

Her expression flickered. Shock first. Calculation after. Her chin came up. "No, I wasn't."

I held her gaze with the full attention of a man who has run out of patience for inference. "Who?"

She did not hesitate, which told me the answer had been assembled in advance. "Kael. He was my first mate."

Kael. I sat with it for exactly long enough to read what it meant and what it did not mean.

She reached up and touched my face, her thumb brushing along my jaw with the deliberate gentleness of a woman applying a poultice. "But I chose you in the end," she whispered. "That's all that matters now."

A slow, cold burn spread through me, every dismissed signal from the entire night compressed inside it.

I pulled back. Not with the rigidity of desire. With the rigidity of a man in whom every piece of intelligence gathered over the course of an entire night had just locked into a single, coherent shape.

Isla had never been with anyone. That was not assumption. That was the specific knowledge of a man who had spent weeks reading every hesitation, every held breath.

The connection between us had been raw and specific and unbroken by any prior claim.

This did not feel unbroken, and the word for what it felt was the word I had been avoiding all night.

She sat up. Her brows drew together with the specific expression of someone whose performance is being interrupted. "Draven?"

I stood and ran a hand through my hair because the motion gave me a half-second to decide what to do with what I now knew.

The woman on my bed was not Isla. She had worn Isla's face and marks and voice well enough to get this far, and that told me the scale of what I was dealing with, and the cold in my chest expanded into a thing with edges.

The woman in my bed wore Isla's face and had not felt like her for a single moment of the entire night.

I had kept walking forward because stopping required acting on what I could not yet prove.

Acting without proof was the error I did not make — until now.

I had the proof now, and the proof changed everything that came next. I

I had the proof now, and the proof changed everything that came next. I was done with managed uncertainty.

I grabbed my robe and pulled it over my shoulders. The action was deliberate, contained, and gave the room nothing of what was moving through me.

"Draven." The frustration in her voice had an urgency in it that told me she understood the shift. "Where are you going?"

I did not look at her, because looking required me to see Isla's face and I was done pretending that face was Isla's.

"I need air." I pulled open the heavy wooden door and stepped into the dimly lit corridor.

I moved fast down the corridor with the bond pulling northwest and the night still ahead of me.

I was done performing calm. Isla was somewhere in the dark. I was done.

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

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