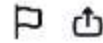




Chapter 39



POV: Draven

I sat in the high-backed chair near the hearth with my elbows on my knees and my hands steepled and the fire doing nothing useful in front of me.

The woman in my chambers wore Isla's face. She bore Isla's mark. And the moment I had touched her, every layer of what I had been telling myself over the course of the night had come undone simultaneously, and what remained underneath was a question I had been refusing to ask clearly.

Her scent was off. The reactions I had expected were not the reactions I had gotten.

And then there was Kael, the name she had produced without hesitation, too clean and too prepared, the answer of a person who has pre-loaded the disclosure and is deploying it at the correct moment.

It did not add up. I had expected her untouched. That expectation was not vanity. It was the specific knowledge of a man who had spent weeks reading a woman who had never given herself to anyone.

The Isla I knew had a particular kind of fire underneath the control, unshaken and specific and entirely her own. That fire was not in the room tonight.

Raven pressed beneath my skin, not growling now but oriented, the

way he oriented when he was building toward a conclusion. His wolf had sensed it. And doubt gnawed at me from the inside, refusing to be organized into anything useful while I remained in that chair.

I stood. The chair scraped the floor with the sound of a decision being made. I could not stay in this room running the same calculation against the same unknowns.

I needed precision. I needed the input that would either confirm what Raven already knew or give me the evidence that would allow me to act.

I strode to the door and threw it open with the controlled force of a man who has stopped pretending patience.

Susan and Jamie materialized within moments, their postures already adjusted to whatever version of me they had read in the sound of the door. Both faces sharp. Both waiting without speaking, which was the quality I valued most in the people I trusted.

"Alpha." Susan's brow contracted slightly, reading the register of the room before the words arrived. "You called?"

"I need you to keep an eye on the Luna." My voice was clipped, each word placed precisely. "Make sure she's comfortable. If she needs anything, handle it."

Susan tilted her head, her sharp eyes narrowing by a fraction. "Is something wrong?"

I gripped the doorframe for exactly half a second. Yes. Everything was wrong. The woman in my chamber was not the woman whose name she was using and Raven had known it from the garden and I had dismissed the intelligence for the better part of three hours.

But I could not say that. Not yet. Not until I had the thread that tied confirmation to action.

"I just need air." My tone dropped to the register that ended questions. Strained, but deliberate.

Susan and Jamie exchanged the glance that meant they were not convinced but were choosing to hold.

"Double the round-checking in the territory." I looked at Jamie directly. "I want patrols tighter than usual tonight. No one comes in or out without my approval."

Susan straightened, her posture becoming the posture she wore when she had received an order she intended to execute. "Understood, Alpha."

I nodded once. Then I turned and moved down the hallway at the pace that did not signal alarm to anyone watching but covered ground faster than it looked.

The moment I cleared the packhouse and hit the cool night air, I inhaled, forcing my lungs to take in the full composition of the night.

Pine and damp earth and the distant smoke from the hall's torches, and underneath all of it, the bond, pulling northwest with the specific wrongness it had been carrying since the garden.

Alive. Moving. Isla, somewhere in the dark, alive and moving northwest, and every second between us was a second that mattered.

Raven had known from the beginning and held the knowledge until I was ready to claim it. I ran.

Not because running resolved the questions — running did not resolve

questions. But it gave my body somewhere to put the urgency that had been building all night.

I had noticed the wrongness the moment I placed that pendant around her neck and she accepted it without the catch of breath Isla had produced when I told her she was mine. I had filed it. I had kept moving forward because the ceremony required it and Raven's instinct was not yet evidence.

Beneath the surface of every interaction, every word, every response the woman in my chambers had given me across the entire course of the night, the texture was wrong.

I had trusted instincts my entire life. Now they screamed to me to pay attention.

I had trusted my instincts for twenty years. I had built Crimson Fang on the principle that intelligence gathered and ignored was worse than intelligence never gathered.

Ignored intelligence created a specific kind of blind spot — the kind that looked like certainty from the outside and was actually the gap where a plan had been inserted.

Someone had inserted a plan into my pack. Tonight. On the night of the Luna ceremony, with every guard softened by celebration and the Alpha himself occupied by the weight of the moment.

I stopped in a clearing, my breaths coming in sharp bursts, and I stood under the open sky with the moon overhead.

My suspicions were right. The case had already closed. Raven had closed it in the garden and I had simply been the last to admit it — the question

it in the garden and I had simply been the last to admit it — the question was not whether Isla had been taken. The question was who planned it, how far ahead, and where she was being taken.

I had the first answer. I needed the second and the third, and I was going to get them before the night was over.

I stood in the clearing under the moon and let the cold settle into me and let it sharpen into the thing I was best at. Not warmth. Not softness. The specific, controlled, absolute focus of a man who has identified a target and is deciding how to move.

I would find her. The storm inside me was not going anywhere. I had learned long ago how to use one.

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

Chapter 39



Comments

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Gifts

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