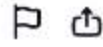




Chapter 44



POV: Draven

The pendant sat in my palm and the broken clasp pressed against my skin the way it had been pressing for a day and a half, and I had been letting it press because the alternative was following the conclusion it pointed to.

My thumb moved over the crescent again, the sixteenth time since this morning. Raven stirred.

"What's wrong?" His voice curled through my mind, not alarmed yet.

I exhaled and let the pendant rest in my open palm. "She hasn't even looked for it."

Raven was quiet for a moment, running it the way he ran everything: against all the available evidence before he committed to a direction. "You think she doesn't care?"

I shook my head, the motion slow enough that even the gesture felt unconvinced. "Maybe I'm just being paranoid."

But they came out wrong in the saying of them, the specific wrongness of words that do not believe themselves.

The Isla I knew would have noticed the moment the pendant left her neck. Would have searched the chambers, the garden, the corridors.

Would have asked me with that specific directness she had, the look that

did not soften or qualify, the look that said she needed the answer and trusted me to give it.

The woman sleeping in my bed had said nothing, had not reached for her throat, had not mentioned the pendant once.

Not one word. Not one hand raised to her throat to register the chain missing. Not one moment of looking.

Raven let out a low, rumbling growl. "For what it's worth, I haven't heard Lira either since that night."

My heart slowed to a beat and a half. "What?" The word came out flat. I wanted to have heard him wrong.

"Isla's wolf is quiet." His voice had gone flat with the flatness he used when he had finished calculating and found the result wrong. "Too quiet. It's unnatural. I should at least be able to sense her."

My grip tightened around the necklace until the broken clasp pressed into my palm again.

The cold that had been sitting in my chest since the garden acquired weight and direction.

I had spent the past day running against my own instincts, constructing rational explanations for the wrongness I kept encountering. I had built the case for my own doubt and kept presenting it to myself as evidence.

But Raven had not doubted Isla. Not from the night she walked onto my territory. Not once had my wolf read her as anything other than real, specific, present, worth protecting.

And now Raven was telling me he could not reach Lira at all, which

meant either Isla's wolf had gone silent on her own in the days since the ceremony, which did not happen to healthy wolves under any circumstance I had encountered in twenty years of leading a pack.

Or the woman in my bed was not Isla. And I had known that since the garden. And I had not acted.

The door opened. Susan stepped inside with her expression tight in the specific way it got when she had been holding information back and had reached the point where holding it was no longer possible.

"Alpha." Her voice carried the edge she used when delivering intelligence she had verified. "There's something I need to tell you." My spine went rigid.

The pendant in my palm felt heavier, the way evidence felt heavier when a second piece of it arrived.

I met Susan's eyes and held them with the specific attention I gave to people who were about to tell me what I needed to hear without softening it. "What is it?"

She hesitated. That half-second of hesitation, from Susan who did not hesitate without reason, was the thing that dropped the floor out of my stomach.

I set the pendant on the table beside me with a deliberateness that was also a decision, and I stood.

"There was a wolf from Midnight Crest. He came to the gate two hours ago with information he said was urgent. I held him in the guardhouse while I verified his identity." She paused. "His name is Brennan. He served under Garrick for eleven years before he left the pack."

"He says a woman named Seraphine — Isla's twin — approached Garrick six weeks ago. A substitution plan. The ball, the ceremony, the consummation."

Susan's jaw tightened. "He says the woman in this packhouse is not Isla. He says Isla was taken from the garden by a man named Kael, who is Seraphine's former—"

"Where is she?" The question cut across whatever Susan had been about to say. I was already on my feet.

"Brennan says northwest." Susan's voice did not waver. "He says Kael has a holding property across the border. He didn't have the exact location, but he had a road. He gave me the name of the nearest village."

I picked up the pendant and closed my fist around it with the specific grip of a man who has just been given the information he has been missing for three days.

Raven was already pressing forward inside me, black and absolute and done with patience.

"How long has she been there?" The question came out level. I was already computing the answer before she gave it.

"Since the night of the ceremony." Three days. She had been there for three days while I ran calculations in the dark of my own chambers, while I gave her time, while I constructed reasons not to act on the intelligence my wolf had been handing me since the garden.

I walked to the door. "Bring Brennan to me. Then saddle two horses and find Jamie." I was already moving as the words left me.

"Alpha." Susan's voice stopped me at the frame. "What about the woman

"Alpha." Susan's voice stopped me at the frame. "What about the woman in the Luna's chambers?"

I did not turn around. "Lock the door. She goes nowhere and speaks to no one until I return."

I stepped into the corridor and moved toward the gates at the pace that covered ground without announcing itself, because the only thing that mattered now was the direction northwest and the bond that had been pulling me there since the garden and the three days I had already wasted being careful.

Raven ran ahead of me in the dark with the full force of three days of withheld certainty behind him, and I let him lead because for the first time since the garden, we were finally moving in the right direction.

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

Chapter 44