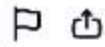




Chapter 45



POV: Draven

Raven had not stopped moving all night, and that had a specific meaning that I had been choosing not to receive.

Not the restless circling of a wolf that could not settle. The specific, persistent pressure of one that was done waiting and had been done for longer than I had allowed it to be.

Susan stood across the chamber, her posture taut. She had delivered the report sixty seconds ago and the weight of it had not moved.

"The scent of Isla was picked up at the farthest edge of our territory. Not in the packhouse. Not where it should be."

I exhaled slowly, giving myself one second before the question. "Did they track it further?"

Susan hesitated a beat before shaking her head. "A team was sent to follow the trail."

"And?" The pause before she answered told me before the words did. Her voice was firm, but it carried the weight before she gave it.

"They never returned."

Raven went still inside me, and the specific quality of his stillness changed the air in the room.

"How long?" My voice came out low and controlled, holding the space

the answer needed to fill.

"Three hours." Susan's voice stayed level. "They should have checked in by now."

My grip on the pendant tightened until the broken clasp cut into my palm, the physical fact of what it represented pressing into the skin that had been avoiding the conclusion.

A missing scout team. A scent on the wrong edge of the territory. The woman in my bed who had not once raised her hand to her throat in three days to find the chain missing.

You already know the truth. Raven's voice cut through the back of my mind. Stop pretending you don't.

My body hardened. I had been pushing this aside for days. Constructing frameworks, building reasonable explanations, holding my own intelligence at arm's length because I needed proof before I acted and proof had kept not arriving and I had kept waiting for it.

Not anymore. "Jamie needs to assemble a team and move out before dawn." I held her gaze. "Now."

Susan's sharp eyes moved across my face. "Alpha, what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I should have trusted my instincts sooner." She took a slow breath. "And what about her?"

I already knew what Susan was asking. The woman in the Luna's chambers. The decision I had been deferring because acting without proof was the error I did not make, and now I had proof, and the error had cost three days.

My jaw tightened against three days of deferred action in the next sentence. "I'm going to ask her myself."

I turned. The moment I stepped inside, I knew, the way I had known since the garden and had chosen not to act on.

Seraphine was seated at the vanity with her back to me, the moonlight cutting across her figure, her reflection in the mirror available before she was aware of me.

I read it in three seconds. The posture too composed. The hands too still. The full attention behind the eyes rather than in the body.

She was performing a woman alone in her chambers, and the performance had been running long enough to wear at the edges.

"You're up late." She startled, not the genuine startle of someone caught off guard but the controlled fraction of a rehearsed response. Her hands gripped the edge of the vanity.

She turned and forced a small smile. "I couldn't sleep." Her voice carried the specific softness of manufactured vulnerability. "There's... a lot on my mind."

"What kind of things?" Her eyes flickered downward before meeting mine. "The trial, the ceremony, everything," she finished. "It's overwhelming."

Vague. Every word chosen for maximum range, minimum specificity, the language of a person covering ground they have not rehearsed specifically.

"You didn't seem overwhelmed before." I stepped toward the vanity, closing the distance by half. "What's changed?"

"I'm just tired." Her tone carried weariness at the exact register that invited sympathy. "I've been trying to adjust to everything, to being Luna, to... to us."

Raven growled low, a sound that vibrated through the floor of my chest without surfacing.

"You're hiding something." I kept my voice at the flat, deliberate register that ended evasion. "I can feel it."

Her eyes widened. The panic was real, the first real thing she had produced in this room, before she buried it. "Hiding something?" Her voice shook, just slightly. "Draven, I—"

"You're different." I stepped closer and watched her face process the closing distance. "Your scent, your mannerisms, even the way you look at me. It's like I'm standing in front of a stranger."

She stood abruptly. Her hands trembled at her sides with the controlled trembling of a woman managing a physical tell she could not fully suppress. "I don't know what you're talking about." Her voice climbed. "I'm the same Isla I've always been."

I stood in the silence that followed and I held her gaze and I gave her nothing.

She was lying. Every instinct I had owned for twenty years was unanimous. But instinct was not proof, and I had walked into this room to confirm, not to accuse. I gave her the silence and I waited.

"If you're the same," I watched her face with the attention I gave to intelligence reports, "then tell me this. Why do I feel like the woman I chose, the woman I bonded with, is gone?"

She froze. The mask cracked — one fraction of a second, the specific, involuntary slip that happened when a person received a question their prepared answer had not covered. I watched it happen and I catalogued it.

Then her face crumbled into pain, a pain so thoroughly constructed I could see the architecture of it. She turned away, her shoulders shaking.

Tears. It was a performance, and the effort behind it was genuine and considerable.

"Maybe you're the one who's changed," she whispered, and her voice broke in exactly the right place.

Raven snarled. She was stalling. Giving me the emotional register that would require me to walk it back, to soften, to perform doubt about my own certainty. It was a move, and it was not going to work.

"We'll talk in the morning." My tone closed the room the way a door closed a room. "Get some rest."

I walked out before she could build on it, and I did not look back at the performance still running behind me.

The door closed. I exhaled, sharp and deliberate, and let the breath take with it the controlled version I had been maintaining inside that room.

The real Isla was northwest. She had been there for three days. A team I had sent had not come back.

Raven pressed forward inside me, black and absolute and no longer asking permission.

I was done playing this game. She was out there, and I was going to bring

her home.

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

Chapter 45

