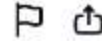




Chapter 47



POV: Draven

The war room held nothing I needed except Susan, and I had said what needed to be said to Susan, and now there was only movement.

She stood across the table, reading my face with the attention she brought to intelligence that mattered. The misplaced scent.

The missing scouts. The woman who had been sleeping in my bed for three days wearing Isla's face without Isla's weight behind it.

"Seraphine stays in her chambers until I return." I kept my voice low, blade-sharp.

Susan's brows lifted a fraction. The closest she came to surprise. She was not a woman who questioned orders, but this one required the question she was clearly running. "You're detaining the Luna?"

"She is not my Luna."

The words landed the way final things landed, without room to argue with them. Susan exhaled. "Understood."

I straightened. "Gather the guards. Do it quietly. I want her contained, not dead."

She gave a curt nod, the nod of a woman who would execute the order down to its exact parameters and ask no more about it. "And you?"

I took my cloak from the back of the chair and fastened it at my

shoulders. Raven pressed at the surface of my control, black and furious and done with patience, and for once I let him press. "I'm going to find Isla."

I left the war room. The packhouse fell behind me, the gate ahead, and beyond it the bond pulling northwest with the specific insistence it had been carrying since the night of the ceremony.

Not frantic. Not fading. Constant and directional, the signal of a woman who was alive and moving and had not given up.

I had not deserved that consistency. Three days of her alive and moving and constant at the end of the bond while I ran my calculations in the dark of my own chambers. Three days was long enough to have spent being careful when I should have been moving.

Raven ran alongside me in the dark of the outer boundary, his black shape cutting through the underbrush.

I ran with him because the horse was being saddled and Jamie was being briefed and the two minutes between the packhouse gate and the stable were two minutes I was not spending waiting.

The horse was ready when I reached it, and Jamie was beside it with his expression already at the specific set that meant he had questions he was deciding whether to ask.

He studied my face the way he studied terrain before committing a team to it. He had earned the right to ask this. "You're certain?"

"Past certain." I swung up into the saddle and felt Raven surge with the movement.

"Send word to the eastern patrol. I want a line of scouts from here to the

Breck crossroads. Any wolves carrying Kael's scent, they hold and send a runner."

"Understood." His expression carried the particular set it got when he had already run the calculation and was not going to voice the concern.

He voiced it anyway. "If the woman in the packhouse calls the pack while you're gone—"

"If she calls for the pack—" I looked at Jamie directly. "She's not bonded to this pack. Not legitimately. Crimson Fang hasn't accepted her. Whatever she reaches for won't hold."

Jamie gave a single nod, the nod of a man who had already moved past the question into the execution of the answer. "Then go."

I went. The road north opened ahead and Raven ran in the space beside me, inside me, both at once the way he always ran when the situation was urgent and I had stopped pretending it was not.

The bond pulled with the pressure of a fixed point. I oriented on it without hesitation and without the second-guessing I had wasted three days on.

She was alive. She was moving. She was fighting toward me from the other end of the distance between us, which was the specific quality of Isla that I should have trusted from the first night and had not.

She was fighting, which was the only thing about this entire situation that had not surprised me for a single moment.

A sound reached me from behind, the direction of the packhouse, carried on the wind in the specific layered way that pack communication traveled when it was moving through the mind-link rather than through

air. Not words. A pulse. A calling.

Seraphine had found her voice. I felt the edges of it reach me from behind, the frequency of a wolf using the pack bond as a weapon, pushing through a network she had no organic claim to.

The response from the pack was the response I had known it would be: the response of wolves who had not chosen her.

A hesitation. Not the immediate, unanimous answer a true Luna would have received from wolves who had accepted her through ceremony and time and the specific accumulation of trust.

A hesitation, then one voice, then another, then confusion in the link that sounded less like defense and more like a pack uncertain what it was being asked to defend.

Seraphine had called and the pack had not answered the way she needed. That was the answer I had counted on. Crimson Fang had not accepted her through the bond, through time, through the slow accumulation that made a Luna real rather than nominal. And that was going to cost her everything.

I kept riding. Jamie was at the packhouse. Susan was at the door. The situation was contained or it was not, and either way Isla was northwest and the bond was pulling.

The trees closed around me. The road narrowed. The bond tightened with proximity rather than distance, as if Isla herself was moving toward me from the other direction.

I did not slow down. The trees thinned ahead and the bond pulled and the night was full of distance left to cover. I was going to cover every

meter of it before dawn, and I was not stopping until I found her.

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

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