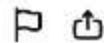




## Chapter 9



POV: Isla

No one in Crimson Fang spoke to me unless the task required it, and most tasks were arranged to avoid the requirement.

I trained. I did my chores. I ate alone in the communal hall with my back to the wall and my eyes forward, pretending not to hear the commentary that moved through the room whenever I sat down.

The pack had decided what I was before I had opened my mouth, and eight days had not shifted that verdict.

Outsider. Rogue. Tolerated, not wanted, and watched for the first useful reason to change that.

Fine by me. I had survived considerably worse than being unwanted inside a building that still had exits.

The problem, and it was both significant and ongoing and showed no signs of resolving, was Draven.

He watched me. Not occasionally, not when the situation called for it — always. During training when three of the senior warriors knocked me down harder than the session required, his gaze was on me when I got back up.

During meals when the table nearest mine went deliberately quiet, he was across the room tracking every wolf who had made the choice to be loud about it.

In the quiet hours when the packhouse settled and I had finally convinced myself I was unobserved, I would look up and find him there anyway.

I did not know what to do with that. Gratitude was dangerous. Fear was more honest, but even fear had its limits when the thing watching you had not yet chosen to act.

Then my body decided to make everything considerably worse, and it did so without my permission.

It started at the edge of perception. A warmth under my skin when he was close. A pull in my stomach when his scent crossed the training yard to me.

I catalogued it the way I catalogued exits, automatically and without investment, and told myself it was stress-response, biological deference to an Alpha, manageable and clinical and not worth examining.

By the fourth day it was none of those things, and I had stopped finding the clinical framing convincing.

By the sixth, I was waking at three in the morning with my pulse hammering in the wrong places and images behind my eyelids I had no interest in examining in daylight. His hands, the specific weight of them. The controlled force in every movement.

What that force would translate to in a context that was not a training yard. The way his attention moved over me, unhurried and thorough, and what it did to my nervous system that I had not consented to and could not make stop.

I pressed the heel of my palm to my sternum and lay in the dark and

ran the list. I had survived Garrick. I had survived Midnight Crest. I had crossed three territories alone. I was not going to be undone by my own body's reaction to a wolf I had not chosen and did not want to want.

I was still telling myself this, still believing it marginally, when the door creaked open.

I went still before I had made the decision to. Every muscle locked down at once, the body reacting to the sound before the mind had caught up to it.

A shadow filled the doorway — broad, commanding, the shape of the one wolf in this pack I had been trying to stop thinking about.

Draven. The word landed in the room before I had finished registering the shape of him.

I pushed upright. Spine straight, feet on the floor. Whatever he had heard in the room before he opened the door, whatever he had registered through wood and stone and thirty feet of corridor, I was not going to be caught horizontal.

He stepped inside without waiting for an answer to a question he had not asked, and closed the door behind him with a sound that was careful and final.

The space between us contracted and went still, the air in the room rearranging itself around him.

"What are you doing?" His voice was lower than usual, rougher at the edges, like the surface had been stripped back to base material.

"I finished training and my chores." I kept my voice level and my hands still at my sides. "I am trying to rest."

He did not move. Did not answer. His gaze moved across me in a slow, deliberate survey that had nothing to do with assessment.

Everything to do with what he was picking up from the room, from me, from the air, from whatever my body had been doing while I lay in the dark telling myself stories about clinical detachment.

He stepped closer without rushing, and my back found the edge of the bed with no room to go further.

The air in the room had changed, his scent stronger and denser, the wild authority of him occupying the space between us without any attempt at subtlety.

His pupils were expanded in the low light. His jaw held with deliberate control, bracing one response back against another.

"You are in heat." Flat and certain. A diagnostic delivered without inflection, stripped of everything that could be called invitation.

A current moved down my spine. "That is not possible." I had not shifted. The heat cycle required a shifted wolf, that was the biology, that was the fact. "I have not shifted."

"Your body does not know that." He closed the remaining distance to the point where the warmth of him became a physical fact against my skin.

His head dipped. His breath was warm against the curve of my neck — not a touch, a presence, the deliberate edge of one, designed to make the distinction feel irrelevant.

"Maybe I can help," he murmured, the words low enough that they did not need to travel far to arrive.

not need to travel far to arrive.

The room listed in my awareness. My hands found the sheets and gripped them.

He was Draven. He had watched me cross his clearing with no pack and no leverage and no name worth using. He had let me stay because it served a calculation I had not yet uncovered.

He was dangerous in the specific way that power over someone's survival is always dangerous. I had zero margin for the mistake his proximity was currently inviting.

I knew all of this with complete clarity, with no available margin for doubt, and it changed nothing.

My body's verdict on all of these facts was entirely and comprehensively unhelpful.

I held the sheets and held my breath and held the ground under my feet, because those were the three things still in my control, and I intended to keep all of them.

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

### Chapter 9