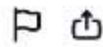




Chapter 18



POV: Seraphine

The dining hall of Midnight Crest was lit with candles, the table heavy with silver platters, and I was listening to my parents discuss the wedding with the patience of someone who has already won.

I heard the rest of it first — Crimson Fang, a trial, three moons — the way you hear distant weather before you register it as a storm.

Then the final word arrived and the hall went still. My mother's cup hit the table in three clean pieces. I understood that the world had made an error.

"Isla." I spoke it once, quietly, and the sound of it in my own mouth landed with a weight I had not prepared for.

My father's voice came through the silence with the particular calm that preceded violence. "You better not be lying. Or I will put your head on a spear."

The scout shook his head. "It is the truth. There will be a ceremony. You can see it for yourselves."

I stood. The chair scraped. "That is not true. That cannot be true." My voice rose with each word, climbing toward an edge I did not want the room to hear. "She is nothing. She was supposed to be gone!"

I did not wait for the table to compose a response. I walked out before one could form.

The corridor was empty. My heels on the stone floor were the only sound, too loud, betraying the speed I was walking at.

I hit the stairs and took them two at a time and did not stop until I had my chamber door between myself and everything below.

I crossed to the window. The dark outside was quiet and indifferent and I pressed my fingertips to the cold glass and made myself breathe through the specific, intolerable thing that was happening in my chest.

Luna. Isla. The two words occupied the same space in my mind and refused to coexist.

I was still standing at the window, fingers on the cold glass, when Kael knocked.

"Scraphine." His voice through the door was even, measured, the voice he used when he had decided in advance not to argue.

"Why are you upset? You will still be Luna here. We are still getting married. Is that not what you wanted? Isla is not a threat to you anymore."

I turned from the window with the particular slowness that is the opposite of calm. "Come in and say that again."

He opened the door and stepped inside and had the particular quality of a man managing his expression carefully, which meant the expression underneath was one I would not like.

"You do not understand, you stupid fool." I crossed the room toward him. "Isla was supposed to be gone. Not Luna of another pack."

Kael watched me with the calm that had always infuriated me. "Do not

tell me you are jealous."

"Jealous." I repeated the word with the precision of someone identifying an insult that has misfired. "Do not tell me you are happy about this."

His gaze settled. "To be honest, I am not surprised. Isla was always stronger than you gave her credit for."

The sentence arrived with the weight of a dropped stone, and I felt the rings of it move outward.

I had given Isla every credit she was owed, which was none. Isla had been born first and had held that over my head without trying.

Every room Isla walked into had rearranged itself around her without effort. Every eye that should have landed on me had followed my sister instead, found me only when Isla was absent.

And I had worked for everything. Precise, perfect and strategic. I had watched Isla receive without reaching, receive without asking, receive without deserving, and had spent years waiting for the moment it stopped.

"You are pathetic." I stepped toward him. "Regretting your choices now, are you?"

Kael met my gaze without wavering. "She won, Seraphine. What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to act like you care! Like me, like my parents, like everyone here who actually understands what this means!"

He exhaled, long and controlled. "What does it mean, Seraphine? That someone you thought was beneath you proved you wrong?"

"That is not what this is about." I held his gaze. "Then what is it about?"
He turned the question back on me, quietly.

"She took something that was never meant to be hers." Each word is placed with precision.

Kael studied me. His expression had gone to a place I could not read, and that was new. He had never been unreadable to me before. "She earned it."

My hands closed at my sides and my nails went into my palms. "Why are you defending her?"

"I am not." Two words, but the two-word answer from Kael was its own kind of tell.

"You are." I stepped forward until I had closed the distance between us.
"You sound like you actually care about her."

The words were designed to humiliate, to expose the transaction I had made him party to, the choice he had made over Isla, in my favor, the debt I had been holding since the moment he made it.

Instead, an expression crossed his face that I had not put there, and I had put every expression on Kael's face for three years.

His jaw tightened, and I went still with the particular attention of someone who has just heard a note played out of tune.

"Oh." I said it quietly, almost to myself, a door opening in a room I had not known existed.

Kael looked away, and the looking away was the answer I had not needed him to give.

I let the silence sit in the room and run its full length, every second of it deliberate.

I laughed. Short, clean, no warmth in it. "You still love her." Not a question. "You let her go. You left her for me. You chose this pack and this title and my father's approval. And now she has a ceremony in three moons and you are standing in my room looking like that."

"Seraphine—" He started, and the unfinished word sat in the room where a complete sentence should have been.

"No." I stepped back. Not in retreat. In positioning. "Tell me I am wrong. Tell me right now."

Kael finally looked at me, and for the first time since I had known him, he had no answer ready.

I let the silence hold. I looked at him the way I looked at everything I had already categorized: calmly, completely, and with no residual investment in the assessment.

"Pathetic." I delivered it the way I delivered most verdicts: without affect, without investment, as a statement of observable fact.

Then I went back to the window, because the night outside was doing what the night always did, nothing and patient, and I had plans to make, and Kael's feelings were not part of any of it.

Three moons. I turned back to the window and studied my own reflection in the glass.

I had been ready for years. I had simply been waiting for the right door to open, and Isla, characteristically, had just opened it for me.