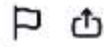




Chapter 20



POV: Garrick

She was Luna. Raised in my house, carrying my name, and now another man's Luna.

I had been pacing the study for an hour with that fact and it still refused to sit flat. The fire crackled and the shadows moved. The old books kept their silence, which was the most useful thing in the room.

'Luna.' My Isla — mine, from the day I claimed her — standing in another man's pack.

I thought about her face the last time I had seen it. The way she had looked at me before she ran.

I thought about it the way I thought about it every night, with the specific grip of a man who cannot release what he believes is still his.

Lenora had not looked up from her tea, which was how she registered most things that displeased her: by refusing to grant them the dignity of a reaction.

She sat with that cultivated stillness of hers, fingers light against the porcelain, face arranged into the expression she wore when she had already filed the situation and was waiting for me to catch up. She had been waiting for me to catch up for thirty years.

"You should have gotten rid of that girl when you had the chance." My voice came out rougher than I intended.

"And what would you have had me do, Garrick? Put her in your room and make her your whore? You've been obsessed with her existence since the day she was born, and yet here she is."

The back of a chair was in my hand before I had decided to reach for it. She had a particular talent for that. The reframe.

The clinical rewording that stripped the feeling from what I said and put a label on it instead. I had married a woman who could make thirty years of devotion sound like a disease. "Don't twist my words."

"You've been fixated on that girl since the moment she was born. And now look at her. Still alive. More than that, a Luna."

I turned away from her and faced the window. The fire crackled behind me. The word Luna was in the room with us and it had been there since the scout delivered his report, and it was not settling anywhere I could manage it.

Draven's pack was ten times our size. Ten times the warriors, ten times the territory, ten times the capacity for retaliation that arrives without announcement.

I had heard enough about the man to know his shape: cold and precise, the type who makes examples without elevation of voice.

Isla would not need to say a word. He would act on her behalf before she finished the sentence.

I turned from the window with the specific sharpness of a man who has been pacing for an hour and has run out of patience for stillness. "You think this is amusing?"

"No." She set her cup down without any urgency, without any change in

her expression. "I think it's inevitable."

My fingers pressed into the wood of the chair. "Draven's pack is ten times the size of ours. If Isla harbors any resentment toward us, she won't have to say a word. He'll burn this place to the ground for her."

Lenora tilted her head, watching me with those flat, assessing eyes. "Then what do you want to do?"

I had no answer for that, which was itself an answer. The door creaked open on its hinge and Seraphine stepped through it, and the room rearranged itself around her entrance the way it always did.

I watched her move through the room with the particular quality she had always brought to an entrance: the measured pace, the silence stretched a beat too long, the sweep of her eyes before she spoke.

She had learned it from watching me. She had then refined it well past what I taught her, and there were moments when I stood across a room from my younger daughter and was not entirely certain what I had built, or whether it would serve me or cut me when it moved.

"You won't have to do anything." She delivered it with the ease of someone whose work is already finished and who is simply informing the room.

I turned toward her. The wariness I kept around Seraphine was not fear. It was the specific caution of a man who has built a sharp thing and cannot always predict which direction it will cut. "Explain."

She walked further into the room, unhurried. "Three moons." Lightly, as if the number were light rather than a fuse. "That's how long they have before Isla is officially recognized as Luna. Until then, nothing is

permanent."

Lenora raised an eyebrow with the measured patience of a woman who has watched plans form and collapse for thirty years. "And you plan to change that?"

Seraphine smiled. The slow, private smile she had been perfecting since she was twelve. "Isla may have won, but she's still Isla. And in case you've forgotten, she hasn't shifted. She's wolfless."

She let it sit. "Draven doesn't see it yet, but he will. And when he does, I'll be there."

I studied her across the room. My younger daughter, who had always understood that the longest play was the most effective one, was watching me watch her. "You think you can turn Draven against her?"

A small shrug. A tilt of her head. "I took Kael from her once. What makes you think I can't do it again?"

Lenora looked at her for a long moment. Then a quiet, satisfied smile moved across her lips.

"And if you fail?" Lenora asked it the way she asked most questions, with the tone of someone who has already run the answer herself and is simply verifying it aloud.

Seraphine's fingers trailed along the back of a chair, as though she were considering the wood rather than the question. "I won't." Her voice dropped into the register she used when she was finished with doubt.

"Three moons is enough time. Draven will see what she really is. And when he does, she won't just lose her title." She looked at them both, her expression unreadable. "She'll lose everything."

expression unreadable. "She'll lose everything."

I exhaled through my nose. My jaw was tight, and I held it there, and I did not argue, because Seraphine was right and I was not ready to concede that to her face.

Lenora picked up her cup again, exhaling slowly. "Then by all means, Seraphine," she murmured. "Do what you must."

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

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Comments

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Gifts

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