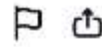




Chapter 24



POV: Seraphine

The fire had burned down to embers by the time I had fully shaped the plan, and the shaping had been satisfying work.

I sat in my chair and stared at the glow and let the pieces arrange themselves. The plan had come to me in stages over three weeks, each stage arriving cleanly.

That was how good plans worked. You waited. You let the problem show you its weak points, and then you used them with precision.

Isla's rise had been a disruption, inconvenient and infuriating. But I had been managing disruptions since I was old enough to understand that the world required pressure applied in the right places.

The question was never whether I could fix this. The question was which lever required the least cost.

My father had declared it in front of the council: Seraphine would be Luna of Midnight Crest. The title was mine by his word.

His word, and nothing else. Right now I was still nobody. No ceremony. No binding. A declaration aging on a shelf while Kael moved at the pace of a man with no urgency.

He did not love me. That had stopped being a wound and become a fact. His parents had tried, arguments about duty and alliance, every rational case available, and none of it had moved him.

You could not argue a man out of a wolf bond. The bond with Isla sat in him like a root, and no pressure from above was pulling it out.

Which was precisely why I was not going to argue. The answer had been sitting in the room at the end of the east corridor for weeks, and I had simply been waiting for the right moment to collect it.

Kael's entry came with the sound of a man who has told himself he will not come and has come anyway. He lingered near the door, broad frame tense, expression assembled into practiced neutrality that was achieved only guarded.

I smirked, leaning back in my chair with the ease of a woman who has been expecting this arrival for an hour. "Took you long enough."

He folded his arms, which was the posture of a man who has arrived and wishes he had not. "Why am I here, Seraphine?"

I stood and crossed the room with the deliberate pace that I had learned made men feel observed rather than watched, which was a different sensation entirely.

"Because you still love her." I kept my voice soft and charged in equal measure. "Isn't that why you've been sulking since the day she left?"

"What's your point?" His voice was clipped, which meant the nerve had been located.

I smiled with the particular warmth I kept for moments when warmth was the most efficient tool available. "Isla is alone in Crimson Fang. Vulnerable. You want her back, don't you? To start over. To give her the life she deserves."

His eyes moved. Pain first, then regret, and underneath both of those the

specific flicker I had been counting on.

Hope. Kael had always been transparent about what he actually wanted, which was part of what made him useful and part of what had always made him limited.

Hope moved people in the directions you needed them to move. It was the most reliable lever I possessed.

"What are you suggesting?" he asked.

My fingers traced the edge of the vanity table, my reflection meeting his in the mirror. "You help me, Kael. Together, we take Isla. You can have your ending with her, and I'll take her place."

He froze. "I cannot believe this. You're insane." The disbelief in his voice was genuine, which was the response I had anticipated.

Disbelief and impact were not separate reactions. They arrived together, and when they did, it meant the thing you had said had landed exactly where you needed it to land.

Which meant it was working. "You think you can fool Draven? The council and his entire pack?"

I turned to face him fully, letting him see the certainty I reserved for people who needed to understand I had already run all the numbers and was not presenting a theory.

"I'll make them believe it. Isla and I share enough resemblance to fool them. A crescent birthmark on my left cheek, identical to hers, will seal the illusion."

"You'd mark yourself to impersonate her?" The astonishment in his voice

was almost flattering.

He had always underestimated the lengths I was willing to go. So had my parents.

So had every wolf in Midnight Crest who had watched me play the supporting role in Isla's story for twenty years. That was their consistent error, and I was correcting it.

Isla had a title, a pack, a man who had named her in front of his council. I had a declaration on paper and a fiancé in no hurry to make it real.

She had walked into a clearing with nothing and taken everything that was supposed to be mine.

I had the promise of everything. She had the thing itself. That was worse in every measurable way, and I was done waiting for someone to correct it.

"Why not? I've always been willing to do what's necessary to win." I held his gaze without flinching. "And when I'm Luna, I'll make Crimson Fang and Midnight Crest untouchable."

Kael's expression darkened, the hope I had just built retreating behind the wariness that never entirely left him when he was in a room with me. "And Isla?"

"You can take her anywhere you want." Without hesitation, the ease of someone discussing logistics. "Just not anywhere near my sight. You can build a new life with her. She'll be free from all of this."

I paused and let the word sit — free — because Kael was the kind of man who collected that word like a debt.

He had been telling himself that story about Isla for months: that he had failed her, that he owed her a better ending. I was simply offering him the ending he had already written. "Isn't that what you want?"

He hesitated. The conflict in his eyes was visible and interesting, the way all genuine internal struggles are interesting when you are not the one experiencing them.

I stepped closer and dropped my voice to the register I used when I needed a person to feel that what was being offered was intimate rather than calculated.

"Kael. I know you love her. This is your chance to have her back. To start fresh."

The room held the silence for a long moment. I stood in it with the patience of someone who has already decided the outcome and is waiting for the other person to arrive at it independently.

Then Kael exhaled, and his shoulders settled by a fraction. "What do you need me to do?"

The satisfaction that moved through me was not performed. It was the specific, quiet pleasure of a mechanism making contact with its intended surface — the click of a lock responding to the correct key, nothing more dramatic than that.

Every piece in position. Every calculation is verified. Three weeks of patience and precision, and here was Kael with his shoulders settled and his hands at his sides and his pride in ruins and his love for Isla still intact, which was the only part of him I had ever needed.

I smiled, the widest smile I had allowed myself in weeks, and it cost me

I smiled, the widest smile I had allowed myself in weeks, and it cost me nothing.

"Good," I said. "Now, listen carefully."

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

Chapter 24