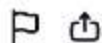




Chapter 26



POV: Seraphine

They were calling her a descendant of the Moon Goddess, and every corridor in Midnight Crest had become a chapel for the announcement.

I heard it before I had crossed the threshold of the main hall, before I had passed the first guard, before I had finished my morning tea.

The words were everywhere, in every doorway, in every low exchange between wolves who had apparently found a new religion in my sister's coat color.

'White wolf. Moon Goddess. The rarest of us all.' Recited with the reverence of people who require the crowd to think for them.

I had been hearing Isla's name my entire life. I had spent my entire life engineering the conditions under which it would stop.

And now it was louder than it had ever been, and it had apparently become a theological matter.

I walked into my father's chambers with the speed of a woman who has already decided what the room needs.

Garrick was pacing. His jaw was set in the configuration that meant he had been awake since before the news arrived. Lenora sat by the fire, hands folded, expression assembled into its standard cold arrangement — the look of a woman who had already processed the information and filed it.

"We made a grave mistake." His voice landed on the floor between them, not directed at anyone.

Lenora's eyes did not move from the fire. "What do you propose we do? It's done."

He stopped pacing. "Do you not see what this means? Draven now holds a power we can't touch. He will use her against us."

I stepped fully into the room, which stopped Garrick mid-sentence and redirected the air in the space. "Then we destroy her first."

Garrick turned, eyes dark. "You don't understand the weight of what you're saying."

I smiled. It was not a warm smile. "If she's the Moon Goddess' descendant, I should be one too, right, mother?!" The word carried an edge I did not bother to soften. "We're descendants of the Moon Goddess!"

Lenora looked at me then, and in her cold gaze was an expression I did not recognize on her face, almost but not quite pity. "Perhaps it's time you knew the truth."

I felt the room change temperature, and I did not yet know what it was changing toward. "What truth?"

She exhaled, voice carrying the particular calm of someone for whom the information is old. "You and Isla were never ours. You were both adopted."

The walls did not move. The fire did not change. Every physical thing in the room remained exactly as it was, and the room had never felt smaller.

"You're lying." The words were out before I had finished the thought. "You were chosen," she continued, with the same tone she used to discuss supply routes. "To hide my inability to conceive. To secure the pack's future."

My breath caught somewhere it should not have. "So I was just convenient?"

Garrick turned from the window, and when he spoke his voice had the flatness of someone reading from a record rather than addressing a person. "You were necessary."

I stood with that word in the room and I did not let any of it reach my face, because I was not going to give them the satisfaction of my reaction. Controlled. Forward-facing. Already on the next move.

But underneath the control, the calculation was already running its circuit, and the circuit was producing numbers I did not like.

Everything I had been told about who I was, every justification for why I deserved the title, the pack, the future my father had declared: all of it built on a story constructed for convenience.

Not for me. I had been adopted for the same reason you acquire useful property.

And Isla, who had been thrown away, who had been driven out, who I had spent years reducing to nothing, had walked into another pack's arena and shifted white, and the continent now recited her name with reverence.

The doors opened without a knock, which was the only way Sorchia had ever used a door in her life.

Sorcha. Ancient and undeterred, her silver-white hair unbound and falling in thick waves. Her staff struck the floor with each step, each impact landing with the weight of a verdict.

The candlelight moved when she entered, which I had long since stopped attributing to drafts. She brought the stillness that always preceded her worst pronouncements.

"You've hidden secrets for too long." Her voice carried the finality of someone who has been waiting to say it.

Garrick's posture changed, every muscle pulling toward the door he could not use. "Sorcha, this is not the time—"

"It is exactly the time." Her gaze moved to me, settled, and held. "The prophecy has come."

My chest tightened and I kept my face arranged and my voice steady. "What prophecy?"

"Two wolves, bound by blood yet not of blood." Her voice carried the specific weight of a woman who has been waiting a long time to say a thing. "One will bring salvation. One will bring ruin."

Garrick's jaw worked through the statement with the grudging weight of a man settling a debt he had delayed too long. "We always knew it was Isla. She was meant to doom us."

"Was she?" Sorcha did not look away from me. The question was not directed at Garrick.

She turned fully toward me, her voice dropping to the register she used when she wanted a room to be certain it was hearing her.

"And yet, she rose. And you—" a weighted pause, and then her voice again — "You were the one left behind."

My hands curled. "This is ridiculous."

"Your jealousy." She kept her gaze on me, unmoving. "Your hunger for power. The darkness in you."

"She abandoned this pack—" I started, voice rising despite itself, and Sorchá cut through it.

"No." One word, placed with precision. "She was driven away. By you."

The thing that snapped in me was not grief. It was not shame. It was the specific, incandescent fury of a woman who has been working for twenty years and has been handed a verdict by someone who watched it all from the sidelines.

This moment, in this room, with my parents as witnesses, holding every humiliation the morning had already delivered.

It was Isla's name in Sorchá's mouth that did it — Isla, who had the white coat and the pack and the man, and now this ancient woman's testimony, while I stood in my father's chambers holding the news that I had never been theirs at all. I crossed to her, and the fury had a direction, and my hands knew what to do.

She did not fight. She looked at me with those flat, knowing eyes, and the words she produced were exactly what I would have expected from a woman who had already read the ending and found her role acceptable. "And so it begins."

A sharp crack split the silence. Sorchá's body found the floor, and the quiet that followed was a different thing from the quiet before.

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Garrick and Lenora did not move. I stood with my breathing evening itself out, my hands steady at my sides, and I waited for the guilt to arrive. It did not.

I turned to face them both, voice clear, unwavering. "This changes nothing. Isla took what was mine. Now I'll take it back."

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

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Comments

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Gifts

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