



Chapter 28



POV: Seraphine

One day before the ball, and the plan was already in motion, had been in motion for weeks, and all that remained was the execution.

I ran the brush through my hair with the specific slowness of a woman who has all the time in the world, which was not the case, but was the impression I was committed to maintaining.

"Kael." My voice carried through the quiet with no urgency, because urgency was for people who were not in control of what was about to happen.

The footsteps came heavy down the corridor. The door opened. He stood in the frame with his jaw set and his posture already arguing with the room before I had spoken a word.

"What now, Seraphine?" His voice had the edge of a man who has agreed and is discovering the ongoing cost.

I turned to him with the smile I kept for moments that required performance. "We're going to Crimson Fang."

His brows dropped. "You want to waltz straight into Draven's territory? Are you insane?"

"No." I stood from the vanity in one fluid motion and let the word occupy the space it deserved. "I'm ambitious."

He crossed his arms in the doorway, which was his preferred position for registering an objection. "And how exactly does this ambition of yours work?"

I walked to the table near the window. The map of Crimson Fang's territory lay open where I had left it, the parchment weighted at its corners, the heart of the pack circled in ink. My fingers moved to it and stopped there.

"The Luna Consummation Ball is happening in less than two moons." I kept my voice smooth and deliberate, the voice I used when I wanted a person to follow the logic without being distracted by their feelings about it. "That's when I'll make my move."

Kael exhaled sharply. "You want to sneak into a pack full of wolves that will recognize our scent in seconds?"

I reached for the small satchel on the corner of the table. "That's already handled."

I pulled out the bundle of dried herbs and crushed leaves. The scent came up immediately, earthy and pungent, filling the space between us.

"Masking herbs." A blend that would cloak our scent, make us untraceable. "We'll smell like loners, rogues. No direct ties to Midnight Crest."

Kael studied the mixture with the wariness of a man who does not accept the result but cannot locate the error. "How long will it last?"

"A full night." I set the satchel back down. More than enough time to do what needed to be done, and nothing extra to waste.

"And what exactly is your plan?" His voice had the specific flatness of a

man who has started to understand the shape of what he has agreed to.

I leaned against the table and let the smirk settle. "The ball is the perfect distraction. I'll use it to replace Isla. She won't make it to the consummation rites — I will. Once I'm in, I'll ensure Draven believes I'm his Luna."

Kael's posture changed, the arms tightening across his chest, the specific stiffening of a man whose credulity has reached its limit. "That's not going to work. Draven's not an idiot. You think he won't notice the difference?"

"You think he'll be thinking clearly with his brain that night?" I let that sit in the air between us.

He did not answer, which was the only answer that mattered. A man with a rebuttal would have used it.

I stepped closer and let the pause do its work. "It won't just be my scent that's masked. The herbs will distort his senses too. He won't realize anything until it's too late."

Kael exhaled through his nose. His hands curled into fists at his sides, the specific configuration of a man who is doing the math and finds nothing he can argue with.

"And what do you need me to do?" He asked it with the resignation of a man who is still hoping the answer will be manageable.

My lips curved, slow and deliberate, with the particular quality of a smile that knows it has already won. "I want you to take her."

He went still — not the stillness of surprise. It was the stillness of a man who has been carrying the knowledge of this moment for weeks and has

finally reached it.

I ran a manicured nail along the wooden surface of the table and watched his face. "You'll make sure she never makes it back to Draven. I don't care what happens to her after that."

The jaw clenched and nostrils flared. "You want me to kill her? I'd rather die."

I shrugged. The lightness was not feigned. It was the specific ease of a woman who stopped losing sleep over Isla's outcomes a long time ago.

"You can do whatever you like with her. Just make sure she's out of the way before the ceremony."

His eyes burned with an emotion I did not waste time identifying. It was either conscience or desire, and neither of those things was my problem.

"Tomorrow night." I pressed the herbs firmly into his hand and held his gaze until he closed his fingers around them. "We leave."

The pack was still talking about her, which was the part I had not factored for.

I heard it through the walls of my chambers, through the doors of the hall, in the pauses between conversations that were nominally about other things.

Three moons since the Luna Ceremony and Isla's name had not lost a syllable of its currency. The white wolf. The Moon Goddess. The miracle that had shifted the axis of everything.

The miracle that was currently somewhere in the dark, taken and absent and probably terrified, and the pack was still managing to make the

story about her.

I sat in front of my mirror in the quiet of the early morning and I did not let any of that show on my face.

Tomorrow night, everything changed. The herbs were prepared, the route was mapped, Kael was committed in the way men commit when the alternative is losing what they love.

By the time the Consummation Ball reached its final rite, I would be standing beside Draven. The name they recited in these corridors would be mine.

Isla had the title and none of the permanence, which meant she had words on paper and I had the patience to make them mine.

I was going to take the substance, and then the title would follow, because titles without substance are just words.

I picked up the brush and ran it through my hair again, slow and deliberate, and watched my own reflection with the particular patience of a woman who has already decided how the story ends.

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

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