

POV: Seraphine

We arrived at the edges of Crimson Fang territory under the midday sun with the forest ahead of us and the weight of what I was about to do sitting in my chest with the weight of years.

Simple cloaks. Masking herbs soaked into the fabric, soaked into our skin. We smelled of the wild, of nothing specific, passing rogues, lone wolves, no thread that tied us back to Midnight Crest.

On any other night the border patrol would have been a problem. On a Luna Ceremony night, with allied packs arriving and the sentries softened by celebration, it was a formality.

Slipping past them was easier than Kael had anticipated. I had anticipated it precisely.

The festival atmosphere had done its work. The guards were focused on the grandeur of the occasion rather than on the strangers at the outskirts, which was exactly what I had counted on when I chose this night.

I let my hood fall as we stepped into the crowd, and the hall received me without question.

I had worn the same ceremonial gown. Sheer silk, identical to Isla's, the cut and color matched with precision.

The hum of celebration swallowed us whole. Chandeliers bright overhead, roasted meat and spiced wine thick in the air, conversations flowing in every direction and none of them aimed at us.

This pack did not know yet that they had let in the wrong wolf, and the

bliss of that ignorance was going to last exactly as long as I needed it to.

My gaze found the center of the hall before I had consciously directed it there.

Draven and Isla, moving together in the slow rhythm of the ceremonial dance, bodies close, his hand at the small of her back with the specific possessiveness of a man who has decided.

The sight sent fire through my veins and I let it, because fire was useful, because it had always been more efficient than grief.

"That should have been me." I held the thought for exactly one second. Long enough to acknowledge it. Not long enough to let it run.

I clenched my fists inside the folds of the cloak and held the expression I was wearing. "Stay close," I murmured to Kael. "Keep your face neutral."

He hesitated, his eyes moving between me and the hall's exits. "This is madness."

"It's necessary." I kept my voice below the level that carries. "If you're not with me—"

"I'm here," he muttered. His gaze had found Isla and Draven again, and the quality of it had shifted into a quality I did not waste time examining. "But you'd better know what you're doing."

My smirk returned without effort. "I always do." I watched them dance from the shadow of a pillar with the patience of a woman who has already arranged the ending.

The music swelled, slow and aching, and the crowd fell back and gave

them the floor and gave me an unobstructed view of everything I had come here to take.

Draven took Isla's hand. His fingers interlaced with hers in the gesture of a man anchoring himself to what he values, and they moved together with a rhythm that told me everything I needed to know about how much ground I still had to cover.

She was unsteady. I could see it from where I stood: the uneven breath, the slight tension in her shoulders, the specific quality of a woman who is performing composure rather than possessing it. The weight of the room pressing against her skin.

Good. Her unsteadiness was a current running beneath the surface, and currents could be used.

Then Draven leaned toward her ear and spoke, and whatever it was straightened her spine. The unsteadiness receded. She smiled, genuine, not performed. Then he kissed her and they finished the dance to applause.

I stood in the shadow of a pillar and watched my own inheritance being celebrated by wolves who did not know my name.

After the dance, they withdrew into the quieter halls. I followed at the distance that kept me invisible and stopped in the shadow of a side corridor where the candlelight did not reach, and I watched through the gap in the doorway what I was not supposed to see.

Isla in the firelight, the sheer silk of her gown catching the warmth, Draven's jaw tight with restraint he did not want. "I should claim you tonight," he murmured. "I want to."

She met his gaze without flinching, without hesitation, without the deflection most women would have used. "Then why don't you?"

His hand moved to her neck, fingers threading into her hair. "Because I won't rush this. I want you. But I want all of you, Isla. When I take you, I want it to be when you know you belong here."

I stood in the dark and listened. The fire in my veins did not cool. It sharpened.

Every word directed at her was a word he would direct at me by the end of this night.

She was leaving. I was staying. The only thing standing between me and everything in that room was Kael's willingness to move when I told him to.

Draven reached into his pocket and pulled out a chain. Delicate silver, a crescent pendant at the end of it, the exact shape of the mark on her cheek.

Isla's breath caught audibly even from where I stood. "This," he said, fastening it around her neck, "is yours."

"You're mine, Isla," he whispered. "No one will take you from me." She believed every syllable of it. She had no reason not to.

She did not know, then, how cruel fate could be.

I turned from the doorway and let the image of the pendant settle into the plan where it belonged.

Fitting. A crescent mark on my left cheek and a crescent pendant at my throat. Draven would see what he expected to see. That was the only

thing that mattered.

I turned to Kael. "Do it." He hesitated — the last hesitation I was going to allow him.

"Seraphine—"

"Do it." His jaw clenched. I held his gaze with the steadiness I used when I needed a person to understand there was no version of this conversation in which they did not comply.

"Take her. And make sure she never comes back." His jaw worked through the decision I had already made for him. Then he moved.

The dark took him with the ease of a move rehearsed a hundred times, and the garden was waiting, and Isla was in it.

Isla would not see him coming. She was still in the warmth of the hall, still wearing the pendant he had fastened around her neck, still believing she was safe.

I adjusted the fall of my gown and walked into the candlelight as though I owned everything in it. By the end of the night, I would.

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

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