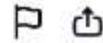




Chapter 31



POV: Seraphine

"I still think this is madness," Kael muttered under his breath. His posture was rigid, his hands clenched at his sides as his eyes cut toward the packhouse.

I turned to face him and gave him the full weight of my attention before I spoke. "Your job is not to think. It is to act."

The muscle beneath his jaw shifted. His focus cut sideways, and I watched the argument compact behind his teeth, swallowed by the discipline that had always kept him functional.

He hated the register I used with him. That hatred made him careful, and careful was precisely what this required.

I adjusted my cloak, letting the fabric shift to reveal the crescent birthmark on my cheek.

The detail was exact, each curve matched, each gradient replicated with the patience of a person who understood precision was the only margin between a plan and its ruin.

Two hours that day, and years of preparation before that, studying a face I had never once admired and never once stopped watching.

My hair was pinned the way Isla wore hers. The gown beneath the cloak had been commissioned in silence three weeks before any of this began. When I had stood at the mirror at dawn, the reflection blinked back

wearing her calm.

I had rehearsed each tilt of the head, each placement of the hands, until imitation dissolved into occupation.

I was better at being Isla than Isla had ever been.

They had been speaking her name all through the early hours. The wolves inside the packhouse moved through the seclusion preparations with the reverence this pack reserved for anything that touched Draven's chosen, their voices dropping to that tender, bewildered ache whenever her name surfaced.

Three days since Isla had vanished, and already they were carrying her absence the way wolves carry a wound they cannot locate.

It turned my stomach.

Isla, handed a mate bond she had not fought for, a pack's devotion she had not cultivated, an Alpha who pressed his palms to her mark and named it destiny.

She had worn all of it with the blank, grateful bearing of a wolf who had never once asked herself whether any of it was earned.

I had spent years asking that question. I had spent years building the answer into every detail I now wore.

I kept my gaze on the eastern corridor, its patrol arc memorized across two weeks of precise observation. The window was open. I did not intend to waste a second of it.

"She will not have the chance. Once we take her, you will get her out of here. Draven will not know the difference until it is too late."

Kael's expression tightened at the corners. He was constructing Isla's face in his head, and I could see it in the stillness that settled over him when he could not afford to feel anything.

"And what happens after that?" He kept his focus on the ground. "What happens to her?"

I let the pause between us open fully before I answered. "She will be free. Is that not what you want?"

He did not respond immediately. That hesitation was the only answer I needed, and I had counted on it from the start.

Kael had carried his feelings for Isla across two years of proximity and restrained distance. I had used every measure of that attachment to place him exactly here, in this courtyard, on this morning.

Too invested in her welfare to walk away. Too compromised by his conscience to see the full architecture of what I had built.

He wanted her safe. That was the only portion of his motivation I found worth using.

The lie did not concern me. Truth was a tool, and I applied it when it served the outcome and put it aside when it did not.

The wolves inside were still talking in those hushed, reverent tones, speaking Isla's name as if she might be listening from wherever she had gone. Three days, and she was already becoming a myth. It made my teeth ache.

"And Draven?" Kael's voice had sharpened. "You think he is just going to accept this? That he will not see through you?"

A dry sound left my throat, quiet and unhurried, the kind that answered better than any argument could.

"He will not care. Not when the rites begin. The seclusion is private — intimate. By the time he realizes anything is off, it will be too late. He will already be mine."

"You do not know that. He —"

"I know men like Draven." I rounded on him fully, holding his gaze until the protest stopped forming behind his expression. "They see what they want to see. And once I am standing beside him, no one will question it."

His hands had gone tight at his sides again. He looked at my cheek, and I watched him weigh everything: how thoroughly I had prepared, how little room remained for the kind of error that required rescue.

He arrived at the conclusion I had designed the whole plan around.

"And Isla?" The words came out rougher than he intended. "What if she fights back?"

"She will not." I kept my eyes on him, unblinking. "She will not have the chance."

Behind him, the packhouse rose in pale stone under a grey sky. The low ceremonial drums had begun their preparatory rhythm deeper in the building, and the air outside carried pine resin and iron.

The wolves moved through their tasks with the focused reverence of a pack attending to a rite they believed would hold. It would not hold for much longer.

Kael's breath moved through him slowly, a controlled exhale. For a long

moment he looked at the ground without speaking, and I watched the last of his resistance consume itself in silence before he raised his eyes again.

"Do you even care what happens to her?"

"Of course I care." I smoothed the cloak over my shoulder and turned toward the stone doors. "I am doing this for her. She is not meant for this life. You know that as well as I do."

He offered nothing. The quiet that followed was entirely his, the place where his arguments had run dry and left him with nothing but the forward motion I had already constructed for both of us.

The eastern corridor sat empty, no shadow moving where a shadow should be. The patrol had completed its arc at precisely the moment my calculations had promised it would. I was already moving.

"We move now. No mistakes and no hesitation."

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

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