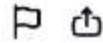




Chapter 33



POV: Seraphine

I stepped through the grand entrance of the Crimson Fang packhouse and let the weight of it settle.

Their packhouse. Their hall. Their guards at the door, their torches, their ceremony still pulsing in the air around me. And I was inside it, wearing their Luna's face.

The guards stiffened the moment they saw me. Their eyes moved across my face with the specific attention of wolves trained to identify threat, and for exactly three seconds I felt the cold calculation of what failure would mean in this room.

Then I gave them an easier read than suspicion, and I watched their certainty soften into uncertainty.

"Luna?" The one on the left spoke first, his voice already pulling back from the edge of confrontation. "You just left a moment ago. What are you doing here?"

I let my expression waver. Not collapse but waver. The specific unsteadiness of a woman who is confused rather than afraid, which required a different set of muscles and a different quality of breath.

"I—" I pressed a hand to my forehead and let the pause do the work I needed it to do. "I... I don't know. I was in the garden, and then—" My voice softened at the edges. "I must've gotten lost. I feel strange."

The guards shifted. Their hands stayed near their weapons. They were not fools, and I filed that.

But their posture had changed by a fraction. The certainty of threat had become the discomfort of concern, and those two things required completely different responses. Concern had hesitation built into it. Hesitation was exactly what I needed.

A cold bead of sweat moved down my spine. The herbs were holding. The birthmark on my cheek was holding. The gown, the braids, the crescent pendant at my throat. All of it holding.

I was Isla. I was going to continue being Isla until the moment it was no longer necessary.

Then a voice cut through the tense air from behind me, and I had exactly one second to decide who I was going to be when I turned around.

"Luna?" The word arrived from behind me and I turned toward it with the pace of a woman who is uncertain rather than alarmed.

Draven's beta, standing a few feet away with her sharp eyes already scanning my face, doing the work her training required her to do.

She was faster than the guards. More precise. She looked at a thing and read what was behind it, which was the quality that made her dangerous and the one I needed to get past.

For one brief, horrifying second, I held the encounter completely still inside myself and waited for the recognition to arrive in her face.

It did not. Her expression softened into the specific warmth of someone who has decided the situation is medical rather than suspicious.

"Draven's been looking for you. Are you alright?"

The relief that moved through me was not performed. It was the specific, efficient satisfaction of a mechanism locking into place at exactly the right moment.

I exhaled shakily, lowering my gaze as though embarrassed. "I—I think I got lost in the garden. I don't even remember how I got there."

Susan frowned, her eyes still moving across my face with the attention I was going to need to keep earning. "That might be the trauma effect from the Luna Trial."

I watched the guards from the corner of my eye. Their postures eased another fraction.

Susan had given them a framework for what they were seeing. Authority did that when subordinates were uncertain: provided the interpretation, and they followed it.

Susan had called this a medical matter. The question of threat had been quietly retired.

"Yes... yes, that must be it." I let the weak smile arrive slowly, with effort, the specific timing of a person who is not sure smiling is the right response but is trying. "Everything feels... foggy."

Susan studied me for another beat. I held her gaze with exactly the right amount of focus, not too sharp and not too vague. The middle register. The precise middle register.

She nodded, the final fraction of hesitation leaving her posture. "Come, I'll take you back to Draven."

I lowered my head as I fell into step behind her, and the motion hid the expression that had arrived on my face without my permission.

Not a smirk, not yet, and not warmth either. The specific cold satisfaction of a thing accomplished that has not yet declared itself.

I was in. The thing I had planned had just been resolved in a corridor conversation with two uncertain guards and a beta who had decided to be kind.

The guards remained wary, their eyes following me as I crossed the threshold. I felt that attention pressing against my back, and I did not flinch and I did not quicken my pace.

Isla would not have quickened her pace. Isla would have walked exactly like this — a little unsteady, a little bewildered, leaning on the certainty of the woman ahead of her.

I had studied her for twenty years. I had spent twenty years inside the same rooms, at the same tables, watching the same face produce the same expressions in the same circumstances.

I knew exactly how she moved through a space where she did not yet feel safe.

Now I walked through her life in her body, and the beta led me deeper into it, and Draven was at the end of that corridor believing his Luma was coming home.

The plan had worked, and the specific quality of that knowledge was not relief but the clean, precise satisfaction of a machine completing its function.

Every calculation. Every preparation. Every herb blend and gown fitting and rehearsed gesture.

Every year of watching and waiting and positioning myself to make this

Every year of watching and waiting and positioning myself to make this moment possible. It had all resolved into this: me walking through the Crimson Fang packhouse unchallenged, wearing a dead woman's future.

Not dead. Gone. Which was better, because dead women became martyrs and gone women became questions, and I needed Isla to be a question for long enough to make the answer irrelevant.

I followed the beta through the corridor and kept my face at the register it needed to be at. Nothing showed. Nothing was going to show.

All I had to do now was be Isla, and I had been practicing that for my entire life.

The **End of Chapter**

Chapter 33



Comments

2



Gifts

224