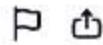




Chapter 40



POV: Seraphine

The room had turned against me the moment Draven walked out of it, and rooms did not turn without reason.

I paced the length of the ceremonial chamber, my gown whispering against the stone floor, and I let myself feel the frustration for exactly the time it took to cross the room and back. Then I filed it. Frustration was a tool. Unmanaged, it was a liability, and I could not afford liabilities tonight.

"This isn't how it was supposed to go." The words came out lower than I intended, the specific register of a woman talking herself back from an edge. I stopped in front of the mirror.

My reflection held. The crescent mark on my left cheek, precise and positioned. The soft waves of hair falling in exactly the arrangement I had studied and rehearsed.

The gown, the posture, the careful calibration of a performance I had been building toward for twenty years. It was flawless. The reflection was flawless.

And Draven had walked out of it anyway, which was the piece I had not adequately planned for.

"He'll come around." I told my reflection this with the specific firmness I used when I needed to make a statement land in the room. "He has to."

But the certainty I was manufacturing did not arrive with the conviction it needed, and the doubt that crept in behind it had a specific texture — the cold, practical doubt of a woman who has been in enough rooms to know when the room has turned.

He had sensed it. Whatever he had sensed, it had been enough to make him stand up and reach for his robe and walk through the door with his face giving me nothing.

Beta Susan had come within the hour, asking her careful questions with her careful eyes. I had managed Susan. But managing Susan was not the same as managing Draven, and I needed to understand the difference before dawn.

The knock on the door hit me before I had finished calculating, which was the specific quality of an interruption that arrived at the wrong moment.

I straightened. One motion, hands smoothing the gown, face resetting to the register it needed to be at.

"Luna?" Susan's voice from the other side, contained and precise, carrying none of the alarm that would have told me she had already decided. "Is everything all right?"

I breathed. One counted second, long enough to ensure the voice that came out was the right voice. "Yes, everything's fine."

The door opened. Susan stepped inside with the contained attention she brought everywhere, her sharp eyes moving across the room in the first two seconds, categorizing, building the picture. Then her gaze settled on me, and the narrowing of it was small but precise.

"Are you sure?" Polite on the surface with the blade underneath, the specific combination Susan used when she was not yet accusing but was close.

I turned to face her fully and manufactured the smile with the specific quality of effort that read as tiredness rather than performance. "I'm just... tired." I softened my voice to the register that invited sympathy. "It's been a long day."

Susan tilted her head and her brow contracted by a fraction, and the fraction was enough to tell me she had found the variance she was looking for.

She was reading a discrepancy. I could see it in the particular stillness she produced when she was processing one — the quality of attention that had nearly caught me at the door on the first night and was working at the same frequency now.

The way I spoke, the way I held myself, was registering against whatever version of Isla she had stored and finding variance.

I had studied Isla for twenty years. I had watched her move through rooms, had catalogued the specific way she held her shoulders when she was being watched, the particular quality of warmth she produced in interactions, the texture of her hesitations. I had reproduced it all with precision.

But precision and presence were not the same thing, and Susan was the kind of woman who could feel the difference.

"You don't look yourself." She held my gaze a beat longer than the conversation required, and I held it back.

My smile faltered. A fraction of a second. I caught it and brought it back, but the fraction had been there, and Susan had been watching.

"I suppose that's to be expected." I turned and moved toward the bed with the quality of motion that said I was too tired for this conversation to continue. "It's been overwhelming, to say the least."

"If you need anything," Susan said, her hand still on the door, "don't hesitate to call for me."

"Of course." My back was to her and I kept it there, giving her the posture of a woman too tired to turn around rather than a woman who could not afford to let Susan see her face. "Thank you."

The door closed. I sat on the edge of the bed and let the breath out in a long, controlled exhale.

Susan's scrutiny sat in the room with me even after she had taken it away. I turned the encounter over, examining it for damage.

I had seen variance. I had named it. You don't look yourself. Which meant I had a working model of what Isla looked like and I had deviated from it in ways she could register but not yet articulate.

That gap between register and articulation was my working space. I needed to close the deviation before she crossed from sensing to knowing.

Draven was the larger problem. Whatever had pulled him out of this bed, it was the same intelligence Susan was running, sharper and more intimate, with three weeks of specific Isla-knowledge behind it.

He had held himself through the entire consummation with the controlled stillness of a man running a case rather than inhabiting a

controlled stillness of a man running a case rather than inhabiting a moment, and I had felt it and pushed through it, and then his hands had stopped.

He was not coming back tonight, and the fact that I was certain of that told me how badly the consummation had failed.

I was still inside Crimson Fang. I was still wearing the title. The ceremony had happened and the pack had witnessed it and Draven had no proof of anything he suspected, not yet, and suspicion without proof was not action.

The plan had not failed. It had encountered resistance, which was different, which was workable.

Those were different things, and I was not going to confuse them the way Isla would have confused them, the way she confused every setback with an ending.

I lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling and kept my face the particular blank that I kept it when I was working, and I began to build the next version of the plan around the shape of what had gone wrong.

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

Chapter 40