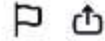




Chapter 49



POV: Seraphine

Three days. Three days since the ceremony and this pack was still whispering Isla's name in the corridors.

Still passing it between themselves in the particular reverent tone that told me everything I needed to know about how thoroughly my sister had embedded herself in this pack without ever having to remain in it.

Gone. Taken. Out of the packhouse and entirely absent from the building, which was supposed to make her less present and had, so far, accomplished the opposite.

And still her name was the only one these wolves reached for when they needed to reach toward, which was the specific problem I was going to close from the inside of this room, today.

Susan had three guards at the door and orders from a man who was not even on the territory anymore. The specific insult of that, being contained by a beta and a set of instructions rather than by the man himself, had been clarifying in a way I had not expected.

Draven had not considered me significant enough to handle personally. He had assigned me to his beta.

That was the error I was going to use, and I had used smaller errors than this to move larger rooms than this one.

I let out a sharp, bitter laugh and stepped past Jamie as if he were

furniture, addressing the guards directly.

"She's lying to all of you." My voice cut clean across the corridor, aimed at the guards, at every wolf in the hall who was watching Susan for confirmation.

"She has no orders from Draven to hold me here. She invented them. She locked me in this room and told you it was his instruction — because she knows he is not here to contradict her."

The guards hesitated. Good. Hesitation was the gap I worked in, and I had been working in it for twenty years.

"She is siding with my evil twin sister." I watched the words hit them. Watched the flinch.

Jamie's head snapped toward me with the sharp confusion of a man whose operational parameters have just been complicated. "What?"

I turned to him with my eyes wide and pleading, the register that read as sincerity to a man who was used to operating in a world where people said what they meant.

I had spent twenty years around a woman who said what she meant. I knew exactly what it looked like and I could produce it on demand.

"Susan has been planning this since before the ceremony. She wants to bring my twin back, the rogue, the imposter." I let my voice rise just enough to carry into the hall beyond, where the gathering weight of wolves was listening without being addressed yet.

"She is manipulating all of you to betray your rightful Luna." The words rang loud and clear in the corridor, and I watched them spread through the gathered wolves the way fire spread through dry wood: first the point

of contact, then the edges, then everything adjacent.

One of the guards shifted, pulling fractionally away from Susan's side with the specific, unconscious movement of a man whose loyalty is being reconsidered without his full awareness of it.

"Enough with this insanity." Susan's voice was flat and tight and entirely unconvincing in that moment, because a person who was right about everything and losing the room anyway was not a person whose certainty landed with weight.

I ignored her. I turned to Jamic, to the pack wolves in the hall doorway, to every wolf who was currently weighing the evidence and finding it insufficient.

"She is trying to frame me." I gave my voice the commanding register, the one that said the speaker had nothing to hide and everything to lose.

"She wants to hand this pack over to an outsider. A traitor who never cared about Crimson Fang."

The hall outside stirred. More warriors had gathered, drawn by the pull of pack tension. I felt the shift in the air, the collective attention swinging toward me, which was the only thing that mattered.

I pressed harder, because the moment you stopped pressing was the moment the room recovered.

"Who do you serve?" I stepped forward, fire in my gaze — not performed, real, the specific heat of a woman who has had her own name drowned out for three days running and has decided she is done with it.

"The woman who fought for her place in this pack? The Luna who stood

beside your Alpha?"

I let it land. Then:

"Or a woman who works in the shadows, spreading lies, turning you against me, so she can replace me with someone who was never worthy?"

The hall stirred with the specific quality of a collective that has just been given a frame it is considering accepting. Not a howl. Not a declaration. But the particular shift of bodies and attention that preceded commitment.

Susan knew it before I finished the sentence. I watched her face run the calculation of a woman who was right about everything and had no proof and was losing the room anyway.

Jamie exhaled, his posture stiffening. He had nothing to counter with, no proof, no order he could execute without the question of authority becoming the question, and I had just made authority the question.

Susan's hands curled into fists, which told me everything about where we were in the exchange. I turned and lifted my chin. "I am your Luna. And I will not be imprisoned."

The warriors in the hall bowed their heads, not all of them and not enthusiastically, but enough and on command, which was the specific definition of power in this room right now.

Enough to make Susan's hand hesitate on the order she was about to give. Enough to make the guards at the door recalculate what following that order would cost them.

Enough to make me smile, which was all the answer I needed about where this was going.

where this was going.

Isla was in the dark somewhere northwest of here. Draven was riding toward her.

The pack bond I had called on and the pack had answered, not unanimously, not the clean answer of a legitimately accepted Luna, but enough of an answer to hold this room.

Enough to keep me here, and keeping me here was the only thing that mattered right now, and I was here, and I was not going to be moved.

I was still standing, still the only one in this room whose name was not Isla, and that was going to have to be enough for now.

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

Chapter 49



Comments

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Gifts

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