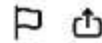




Chapter 13



POV: Isla

The courtyard hit me with cold air and the full, unambiguous weight of what I had just done.

I had accepted. The word sat in my chest, weight without exit, and every second that passed was a second I could not use to undo it.

Tyla Morvin. Years of war and discipline built into a frame that made me look unfinished by comparison. Not shifted. No pack. No advantage I could name or count on.

I walked faster and my feet made the calculation on their own — the east gate, the dark, the road out of Crimson Fang I had mapped on my third day here because mapping exits was the first thing I did in any space that held me against my will.

Running was a real option. I had done it before, had done it well, had built an entire survival out of knowing when to go.

"You are making a mistake, Isla." Lira's voice arrived in the back of my mind, steady and completely uninvited.

"This is all part of the Moon Goddess' plan." The certainty in it was infuriating.

My hands curled into fists at my sides and I kept walking. "The Moon Goddess wants me dead."

"You know that is not true." I could hear the patience in it, which was almost worse.

I opened my mouth to push back and a shadow moved at the edge of the courtyard, and the words dissolved before I had finished forming them.

Draven stood against the stone wall with his arms folded across his chest, carrying the stillness he always carried, the kind that makes it clear every movement is chosen.

He had been there long enough that his eyes had adjusted to the dark. Which meant he had been there long enough to watch me cross the yard.

"You are not running away, are you?" Low and smooth, the tone of a man watching a situation he has already calculated.

I stopped. Four feet between us, my pulse still hammering the wrong rhythm. "Why did you choose me?" The words came out raw, stripped of any pretense at composure. "Why not Tyla?"

He tilted his head, studying me the way he studied everything, with unhurried precision, as though the answer were already visible and he was deciding how much to give me.

"Because I have seen you fight." His mouth curved into the edge of a smirk. "You know what you are doing. I count on you, little rogue."

The words did something to my chest that I had no architecture for. Not fear. Worse than fear. The specific vulnerability of being believed in by someone whose opinion I could not afford to dismiss.

He pushed off the wall and walked past me, his shoulder grazing mine, close enough that I felt the warmth of him before the contact.

"Do not disappoint me." Four words, and then he was gone into the dark before I had finished deciding what to do with them.

I stood in the empty courtyard and watched the dark where he had been, and I told myself the thing his words had done to my chest was irrelevant, and I believed it approximately thirty percent, and that was going to have to be sufficient.

My room. The floor. Knees drawn to my chest and the door closed and the silence of a building that did not care what happened to me.

I had accepted the trial. The trial would come. Between those two facts and the outcome I needed was one thing: Lira.

"Lira." I put the name down with care, aimed at the interior, the way you call toward a door you are not certain will open.

The inside of my mind returned to the specific silence it had been returning for weeks — present but withheld, the warmth of her still there at the edges but the voice absent.

"You need to help me shift." I kept my voice steady. "I cannot fight Tyla like this. Not unshifted." Nothing came back from the inside of me.

I pressed my nails into my palms and held the frustration down because anger at Lira had never produced anything useful and I needed strategy now more than ever.

"You told me not to run. You are the reason I am in this room, in this pack, in this trial." Each word precise, aimed at the interior. "So shift with me."

Still nothing. Just the warmth of her presence at the edge of my awareness, withheld and patient.

I dug my nails into my palms until the pressure registered. "Please." Just one word, stripped of armor and dropped into the silence between us.

A long moment stretched out and the room held its silence and I held mine and we waited.

Then: "Let go." Two words, soft and absolute, with the particular weight of a thing said once and meant entirely.

"You are holding on too tightly, Isla. You are afraid. That is what is stopping us."

My jaw tightened until my back teeth ached. "Of course I am afraid. I am going to die."

"Not if you trust me." Quiet and steady. The certainty of someone stating a fact.

I opened my eyes and stared at the wall opposite and I ran the accounting I had been avoiding.

Trust. The specific thing I had been dismantling my entire life, one betrayal at a time, until what remained was a structure of one: myself.

I had built it carefully and maintained it under conditions that would have collapsed most people. It had kept me alive.

And tomorrow it was not going to be enough, and I had known that since the moment Tyla stepped forward.

Not Garrick. Not Lenora. Not Seraphine. Not Kael, and not Draven, and not this pack.

But Lira was different from all of them. Lira had no agenda beyond the bond itself.

bond itself.

Lira had been there before any of them. She had been the voice in the dark before I had language for darkness.

Lira had been silent at the worst moment of my life, and I had carried that silence as a wound ever since. But she was here now. She was asking.

The trial was tomorrow, the floor was cold, and I was done running the same numbers to the same dead end.

I unclenched my hands, one finger at a time, and deliberately set the refusal down.

I let the breath out, long and unsteady, and held completely still in the space it left behind, and waited.

"Then I trust you." No qualifications and no conditions. I held still and waited to see what that opened.

I sat in the dark with the trial twelve hours away and the question I had been refusing to ask sitting cold in my chest.

What if it isn't enough?

The **End of Chapter**

Chapter 13



Comments



Gifts