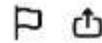




Chapter 15



POV: Isla

Dawn arrived before I was ready for it, which was how dawn always arrived for the things that counted.

The arena filled fast. Wolves two and three deep along the ring's perimeter, voices low and running the same calculation. I walked in and felt the weight of it, hundreds of eyes doing the arithmetic before the bell even rang.

I could hear them, individual voices cutting through the low murmur of the crowd.

"She will not last a minute." "Tyla will tear her apart." "She should have run when she had the chance." The arithmetic in their voices was unanimous.

I kept my chin up and moved to the center of the floor. Hard ground underfoot, packed and final.

No weapon. No wolf. A trial to prove worth, and what I had brought into this ring was myself, and that had to be enough.

Across from me, Tyla rolled her shoulders and shook out her arms with the ease of someone warming up before a session she planned to finish quickly. Black training gear, muscles coiled beneath it.

Her golden eyes moved across me with the attention of someone reading a room she already owned. She had slept well. The certainty of it was in

every line of her body.

"This won't take long." Loud enough for the front row. A few wolves found it funny.

I did not answer. I kept my eyes on her and mapped the weight distribution of her stance.

I felt him before I located him — that specific density of attention I had learned to register at the back of my neck. I found him at the arena's edge, settled in his chair, arms loose on the armrests.

He looked unbothered. Unmoved. A man watching a game whose outcome he had already run.

The bell rang and Tyla moved first, fast in a way that made my preparation feel theoretical. A fist into my ribs before I had completed the pivot — the air left my lungs in one expelled breath.

I tried to recover my footing and she was already on my wrist, twisting, and the dirt came up at an angle that had nothing courteous about it.

I hit the ground. Pain detonated down my spine and my next breath tasted of iron.

She did not give me another second to recover. A knee into my stomach. Her hand closing around my throat, pressing me flat, her grip considered and precise, the grip of someone who has done this before and knows the exact pressure required.

"You're not a fighter," she murmured, and the pity in her voice was the most insulting thing she had said since she stepped into this ring.

I clawed at her wrist. The edges of my vision went soft. The crowd was

loud, individual voices peeling out from it: cheering, laughing, the specific enthusiasm of people watching a conclusion arrive on schedule.

My eyes found Draven through the narrowing blur and stayed on him. His hands on the armrests were white at the knuckles.

His chest moved with the forced evenness of a man who has decided not to move and is holding that decision against the body's preference.

He was not unmoved. He had been performing unmoved, and I could see through it now from the dirt.

That was information, and it changed the weight of the fight. I filed it and got back to work.

Tyla's grip tightened. The softness at the edges of my vision became pressure, became the specific narrowing that means time is running out.

I stopped fighting the grip and let every muscle in my arms go deliberate and still.

I felt her register the change, the slight recalibration of someone who has been fighting resistance and is now encountering the absence of it.

That fraction of a second was all the architecture I had.

My elbow found the inside of her arm. I drove it up and rotated my hips and planted my foot. Not strength.

The mechanics of it were old and practiced and came from the same years of training this pack had watched and discounted. I was off the ground, and for two full seconds the crowd went silent.

Tyla recovered fast, turned fast, and the strike clipped my temple. The world strobed white. I went down on one knee and stayed there for a

Tyla recovered fast, turned fast, and the strike clipped my temple. The world strobed white. I went down on one knee and stayed there for a breath I could not afford to spend, and then I got back up.

Because that was what I did. I got back up. I had been getting back up my entire life from harder floors than this one.

Thrown down by people with more power and more authority than Tyla Morvin had ever possessed. The floor had never been the last word on any of it, and today was not going to be different.

Tyla came at me again. I read the weight shift — I had been reading her weight shifts for thirty seconds and building a map.

I stepped into the blow instead of away, deflected at the wrist, put my shoulder into her center mass, and moved her.

Not far. Not enough to matter on its own. But I had moved her, and every wolf in that ring heard it.

The voices running the arithmetic in the crowd were recalculating. The math had changed.

Tyla's golden eyes locked on mine. The boredom was gone. The pity was gone. What replaced both of them was cleaner and more dangerous: attention.

"Still standing." Tyla's voice had shed the boredom entirely. What replaced it was cleaner and more dangerous.

I rolled my jaw, tasted the iron in the back of my throat, and looked at her across the space between us without blinking. "Still standing."

Draven's eyes were on me. The grip on his armrests was visible from

where I stood. His chest still moved with that forced evenness, controlled breath by controlled breath, and the control itself was the tell.

Tyla moved and I moved to meet her. The dirt floor of the arena held us both with equal indifference, and the only question left was which of us it would keep.

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

Chapter 15



Comments

5



Gifts

222