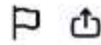




Chapter 16



POV: Isla

I could not breathe, and the dirt was in my mouth, and the crowd had already decided.

"She is finished." "I told you she would not last." "Tyla is going to rip her apart." I heard every word with perfect clarity. That was the thing about the ground. It carried sound well.

My arms shook under my weight. My ribs had become a sustained chord of agony with no rest between the notes.

The blood from my split lip had gone into the dirt and the dirt did not care. My body was sending the same message it had been sending for three minutes: stay down, the accounting is done, the floor is the honest answer.

Then Lira arrived through the noise, her voice cutting everything else to silence.

"Let go of your hatred, Isla. Surrender to the Moon Goddess." The words arrived precise and cold, aimed at the exact place I was most defended.

Let go. I had been carrying the rage so long I had long stopped noticing its weight.

Had worn it as armor. Used it as fuel. Built my entire survival out of its heat. Let go meant standing without it, trusting a thing I had spent years learning to distrust. Let go meant nothing I had ever practiced.

My breath caught in the middle of my chest, and then — a thing cracked open that was not a rib, and the air moved through it.

I exhaled, and the shift was not dramatic. It did not announce itself with heat or light or the howl of a wolf that had not arrived yet.

It was quieter than that, a weight releasing, a refusal dissolving, the specific sensation of a door opening inward.

My fingers dug into the earth. I pushed. My legs found the ground and held it, and I was standing. The crowd went quiet with the shocked silence of people whose arithmetic has been wrong.

Tyla watched me from across the floor. She traced the edge of her blade along her palm in a slow, deliberate line, drawing blood without urgency, and the smile that crossed her face was the smile of someone extending an afternoon they are thoroughly enjoying.

"Impressive. You are still standing." Her voice carried to the back of the arena. She advanced one step, blade catching the light. "I will give you that much credit."

My hands curled into fists and I planted my weight evenly and I did not give her the retreat she was anticipating.

"I was going to end this quickly," she continued, warm with the pleasure of someone narrating a story they already know the ending of.

"One clean strike. Nothing drawn out." She tilted her head. "But now I think I would rather enjoy myself."

The arena held its breath, every wolf along the perimeter going still with the specific attention of predators who have just seen the prey they predicted stop behaving as predicted.

"I think I will start with your ribs. Crack them one by one, feel them splinter under my hands. Then I will carve you open, let everyone here see what a weak little rogue looks like on the inside."

The crowd murmured. Someone chuckled. I heard it and I filed it and I did not look away from her.

Tyla twirled the blade between her fingers and dragged it slowly across her collarbone, absentminded and performing simultaneously.

"Then, when you are choking on your own blood, I will make it personal. I will rip your throat out with my teeth, just like my ancestors did."

Her gaze moved to Draven's chair, deliberate and slow. "Or maybe, if I am feeling generous, I will tear your heart out instead. And hand it to our Alpha myself."

The words moved through the arena and landed on my skin and my hands and my chest.

What arrived in response to those words was not fear. Fear I knew how to manage.

It was rage, clean and total, stripped of the management I had applied to it for years, the specific fury of someone who has been miscalculated and announced as prey in front of witnesses. It moved through me fast and without asking permission.

Tyla's eyes came back to me and found what I had put there in the last ten seconds, and her rhythm shifted.

She lunged and I moved — not away, into. My feet found the angles I had been mapping since the first blow landed, and I moved through the line of the lunge instead of retreating from it.

Tyla's blade cut through air where my throat had been a half-second earlier.

I spun. Caught the flash of steel. Caught the fractional hesitation of a fighter who expected impact and found absence instead. That fraction of a second was the whole architecture.

My elbow into the inside of her guard. My shoulder into her chest. The impact was not controlled, not technical. Real. Bone and muscle and the force of a woman who has nothing left to be careful about.

Both of us hit the ground hard, and the impact was the most honest thing that had happened in this arena all morning.

When I came up and found my footing, the blade was in my hand. Taken clean from her grip in the collision.

Steel warm from her palm. Fitted to her grip and not mine and it did not matter.

The crowd's roar struck full force, raw and fractured, not the comfortable roar of people watching a predicted conclusion, but the sound of a crowd whose certainty has been broken open.

Tyla pushed to her feet. Her eyes were stripped of the performance now, fixed on me with the focused attention of a fighter who has found a real fight.

I held her gaze across the open floor and held the blade between us and let her read whatever she needed to read.

My ribs were still a chorus of agony. I was still bleeding. My legs still wanted to go, and I held all of that behind my face and gave her none of it.

it.

The blade was mine. The ground was mine. I had come into this ring with myself and nothing else, and apparently myself had been sufficient.

Blood ran from us both into the dirt between us, and the dirt received it without comment.

Neither of us moved. Neither of us looked away. The crowd held its noise and waited.

The roar of the crowd next was a deafening, vicious thing. It broke over the arena and kept breaking.

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

Chapter 16



Comments

7



Gifts

222