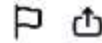




Chapter 32



POV: Kael

The moment I saw her in his arms, the way she fit there, the way she allowed it, a thing in me snapped that I had been bracing against all night.

I had spent the whole night telling myself it did not matter. That Isla was not mine anymore. That she had made her choice and I had made mine. I had not learned to live with the distance between those two facts.

I watched her from the shadows with my hood low and the masking herbs still sharp in my nostrils, and I watched Draven pull her into the dance the way a man claims what he has already decided belongs to him.

I watched her laugh. I watched her lean into him, the trust in her body so complete and so visible from where I stood that it was almost indecent.

Isla had never leaned into me like that. She had never stopped calculating when we were in the same room.

She had always held some part of herself back. Always a step removed, always a qualification — ‘I want to wait until it feels right. I don’t belong to anyone.’

I had spent years taking the careful version of her, the one that kept its distance and called it self-preservation. I had told myself that patience was a kind of love. I had told myself a lot of things.

And then she let him kiss her, and the pack celebrated, and I stood in the

dark and held myself together with both hands.

My vision went white at the edges. A growl built in my chest and I forced it down before it could surface, because losing control now would ruin everything, and I had not come this far to lose control now.

I had let Seraphine believe I was doing this for her. I had let my parents believe I was doing it for the alliance, for all the reasons they had been feeding me in careful spoonfuls since I was old enough to be directed.

Seraphine is your future. She will make you an Alpha. Isla never could. I had believed it once. Long enough to build a life on it.

But standing in the shadows of the Crimson Fang hall watching Isla become someone else's Luna, I was not doing this for Seraphine. I was not doing it for my parents' ambitions or the pack's political geometry or any of the architecture I had built my choices on.

I was doing it because she had belonged to me first, and the bond in my chest had never accepted any other answer.

I could feel it even now, the pull of it running beneath my sternum with the force of a current that had nowhere to go. My parents had told me it could be redirected, that choice and discipline were enough.

They had been wrong about that. That filling with Isla had not moved. It sat exactly where it had always sat and it ached with the specific persistence of a thing that has been told to stop existing and has declined.

She was mine. She had always been mine. And he had walked into that equation and changed the terms without my permission.

I tracked her as she separated from the celebration and drifted toward

the garden. The pack's attention was on the hall, on the music, on the Alpha and the Luna. No one was watching the side door.

She stopped near the fountain, the sheer silk of her gown catching the moonlight, the crescent pendant at her throat catching the glow — his, obviously his, a thing he had put on her to mark what he believed he owned.

The thought burned through me. I was already moving before I had finished processing it. She went rigid instantly.

Her nails found my forearm and dug in, and she thrashed with the immediate, furious intensity of a woman who has fought before and knows how to apply her weight.

She was stronger than she looked. She had always been stronger than she looked. That had always been the part of her I had never adequately prepared for.

"Shh, Isla." My breath was hot against her ear, and I felt the moment she recognized it.

She went still. Not the stillness of surrender. The stillness of a wolf who has stopped thrashing to calculate the odds.

Then the fight in her turned wild. She screamed against my palm, the sound muffled to nothing, and she kicked backward and twisted and clawed, and I tightened my hold because I had come too far and wanted this too much to let go again.

"Stop fighting me, Isla." My voice came out lower than I intended, rougher. "You don't want to make this harder than it needs to be."

She bit down on my hand with every intention of making it harder than it

needed to be.

I yanked my hand back with a hiss. She spun to face me, and the expression on her face was not fear. It was rage, white-hot and specific, the kind that comes from recognition.

"Kael?!" Recognition and fury, arriving together. I let it settle between us. "Miss me?"

A movement ran through her expression. Not the softness I had been hoping for. Not even close. Her jaw set. Her eyes found the space between us and measured it.

"What the hell are you doing?" She was not asking. She was buying a second to look for an exit.

"Taking back what's mine." The words left my mouth clean and final, and I watched them land.

The words landed between us with a weight I had not anticipated. I watched the understanding move through her face.

It was not a relief. Not gratitude. Not anything I had constructed in the long months since she left.

"I was never yours." She put every syllable of it directly at me. No flinch. No softening. Just the flat, clean truth as she understood it.

My jaw clenched hard enough to feel it in my back teeth. The bond pulled at me from the inside, insisting on what my mind already knew.

She was wrong. She had always been wrong about this. The bond did not ask for permission. It did not care about Draven or the ceremony that had just happened inside those doors.

had just happened inside those doors.

"That's where you're wrong." I held her gaze. The bond between us was already answering, whether she chose to acknowledge it or not.

I moved before she could complete the turn. My hands caught her wrists before she reached the distance she needed.

I looked at her, really looked, the way I had not been able to for months. She was furious and terrified underneath the fury, and she was the most real thing I had seen in a year of living a life I had let other people construct for me.

"You're coming with me, Isla." I did not let go of her wrists. "One way or another."

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

Chapter 32



Comments

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Gifts

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