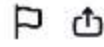




Chapter 37



POV: Kael

I sat in the corner of the dimly lit hut, shoulders hunched, fingers digging into my knees.

The lantern threw long shadows across the wooden walls and made the space feel smaller than it was. Small enough to pass for a verdict on what I had done.

Across from me, Isla was chained.

Heavy iron shackles circled her wrists, bolted to the thick post behind her. Her ankles were bound too, with just enough slack to sit on the makeshift bed. The chains were not tight enough to bruise.

They were still chains. And I had put them there.

I had told myself it was the only way. That pulling her away from Draven would loosen the coil of pressure that had been tightening inside me for weeks, that once she was back within reach the wrongness would finally go quiet.

It had not gone quiet. But it had gotten louder.

Isla began to stir. Her head rolled to the side, a soft sound escaping her lips as she fought her way back through unconsciousness. I leaned forward, breath held.

Her eyes opened.

Confusion first. The raw disorientation of waking somewhere unfamiliar. She blinked against the low light, and then her gaze found me and confusion sharpened into recognition and recognition hardened into the particular weight I had been dreading since the moment I locked those chains.

"Kael?" Her voice was thick with sleep and disbelief.

Her eyes moved fast across the room. The rough walls. The dim lantern. The chains. When the iron rattled against the post she went completely still, the way a wolf goes still when it has measured every distance and found no viable route.

Her breathing quickened.

"Kael," she said, the grogginess stripped out now. "Where are we?"

I made myself hold her gaze. "You're safe," I said softly. "You're back with me. We can start over again."

Isla's entire body stiffened.

"Start over?" she repeated, disbelief creeping into her tone. "Kael, what are you talking about? What have you done?"

"I saved you, Isla." I leaned closer, my hands moving toward her and stopping short of contact, suspended in the air between us. "From Crimson Fang. From him. You don't belong there — you belong with me. We can be together now, like it was always meant to be."

She stared at me, horror widening her eyes.

"Kael," she said, her voice trembling, "take me back. Now."

"Why would you want to go back to that pompous Alpha?" The words

came out harder than I intended, the frustration and the fear running together. "Isla, he's a ruthless wolf. You don't know a thing about him."

Her body tensed. "And yet I chose him."

I flinched.

She pushed herself upright, ignoring the chains, ignoring the cold drag of iron against her skin. Her eyes burned and they did not leave my face.

"Kael, you betrayed me. Do you remember that?" she demanded. "Do you remember how you abandoned me when I needed you the most?"

The accusation landed with precision. The guilt that came with it was not performance. It was the real, ugly thing, and I let her see it because hiding it would have been worse.

"I made a mistake," I admitted, voice tight. "I was weak. But I can fix it. Let me fix it, Isla. Just give me another chance."

"Fix it?" The words came back at me stripped of patience. "You can't fix this, Kael. You can't undo what you did. If you really cared about me — if you ever cared about me — you'd take me back to Crimson Fang." She lifted her chin, and in the low light she was exactly as she had always been: steadier than any of this warranted, more certain than I had ever managed to be. "Back to my mate."

My jaw clenched.

"I can't do that."

"Why not?" she pressed, her voice sharper now. "If you love me, why won't you let me go?"

"Because I can't lose you again," I ground out through gritted teeth, hands trembling. "I won't."

Silence descended between us.

I had rehearsed this. I had gone over it across weeks of watching from a distance, months of standing close enough to speak and having no right to say any of it. I had known what I would tell her and how she would receive it and how she would eventually understand. I had built the plan in the dark and trusted it to hold.

Sitting across from her now, watching her eyes move across my face and settle into a judgment she was not walking back from, I felt the structure of it collapse.

She was looking at me the way I had always dreaded being seen.

Not the man shaped against his will. Not the wolf directed into choices by parents who treated loyalty and obedience as the same instruction, who placed Seraphine in front of me before I was old enough to name what was being arranged. Not the person who had spent two years maintaining a distance that had cost more of himself than he had realized he was paying.

She was looking at what was actually in front of her. A man who had put iron on her wrists, in a hut no one else could find, because he had exhausted every other argument and refused to accept the verdict.

"Kael," she whispered, "this isn't love. It's obsession."

The word drove into me and did not move.

I had the argument against it. I had lived inside that argument long enough to stop noticing its walls. But the anger had gone from her

enough to stop noticing its walls. But the anger had gone from her expression now and what was left was worse: clear, undiluted sight. The look of someone who has passed through fear and arrived at plain truth with nothing softening it.

My breath came out rough.

I wanted to tell her about my parents. About every year of proximity to her that had cost me a piece of myself I had not noticed losing until the loss was already total. About standing at Seraphine's side at ceremony after ceremony, feeling the falseness of it press deeper each time, until the falseness was the only thing I could locate with any certainty.

I wanted her to understand that there had been a before. Somewhere behind all of this, before the desperation calcified into these four walls and these chains, what I had felt for her had been clean and real and possible.

But the chains were still on her wrists.

And she was watching me with the patience of a wolf who has already reached her verdict, waiting, with grief rather than fury, for me to choose what to do with it.

"You'll see," I said, voice shaking with conviction. "You'll see that I'm the one who truly cares."

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

Chapter 37

