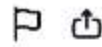




Chapter 41



POV: Isla

The darkness was absolute and the gag was filthy and my wrists were burning where the iron had been chewing at the skin for what felt like hours.

I breathed through my nose. Short, controlled. The panic was there — it was always there when the body could not move freely, but panic was a noise and I had learned how to put noise in a room it could not get out of.

The cloth tasted of sweat and dirt and I pushed against it with my tongue until my jaw ached and it did not move. My wrists were bolted behind me, the shackles thick and unapologetic, the chains at my ankles running to a wooden post I could feel but not see. Three inches of movement in any direction. I had catalogued the limits in the first thirty seconds.

I reached for Lira with everything I had, every fiber of the reach that had always brought her back. Silence. The specific silence of a room that has been emptied.

Not the silence of Lira being quiet: that had warmth, the presence of a wolf choosing restraint. This was the other kind, the kind I had not felt since before the ceremony. What had been done to me had not yet been undone.

My chest went hollow. I bit down on the gag and held the whimper before it became a sound. The tears at the corners of my eyes were anger, not grief. I was decided about that.

I had fought for Crimson Fang. Had bled in an arena for the right to stand in it. Had shifted under a full moon and given the pack the answer they had been withholding.

Draven had put a pendant around my neck and told me I was his and I had believed it for exactly long enough to be taken from the garden by a man I had already refused once.

Not again. That was the complete substance of my position and I was going to hold it until my body gave out or the chains gave first.

Then: sound. Rustling outside. My body stiffened before the thought finished forming. Footsteps. Low voices.

I inhaled through the gag and the scent hit me, clean and specific and unmistakable.

Crimson Fang warriors. Draven's people. The hope that detonated in my chest was violent enough to hurt. I started moving before I had a plan, my body twisting against the chains, the shackles hammering the wood.

I screamed against the gag. Muffled, broken, swallowed by the cloth. I pushed harder. Throat burning. Body jerking at the absolute limit of what the chains allowed.

I'm here. I'm here. The voices outside grew closer with every second I fought.

Kael appeared in the doorway. His eyes found me immediately, his expression going from controlled to furious in the span of a second. He brought one finger to his lips.

I screamed louder and threw my whole weight against the chains, the shackles digging in, the wood answering with sound.

The door opened. A Crimson Fang scout stepped through. His eyes swept the room and found me and recognition crossed his face with the specific quality of a man who has found exactly what he was sent to find.

Hope hit me so hard my vision blurred at the edges, the whole room going bright for one second.

He was here. He had seen me. Draven had sent him and he had come and he had found me and it was over — and then Kael moved.

The blade came out of his belt in one motion and crossed the scout's throat before the man had finished stepping through the door. The door opened.

The sound it made was wet and brief and final. Then the body was on the floor and the blood was spreading across the wood toward my bound feet, and the scent of it filled the room sharp and metallic and absolute.

I did not make a sound. I held everything absolutely still and let the rage settle into the space that panic had been using.

Not because I was afraid. Because what I was feeling was not fear and it needed different handling.

It was rage so specific and so complete that it had no room left for sound. I stared at the body on the floor. I stared at Kael. I held every muscle at the edge of what the chains would allow and I did not look away from him.

Kael's chest rose and fell. He turned toward me. Whatever he was reading in my face, it made him kneel rather than stand, brought him down to my level with the specific approach of a man who has done damage he is now trying to manage the fallout of.

His hand found my chin and gripped it, tilting my face toward him like he had the right to direct where I looked.

"You can't fight this, Isla." His voice dropped, low and explanatory, the voice of a man who had mistaken obsession for patience. His eyes carried a quality he intended as softness. "No one is coming for you."

A tear broke free from the corner of my eye. I did not stop it. Tears were information — they told him I was responding, gave him a reading to work with, and while he was working with it I was thinking.

He reached up and brushed it away with his thumb, the gesture careful and possessive and entirely convinced of itself. "Just accept it," he whispered. "You're mine now."

I looked at him. Then I looked at the body on the floor behind him. The scout who had come for me, the one Draven had sent.

Draven had come to the garden. He had found the chain. He had sent people into the dark to find me, which meant he was still looking, which meant the bond between us was still pulling.

I was not lost yet. My body was shaking with the specific tremor that rage and cold and restraint produce together, and I let it shake because shaking was not the same as breaking.

I kept my eyes on Kael with the specific steadiness of a woman who is not going to look away, not going to stop. I let him read whatever he needed to read in my face while I built what came next in the silence behind it.

Not like this. Not to him. Not again. Not while I was still breathing and thinking and refusing.

He wanted me to accept it. He was going to find out precisely how long

He wanted me to accept it. He was going to find out precisely how long that took.

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

Chapter 41

