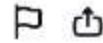




Chapter 42



POV: Isla

Time had stopped having edges, and what I had instead of edges was the specific inventory of what was still available to me.

I sat slumped against the post with my wrists raw and the body of the Crimson Fang scout still on the floor a few feet away, his blood dried dark into the wood. The scent had settled into the room the way bad things settled: completely, without apology, until it became the only thing the air was made of.

My fingers had gone numb an hour ago. I had been moving them in small circles, keeping the circulation fighting the chains, keeping the body functional because my body was the only tool I had left in this room and I was not going to let it stop working.

Draven. I held onto that deliberately, with the specific intention of staying sane.

The night of the ceremony. The way his voice had dropped when he spoke my name. The weight of his hands on my waist as we danced. His mouth against my ear with a promise that had felt like solid ground beneath my feet.

And then the distance between that and this — the specific measurement of what Kael had taken.

I did not know if Draven knew I was gone. That uncertainty was the thing I could not work around, could not strategize past, could only hold. Not

the chains. Not the body on the floor.

Not even Lira's silence. The possibility that the ceremony had ended and Draven had moved forward without feeling the wrongness in the bond — that was the thought that cut deepest.

The metallic clank of Kael crouching in front of me pulled me back into the room.

He reached for my face. His fingers moved the damp strands of hair from my forehead with the particular gentleness of a man who had convinced himself this was care.

"We're out of food." Logistics. Not captivity. Never captivity, in his voice.

I did not respond. I had stopped flinching at his touch two days in — flinching gave him feedback, and feedback was currency I was no longer spending.

"I'll be back before nightfall." His grip found my chin, directing my eyes to his. "Don't make a sound while I'm gone. You'll only get yourself into trouble."

His fingers tightened slightly. Just enough.

"Do you understand?"

I held his gaze with the emptiness I had built specifically for this purpose. No submission. No defiance. Nothing he could use.

Kael exhaled. His grip loosened. "Don't fight this, Isla." The authority softened into something underneath it — a plea, which was the part I had catalogued as useful. "Just let me take care of you."

Revulsion moved through me, clean and total.

The door shut behind him. I let the breath out and started working on the shackles again.

My wrists screamed every time I flexed them. I kept moving.

I brought Draven back into the silence and held him there like an anchor. The Moon Goddess brought you to me for a reason. His voice, certain and unhurried.

Tears burned behind my eyes. I held them at the boundary — grief required energy I was not allocating to grief right now.

If that was true — if there was a plan that had carried me across three territories, through an arena, all the way to a ceremony where I had shifted white in front of two hundred wolves — then this was not the ending. This was a complication inside the plan.

I was not the ending of my own story. I held that with both hands and no intention of releasing it.

The door creaked. My eyes snapped up.

Not Kael.

My blood went cold — not with fear, but with a specific recognition that had no good options attached to it.

Garrick. He stepped inside, boots clicking against the wood, the smile on his face the exact smile I had been trying to escape since I was seventeen years old. His gaze moved over my bound form with the amusement of a man who finds a situation entertaining precisely because the other person cannot move.

"Well, well." He stopped three feet away, taking his time. "Look at you

now, Isla."

My stomach clenched. My spine — against every instruction my body was sending — straightened against the post.

I had fought in an arena. I had shifted under a full moon and given two hundred wolves their answer. I had survived everything this man and his family had thrown at me since I was old enough to understand the trajectory.

I was chained to a post in a dark room with a dead body on the floor, and I was not going to shrink for him.

His eyes darkened. "Not so high and mighty anymore, are you?"

A sharp breath left me — involuntary, the body registering him before I could stop it.

I was already working out what came next. I had been working it out since the door opened.

Garrick had never been able to stop me from thinking. That had always been his problem.

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

Chapter 42

