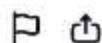




Chapter 43



POV: Isla

He did not rush — that was the thing I had always hated most about him. The deliberateness. The slow, savoring quality of a man who knew he held every card in the room and wanted me to feel the weight of each one before he played it.

His boots clicked against the wooden floor in measured steps, hands clasped behind his back, eyes locked onto me with the particular hunger that had lived in my nightmares for three years.

He looked at me the way he had always looked at me: as property. The chains a formality. My struggling part of the pleasure rather than an obstacle.

"You look good like this." His voice dripped satisfaction. "Bound. Helpless. Right where you belong."

I jerked against the chains with everything I had. The metal answered by cutting deeper. I kicked out until the shackles bit down and the wood answered with a hollow thud. None of it moved him. None of it touched his expression.

I was giving him exactly what he wanted and I could not stop, because going still was the other thing he wanted and I refused that too.

"Always had a little fight in you." He circled me slowly. "I liked that about you. Made it more... fun."

The whimper that escaped me was involuntary and I hated it. His chuckle made my skin crawl.

His hand came up to trace the chains at my wrists, fingers lingering against my skin with the deliberate patience of someone who has done this before and intends to take his time.

"I was so angry when you ran from me." His breath was hot against my ear. I wrenched myself away and hit the limit of the chains. "After everything I gave you. After all I did for you."

I shut my eyes. Draven. I felt Garrick's fingertips on my collarbone and the scream that tore from my throat hit the gag and broke apart. I thrashed with everything my body had until the metal cut deeper and I did not stop.

"You still remember, don't you?" His voice was thick, smug in a way that turned my rage white and total. "How good I made you feel."

I had not begged then. I was not giving him a revision of it now — not with my silence, not with my eyes.

His hand moved lower. I felt his fingers brush the fabric of my gown and I turned my face to the far wall because I could not turn my body away.

I counted the knots in the wood. Counting took up space, and space was what I needed.

"You've gotten even more beautiful, Isla." I kept my eyes on the wall and my count on the wood grain. "And now that you're all grown up," his other hand moved to my thigh, "I think it's time you understand—"

The door came off its hinges with a crack that shook the frame.

Garrick did not flinch. His hand stayed where it was. "Now." His voice stayed low and deliberate. "Let's not be interrupted."

His hand moved higher. "Let's see how much you can take this time." His lips brushed my ear. "Let's see if you can beg as sweetly as you used to."

I kept counting. I was still here. I was going to make it to the end of this count, and then the next, and then the next, until —

"Get your fucking hands off her."

Everything stopped. The air. The sound. My breath.

I stopped counting. Kael's voice had taken the space the numbers had been filling.

He hit Garrick with his full weight and the two of them went into the floor with a crack. Kael's fist connected with Garrick's face, and connected again, and the blood went across the wooden planks in a dark spray.

I watched and did not look away. I did not give Garrick the decency of my tears.

"Touch her again," Kael growled, "and I'll make sure you never walk out of here."

Garrick laughed. Blood ran from his nose. He wiped it away and grinned with the specific confidence of a man who has not yet accepted he has lost a room.

"You think you can do that? I'll banish you from my pack and let them devour you."

Kael's grip did not loosen. His expression did not change. "Yeah." He held Garrick's gaze and did not blink. "But you're alone right now."

Garrick went still. I watched his face run the calculation of a man who has spent decades being the most dangerous person in every room, discovering he may have miscounted.

He shoved Kael off him and stood. Dusted himself off. Then his eyes found mine.

"This isn't over." Flat certainty, not a threat. "One way or another, I'll get you, Isla. You belong to me."

I held his gaze with the deliberate blankness that said I had heard him and was not impressed by his conclusions.

He walked out without looking at Kael, and the door closed behind him with the specific quality of an unfinished sentence.

I breathed. Long and shaking, the breath my body took because it had been waiting.

My wrists were bleeding. Lira was still silent. Garrick was outside that door. Kael stood three feet away with blood on his knuckles.

I was still here. Still counting. Still refusing to be what the night had tried to make me. I was not broken. I held that in both hands while my body shook.

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

