



Chapter 46



POV: Isla

The nail was in my palm and the rope was almost gone, and Kael was still breathing, and I had maybe three minutes before his next shift in his sleep.

Three hours of working the rope against the rusted iron, fingers raw, wrists screaming every time the shackle shifted against bone.

Three hours of moving in fractions so small that Kael's breathing never changed rhythm, never quickened, never broke from the deep, even pull of a man who believed he had made escape impossible.

He had not made it impossible. He had miscalculated what I was willing to endure to get past difficult, and difficult and impossible were different categories, and I had always known the difference between the two.

I held still for ten seconds, watching the rise and fall of his back across the floor. Then I pulled the rope free.

The last fiber gave without sound, and the silence of it was the best sound I had never heard.

I was on my feet before the rope hit the mat, body already orienting toward the door, the plan already running.

The door. I eased it open one centimeter at a time, reading every creak before it happened, giving each one the silence it needed before the next.

My heartbeat was loud enough to fill the hut. I breathed past it, slow.

controlled, the breath of a woman who could not afford panic and was specific about what she needed from her body.

The night air hit my face and I took it in full stride, the cold of it a confirmation rather than a deterrent, and I ran.

Cold and sharp and real — the cold of freedom and the cold of capture were the same temperature and I did not care about the difference. I ran.

Bare feet against damp earth, no trail, no direction except away, and away was enough. The trees closed around me and I went into them at full speed, lungs catching up to my legs, arms pumping.

The underbrush cut at my calves and I registered each cut and filed it and did not stop, because I had counted the costs before I moved and this was exactly what I had agreed to pay.

Then: a sound behind me. Closer than it should have been. The specific quality of a sound that meant I had miscalculated the depth of his sleep.

A shift in the air that arrived too fast, that carried his specific weight and direction, that meant he had not been as deep asleep as I had read him.

My stomach dropped. Too soon. I adjusted my angle and drove harder into the next stride. Do not stop moving.

"Isla!" Kael's roar split the dark, furious and raw, and I heard the crash of him coming upright, heard the door hit the frame, heard him orient on me by sound and begin to move.

I ran harder, the specific decision of a woman who has not come this far to be caught in the first thirty seconds.

My lungs were already burning. I pushed past the burn because burning was a sensation and sensation was not a reason to stop.

The trees thinned ahead and thickened to my right and I angled left, buying distance, buying the few seconds I needed to build a gap I could hold.

"Stop!" His voice was closer now, his footsteps crashing through the underbrush with the full force of a wolf who had stopped pretending to be careful.

Not fast enough. I pushed harder anyway and my foot caught a root that had been waiting in the dark for exactly this moment.

The ground came up fast and I went into it hard — palms, knees, the breath slamming out of me on impact.

Pain shot through my hands and I registered it and ignored it and scrambled upright, but the seconds it cost were the seconds I did not have.

Kael's hand found my arm and the grip closed before I had registered the contact, the speed of a wolf who had been running at full capacity before I had gotten twenty meters from the hut.

He spun me, grip like iron locked around my wrist, his face close and his breathing ragged and his expression split between fury and a relief I refused to name. "Enough!"

"Let me go!" I raked my nails across his forearm, hard enough to break skin. He gritted his teeth and his grip did not move.

"I'm trying to save you!" His voice was desperate and pleading and entirely convinced of itself.

"You're destroying me!" I put every syllable of it at him, full weight, no softening.

The words landed. I watched them land. I watched his face absorb them the way a body absorbed a blow — the flinch, the micro-collapse, the specific involuntary response of a person given the truth with no counter ready for it.

His grip slackened, and the slackening was the answer to everything I had just said, the involuntary proof of it.

One second and that was all. One second where his hands remembered they were choosing to hold me and had not yet re-committed to the choice.

I wrenched free and shoved him with both hands, every ounce of weight I had behind it. He stumbled back, eyes wide, and in the space of his stumbling I was already running.

Branches cut across my arms and face. I felt each one and catalogued them and did not stop. I was bleeding in four places by my count and none of it was structural damage and none of it was a reason to slow.

Kael's roar followed me through the trees, rage and frustration twisting in the dark, but I did not look back because looking back required a direction and I had already chosen mine.

My feet hit harder ground. The trees were thinning at the edge of my vision, the dark becoming less absolute ahead, which meant open ground, which meant distance, which meant I was going to make it.

My lungs were past burning, past the register where pain was a useful signal, into the territory where the body just ran because it had

useful signal, into the territory where the body just ran because it had committed.

I let it run. I trusted it. Three hours with a nail and a rope and a man who thought he understood what I was capable of. I knew what I was capable of, and what I was capable of was this.

Freedom was ahead. I was taking it, and no version of Kael's reach was long enough to change that now.

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

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Comments

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Gifts

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