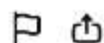




Chapter 48



POV: Isla

The forest had gone quiet the way forests went quiet when they were tracking a target.

My breath came in sharp gasps and I forced myself forward anyway, each stride a negotiation between my lungs and my legs, both of them past reasonable limits and both of them not my problem right now.

The trees pressed close on either side, their shadows reaching across the ground. Every sound carried the specific weight of a thing that might be him.

Kael was close. I could feel it the way I felt things in the dark: not through sight, not through Lira — who was there now, finally there, a warmth at the base of my mind where the silence had been — but not answering.

Present the way a flame is present behind glass. I could feel her but I could not reach her, could not pull her forward, could not shift. Whatever the relic had done had left the bond intact and the access shattered, and I had not yet found the seam between the two.

What I had instead was the awareness of a woman who had been someone's prey long enough to learn the texture of being followed.

His voice was still in my head. The fury of it. The desperation underneath the fury that was somehow worse, the specific quality of a man who

could not separate wanting someone from owning them.

He had once been someone I trusted. The memory of that trust was its own kind of wound.

Now he was behind me in the dark and I was running and that was the complete and total summary of the situation and it was enough.

A low growl reached me from the dark ahead and froze me in place before my body had decided to stop.

My chest was still heaving. I turned, eyes moving through the darkness, reading every shadow for the shape I knew.

Nothing moved. "I know you're out there!" My voice came out shaking, which I had not intended. "Come out and face me, Kael!"

A figure emerged from the trees, and it was not Kael, and I had three seconds to decide what that meant.

A wolf. Silver fur under the faint moonlight, large and absolutely still and watching me.

As I watched, the form shifted, the specific fluid motion of a wolf taking its human shape, and a man stood where the wolf had been.

Tall, broad-shouldered, golden eyes locked onto mine with the particular regard I could not read.

I took a step back, keeping the distance between us at the width I could still run through. "Who — who are you?"

He did not move. His voice came out smooth and low and unhurried in the specific way of a man who has decided there is no urgency yet. "A friend. For now."

"For now?" My body stayed angled toward the nearest gap in the trees, weight on my forward foot, the particular readiness of someone who had already decided on the first three steps of escape.

He lifted his hands, palms facing out. "Easy. I'm not here to hurt you."

I had heard that before. From people who then proceeded to hurt me.

"Then why are you here? How do you know who I am?"

His golden eyes moved over my face with the attention of a man cataloguing information rather than assessing threat.

"Let's just say I have a reason to keep you alive. And right now, you're dangerously close to getting caught."

My heart was still hammering. I ran the calculation with what I had: stranger, unknown pack, unknown agenda, his word against nothing.

Lira was silent. I had no wolf instinct to check him against yet, no thread of pack bond to read the register of his presence through.

What I had was that he had emerged from the direction Kael was not, and Kael was still coming, and the time available for careful decisions was running out.

"Kael is out there." I kept my voice below the level that carried. "He won't stop until he finds me."

"Then it's a good thing I found you first." The man's voice stayed calm, steady, with the flatness of someone who has arrived at this kind of situation before and has a method for it. "But if you want to stay free, you'll have to trust me."

Trust. The word sat in my chest the way it always sat now: heavy, with

edges, requiring the specific calculation of whether the person saying it had earned the right to ask for it. This man had not. I did not have time to let him earn it.

I had no options and no time. The alternative was Kael. The alternative to the alternative was the dark alone, with no direction, no idea how far I was from anyone who was looking for me. I weighed it in under a second.

"Fine." The word came out without warmth and without the hesitation that would have told him I was not in control of the decision. "But if this is a trap—"

"It's not." His gaze held mine, level and without qualification. "Follow me. Quickly."

I glanced once behind me. The dark between the trees was thick and still and did not reveal him, but that was the specific quality of Kael: patience when the situation required it, the willingness to move at the exact moment I stopped moving.

I turned back to the stranger and gave him the look I gave situations I had not yet decided about but was committing to anyway.

He was already walking, his pace steady and confident through the dark, and I ran after him because the alternative had a name and it was Kael.

The trees closed around us and the forest swallowed the sound of our movement, and I kept pace with him and kept my eyes on the tree line behind us and kept every muscle at the specific readiness of a woman who was not done making decisions just because she had agreed to follow someone.

He was taking me somewhere and I was going there and I kept my eyes

He was taking me somewhere and I was going there and I kept my eyes on the tree line behind us and kept every muscle at the specific readiness of a woman who was not done making decisions just because she had agreed to follow someone.

I was still here. I was still running, and the dark was thinning ahead, and I was not going to stop now. That was enough. That had always been enough.

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

Chapter 48



Comments

2



Gifts

224