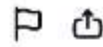




Chapter 8



POV: Isla

I woke with my hands already pressed to my sternum, my breath coming wrong, too fast and too shallow, my body convinced it was still in the hallway.

The sheets were damp. The room was dark. Crimson Fang, not Midnight Crest. I repeated it twice, waiting for it to take hold.

The nightmares always arrived in fragments. Sharp and disconnected, each piece landing before the next, no mercy between them.

I could still feel his hands on me. That was the part that waking never fully cleared.

I got out of bed. Both feet on the stone floor. Cold against my soles, deliberate, real. I pressed my palms flat to the wall and held the surface until the room stopped tilting.

I was young. The corridor outside my room. The smell of wine was thick in the air before I had even heard the footsteps.

His grip had come around my wrist before I had time to turn. Tight and immediate. The kind of grip that already knows it will not be challenged.

"You've always been my favorite, Isla." Garrick's voice had been smooth. Almost gentle. That was the worst part of it — the almost.

"You're the prettiest she-wolf here, you know that, don't you?" His

fingers had trailed along the edge of her blanket, hovering just over her leg. "Give Daddy a little taste of you, sweetheart, and I'll give you anything you want."

I had wanted to run. My whole body had been screaming for it. But I had already learned.

His hand had moved toward my face. Slow and expectant. Waiting for a response I would not give.

I had clenched my teeth and kept my breathing even and screamed for Lira in the only place that was mine.

"Help me. Tell me what to do. Please." The inside of my mind returned nothing.

The quiet was not peaceful. It had the density of a space deliberately emptied.

Lira, the voice that had been there every time before, steady and certain — was not there. The one time I had needed her with everything I had, the space where she lived inside me was cold.

And then the knock arrived at the door. Three strikes, sharp and certain, and the moment shattered.

Garrick jerked back. I stayed exactly where I was, not moving, not reacting, not giving either of them the satisfaction of watching my face do anything.

My mother appeared in the doorway, and for the space of one breath, the architecture of the whole scene rearranged itself. For one breath I had thought: safe.

"You filthy whore!" She was across the room before I had processed the movement, her hand in my hair, yanking. "How dare you seduce your father?"

The words had hit in the way that only words from a particular source can hit — with the force of everything they confirmed, every suspicion I had refused to hold.

She had not spoken to me for weeks after that. The punishments arrived in waves, calibrated and patient. Hours locked in my room. Days without food. Slaps from directions I had stopped anticipating.

My father had never tried again. He had not needed to. What he had built was already in place, and it held without maintenance.

I pushed off the wall and stood in the dark of my own breathing. The room waited with me.

In Crimson Fang, at whatever hour this was, in a room that was mine only conditionally and under constant observation, I walked to the window and gripped the sill and looked out at the dark.

I could still hear Lira's voice. Not from the memory. From the night I had fled Midnight Crest, her voice coming through the dark just before I crossed the border.

I could still hear her: "You were meant to be rejected by Kael... but..." She had started to tell me, and then she had stopped, and the unfinished sentence had been worse than silence.

The 'but' had dangled in the dark of the corridor that last night, and then she had gone quiet, and nothing had followed. The sentence hung, and the line went cold.

I waited for the second half of it, for the 'but' to arrive and give me the rest. It never came.

The anger that moved through me was not the damp, exhausted grief I had been managing for years. It was cleaner than that. Harder.

"Where were you?" The words left my mouth quiet and certain, aimed at the interior where Lira lived. "Where were you when he put his hands on me?" The silence that returned was absolute.

"You are supposed to protect me." My voice was steady, which was the one advantage of having survived as many things as I had. Steady had become reflex. "You are supposed to be my wolf."

The silence that returned held the same shape as the one before it.

I crossed to the bed and sat on the edge of it and pressed my hands together and made myself breathe through the fury. Made myself hold it instead of dissolving into it.

Dissolving was not available to me. Not here. Not in a packhouse full of wolves watching for any crack they could use.

"Say something, Lira. Say anything." My voice did not shake. I would not allow it to.

The room gave me the sound of my own unsteady breathing and nothing else whatsoever.

I sat with that for a long time, long enough that the dark outside the window began to shift by degrees.

This was the thing no one outside the wolf bond would understand: the silence was not absence.

It was presence with the sound removed. Lira was still there. I could feel the shape of her at the edge of my awareness. She was not gone. She was withheld, or waiting, and she was not telling me which.

I had built my survival out of not needing anyone, and I had done it deliberately. Kael had been the one exception I had allowed myself to make.

I did not need the Moon Goddess. I did not need this pack. I did not need Lira either, if it came to it. I had crossed three territories in the dark and stood in front of Draven and not broken. I had survived everything that had been done to me without anyone.

I was enough. I had always been enough, even when everything around me had worked to prove otherwise.

The thought landed, and I held it, and for the first time since I had woken with my hands pressed to my sternum and the smell of wine still somewhere in the back of my throat, a hard, settled place in my chest became ground.

I did not trust the Moon Goddess. I did not trust this world, which had given me Garrick as a father and Lenora as a mother and Seraphine as a mirror and called it a family.

But I trusted myself. And in this room, with Lira silent and Draven circling and every exit I had mapped still available to me, and that was sufficient.

It had to be. And for tonight, in this room, with the dark outside the window beginning its slow shift toward morning, it was enough.

