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Phera POV:

The quiet hum of the kitchen was pierced by the sudden jingle of my phone, a tone I had custom-set years ago. I didn't need to look; I knew it was Josh. My heart did a little flutter – a blend of nostalgia and anxiety – but I took a deep breath, steadying myself. Josh wasn't just a name from my past; he was my past. Hitting the answer button, I tried to keep my voice neutral,

"Hey, Josh."

"Morning, sunshine," came his voice, that old familiar flirtatious lilt to it.

It had always made me giggle once, but today, it was a reminder of a chapter we had closed. Or at least, I thought we had.

"To what do I owe this call?" I inquired, taking a sip of my coffee.

"Just thinking of you, is all. Heard you're back at Red Moon. Big news, considering..."

He trailed off, and the unspoken words hung heavily between us. Considering we once dreamt of ruling this pack together. Considering the heartbreak when the reality of my fated mates had shattered those dreams. Forcing a small chuckle, I brushed off his sentiment,

"Oh, you know how it is. Can't stay away from home too long."

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His laughter, husky and familiar, echoed in my ears.

"You've always been a force, Phera. I bet the pack's thrilled to have their firebrand back."

Despite the tension, I couldn't help but smile at that. We had shared countless training sessions, many challenges, and even more laughter. "Oh, they don't know what's coming. Got a few more tricks up my sleeve now."

There was a brief pause, and when he spoke again, the playfulness was evident.

"Always keeping me on my toes, weren't you? Maybe I could get a personal demo sometime?"

It was meant as light banter, I knew. But the implications were there. Navigating this terrain was trickier now, given our shared history and the scars that lingered.

"Josh," I began gently, trying to navigate the delicate balance of our past relationship and our present friendship, "let's just keep things... simple, okay?"

He sighed, the weight of our past pressing down on him too.

"Yeah, I get it, Phera. Old habits die hard, I guess. But hey, we're friends. That's what matters."

Grateful for his understanding, I agreed,

"Exactly. Friends. And I cherish that."

As we continued talking, I was reminded of why we had been so close – our shared dreams, our ambitions, our challenges. We had been each other's rock. And though our paths had shifted, that bond, strained though it may

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be, still held. The flirty undertones from Josh were reminders of a time gone by, but I was determined not to let them overshadow the genuine bond of friendship we had built over the years.

When the call ended, I was filled with a mix of emotions – gratitude, nostalgia, a twinge of sadness, but most importantly, hope. Hope that despite the odds, two people with a complicated past could still find a way to have a meaningful friendship in the present.

The sunlight spilled into the kitchen, casting golden hues over the countertops and creating shimmering patterns on the tiled floor. The remnants of my breakfast – a half-eaten toast and a cooling mug of coffee – lay forgotten on the table, a silent testament to my scattered thoughts. My recent phone call with Josh, interspersed with his flirty remarks, still echoed in my ears, causing a ripple of unease within me.

As I was lost in these ruminations, the soft rustle of fabric drew my attention. Newmara stepped into the room, her elegant form framed by the doorway. She moved gracefully, the morning light catching the highlights in her raven-black hair. Her piercing gaze settled on me, carrying an unspoken mix of concern and contemplation.

"That was Josh, wasn't it?" Newmara began, her voice as smooth as silk yet carrying an undertone of inquisition. "From the playful cadence of his words and your reactions, it sounded like he hasn't quite moved on."

My back stiffened, the protective walls around my heart instantly shooting up. Even though Newmara and I had somewhat mended our frayed bond, her delving into my personal matters felt intrusive. I took a moment, choosing

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my words carefully.

"Josh and I have history, yes. But we're friends now. Whatever was there is in the past."

She tilted her head slightly, her eyes never leaving mine.

"I'm not implying anything negative," she responded gently.

Taking a few careful steps closer. The delicate scent of her perfume — floral with hints of vanilla — wafted through the air.

"I just don't want you to lose focus on the present, especially with everything you're rebuilding with your mates."

A swirl of emotions tightened in my chest. I took a deep breath, trying to keep my composure.

"Our past isn't a distraction, Newmara. It's a part of who I am, just as my present is. And Josh, whether as a friend or anything else, is a part of that tapestry."

She sighed, running a hand through her hair.

"I understand that. Truly, I do. My intention wasn't to belittle your feelings or experiences. I just... I worry about you. This whole journey with our mates is tumultuous enough. And with lingering feelings or unsaid words, things can get even more intricate." 1

I looked at her, our shared history, both bitter and sweet, flashing before my eyes.

"Thank you for your concern," I murmured, attempting to keep my voice even, "But I can handle it. I've navigated storms before."

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She nodded, and a pregnant pause enveloped the room.

"I genuinely wish you all the happiness, Phera," she said softly, her gaze sincere.

I nodded, the weight of our conversation pressing on my shoulders. Without another word, I headed towards the door, eager to immerse myself in the familiarity of the training grounds, a place that offered solace and clarity amidst the chaos of emotions and tangled relationships.

The training grounds, a vast stretch of leveled earth bordered by tall pines and oaks, was awash with the morning sunlight. The atmosphere was alive with an electric charge, filled with the potent energy of Red Moon's female warriors. Their silhouettes, synchronized in formation, bore the mark of discipline and pride. The rhythmic pattern of their boots pressing into the soft, moist earth created an intimidating and exhilarating cadence.

As I entered this sanctum of strength, every gaze shifted, zeroing in on me with a blend of reverence and anticipation. I could feel the weight of their expectations, the silent hope that today would be a turning point in our shared journey. Pausing to take it all in, the grass's fresh scent, still dew-kissed from dawn, enveloped me, grounding my spirit.

Steeling myself, I stepped forward, my voice slicing through the crisp air,

"Warriors of Red Moon, we stand here not as females, but as symbols of power and resilience. The world outside might label us, might try to diminish our worth, but here, in this circle, we are bound by our strength and unity."

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Nods and murmurs of agreement echoed around, and I could see the fiery determination kindling in their eyes.

"Today, our focus will be agility and technique."

Demonstrating, I transitioned into a fluid series of movements, each step and turn merging seamlessly into the next.

"This is the *Lunar Spin*," I emphasized, making sure to accentuate the pivot and follow-through.

The warriors mirrored my actions, their bodies swaying and twisting in elegant, deadly arcs.

"Good! Now, the *Ecliptic Evade*."

Dropping into a crouch, I illustrated the duck and roll technique, highlighting the importance of using an opponent's momentum against them. The field transformed into a dance floor of whirling, evading warriors, each one striving for perfection.

By the time we progressed to the *Celestial Charge*, a challenging blend of sprinting and precision striking, sweat glistened on brows, and breaths came faster. But the determination remained unyielding. A teasing voice punctuated our intense session.

"Such intriguing names for these maneuvers. Are they exclusively reserved for the ladies?"

My heart skipped a beat. Zane. He stood a little distance away, casual in posture but with an intensity in his gaze that belied his playful tone. His eyes, those deep pools of gray, twinkled with mischief.

Meeting his challenge, I quipped,

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"Maybe. Jealous much?"

His chuckle was rich, making the butterflies in my stomach flutter wildly.

"With you leading the class? Absolutely."

Around us, soft giggles and knowing looks were exchanged among the warriors. Their Luna and one of her mates, sharing a moment amidst the intensity of training.

Clearing my throat, I turned back to the group,

"Ladies, let's wrap up with the *Stellar Strike*."

But even as I spoke, my mind was very aware of Zane's presence, of the promise in his gaze, and of the journey we were on — filled with challenges, but also endless possibilities. The training, while physical in nature, was also symbolic of our pack's journey, of overcoming, of reclaiming, and of standing strong amidst the storms.

The air seemed to thicken around us, its once invigorating freshness replaced by a palpable tension. As I continued to instruct the warriors, each pivot and jump carrying a grace that came from years of practice, I felt Zane's gaze, heated and unrelenting, following every nuance of my movements. It wasn't just admiration, but something deeper, more primal.

Every time I'd stretch or leap, every time the fabric of my training attire clung a little tighter, I felt his eyes on me, their intensity making my skin prickle with awareness. An unfamiliar warmth began to unfurl deep within me, a growing heat that spread through my veins, making me hyper-aware of every inch of my body and, more pertinently, of his proximity. My breath hitched, the usually

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rhythmic inhales and exhales now staggered, my heart racing at a pace that was wholly inappropriate for a training session.

I tried to push the sensations aside, to concentrate on the training at hand, but it was as if an electric field had enveloped us. A charged atmosphere, invisible yet undeniable. A glance in his direction confirmed my fears. He was smirking, that signature playful-yet-dangerous tilt to his lips that hinted he was fully aware of the effect he had on me. The realization was mortifying.

Did he know just how much he affected me?

Could he sense the rush of emotions, the heady mix of arousal and embarrassment that surged within me?

Gathering my composure, I called out,

"Alright, ladies, that will be all for today! Remember to practice, and we'll continue tomorrow." I hoped my voice didn't betray the whirlwind of emotions inside.

As the warriors dispersed, sharing soft whispers and sneaky glances in our direction, Zane sauntered over, his stride confident, the look in his eyes predatory. The distance between us disappeared, and before I could step back or put up any semblance of resistance, he was right there, his breath warm against my ear.

"You know," he murmured seductively, his voice sending shivers down my spine, "it's not just the training moves that have me captivated. It's the fiery instructor showcasing them."

I swallowed hard, lost for words, my entire being engulfed in the raw intensity of the moment.