

Alpha's Hunt by Starlight Chapter 19 -20

Chapter 19 The first lodge

"Who's a good boy?" I coo as I scratch his head "obviously, you are."

"Hazel," Luke says in irritation "Stop it."

I huff "You're just jealous because animals hate you and not me."

"Stop playing with that squirrel, we have to get going." He says, already starting to walk

"But—

"No arguments."

"a**hole," I mutter before I swing my bag on my shoulder and follow him

Since we pretty much didn't sleep yesterday, we woke up late. Yes, Luke Winters, the perfectionist is not a robot and woke up late as well.

"Hey Luke," I ask, he hmms in response "Didn't you expect to find your mate in that crescent moon ball?"

"No."

"And during your travels?" I ask "Didn't you think you'd find her during that?"

I see his shoulders stiffen at that "No."

Sure, I think to myself. Even if Luke might not accept it, his tense demeanor is more than enough to tell me that he did expect to find his mate during his travels.

"So, when you become Alpha supreme, what will you do?" I ask, deciding to drop the mate subject

"We have just started a shorter route, what makes you think we'll win?"

"Humor me."

"I'll do what I'm supposed to," he shrugs "Work, maintain peace, shift to the New York HQ."

"That's it?" I stare at him incredulously "That's what's driving you to win?"

"That, and a lot of power."

Crazy. Why would someone want to risk their lives for some stupid job?

“What would you do?” Luke asks, effectively surprising me “After you leave?”

My rough sketch plan flashes in my head again “Get a job, save up money, work my a** off and start a small business which will eventually grow and I’ll be rich.”

Luke stares at me for a moment before looking ahead again, a small sound escapes him. Did he just... chuckle?

Maybe I should just admit that he’s a living being too.

“So you do have a brain in that big head of yours?”

“Yes, a very bright one.” I ignore his sarcasm

“And about your mate?” he asks “You did sneak in the ball, I’m guessing you wanted to find him.”

“That was my intention,” I don’t bother denying

“But you didn’t find him.” Luke says “Now what will you do?”

I pause for a moment, trying to think past the twang of emotions in my head. What will I do? Try to find him? If I do find him, will he accept me? With all the crazy things I’ve done and probably will keep doing in the future?

“I haven’t given it much thought, actually,” I say honestly “Maybe I’ll fall in love with a human, maybe I won’t.

Maybe I’ll adopt a kid or two and leave all my money in their name.”

“For someone who acts like a lunatic almost all the time,” Luke says with such a straight face, it’s infuriating “You’re quite mature.”

“I’m not sure if you’re complimenting me or insulting me,” I say

“I’m a multi-tasker.”

We keep walking, me keeping up a conversation, and Luke simply sticking to monosyllable answers. Noon bleeds into the night and the urge to stop and sleep starts its toll on me.

“Luke,”

“No,”

“You didn’t even hear me out!”

“I know you’re going to say we should stop,” He says “But we can’t. We slept too much and now we have to compensate.”

“Well, if we sleep at midnight, we’ll wake up late again.” I say “Then this cycle will never end!”

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“Then get used to your new sleep schedule.”

“You can not be serious.” I give him a look

“For once, Hazel.” Luke says “You’re right.”

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“We won’t wake up late again, I’ll make sure of that.”

“You bloody bas—

“Language,” He cuts me off, a steely edge to his voice “There’s a spring a few meters from here. We’ll set camp near it. Now shut up and keep walking.”

At least I get one of the things I wanted to take the shorter path for; a good sleep. We keep on walking in silence. The moon rises in the sky, illuminating the place with its silvery glow.

Everything looks so... pristine. Bigs trees with hanging vines, moss-covered forest floor, the little wildflowers s***tered everywhere.

“It’s so beautiful, isn’t it?” I say softly, looking up at the moon

But while I do that, I forget that I need my eyes on the ground. The consequences of my actions catch up to me fast and I trip forward. My eyes are automatically closed as I brace myself for the fall.

Something warm wraps around my arm and pulls me back and upright, my eyes snap open. The sudden tug causes me to stand on my toes against something hard and warm. Luke looks back at me, his stormy blue eyes dark in the dim light.

“Don’t you know, Hazel?” he says “Pain finds beauty a reliable disguise.”

Pop! Pop! Pop!

I jump away from Luke, startled at the sudden sound and then at the things falling on us. Confetti?

“Congrats!” a man appears from behind a few trees

“What is this?” Luke asks, taking a step in front of me

Whoa, whoa, hold up. Who told him I’m a little girl he needs to protect?

With a huff, I step aside and stand beside him. The man in front of us smiles gently. Dressed in a neat suit, he appears to be in his forties.

“Please, Alpha,” he holds up a hand as if in surrender “Allow me to explain.”

He takes out a folded piece of paper from his jacket and gives it to Luke. His eyes scan over it quickly before giving it back.

“A one daybreak?” he raises an eyebrow

“Yes,” the man says “The Alpha Supreme wants everyone to be comfortable.”

Luke crosses his arms and gives him a curt nod, but I notice one of his hands is close to the waistband of his jeans, where he keeps his gun.

“You see, Alpha Supreme has arranged for the competitors to have checkpoints.” The man explains “Now and then, the teams in the same area will be allowed a day’s rest in a lodge. And right now, I’m here to lead you to your lodge.”

Luke assesses the man in a glance. His eyes flicker to me, I shrug. Then he nods towards our messenger.

“Go on, we’re right after you.” He says

“Very good. This way,” The suited man starts walking

“How come there’s a lodge here?” I whisper to Luke

“Probably magic,” He says quietly “Keep your guard up. this is the first time I’m hearing anything like this.”

I nod, feeling my stomach turn a bit in anxiety. But this man hadn’t been one of the participants. Besides, if he’s allowed to pay some witch to make a lodge here, he’s probably an official.

And soon enough, we reach a little wooden cabin in a clearing. I look around for any sign of danger but everything seems normal. Then again, it’s not very well lit at this hour

of the night. The suited man opens the door for us, once all of us are in the front hallway, he turns to us again.

“You have to leave your weapons with me, Alpha,” The man says “All the other teams in this lodge have done so, this is supposed to be neutral territory.”

Luke’s shoulders stiffen at that, but still, he hands over the weapon bag. The guns he and I keep on ourselves are still hidden beneath our clothes.

“Please make yourselves comfortable, there are three more duos here other than you.” He says “I should get going. I have others to attend to.”

With that he leaves us alone, closing the door behind.

“What now?” I ask Luke

“Now we see what’s going on.” He says

Surprising me, he takes my hand in his and starts forward. A strange sensation rises my arm, but somehow, I like the press of his palm against mine. Goddess, I need to pull my hand away. Before I have the chance to do that, I hear someone laughing as we enter the lounge.

Four guys look back at us. Their eyes fall on Luke first, not very surprised. They probably already know him. Then their gazes turn to me, curious, amused, indecent.

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“Ah, Luke,” one of them stands up from the couch, running a hand through his sandy blond hair “I was wondering if you’d be joining us.”

“Adrian,” Luke gives him a curt nod “I’m surprised that you’re still alive.”

“You’re as cheerful as always, I see,” Adrian laughs “Won’t introduce me to your little companion?”

I notice the momentary hesitation on Luke’s face before he pulls his hand away from mine. Is he ashamed of me being his companion? A messy omega girl?

“Elise,” he says formally, putting a hand on the small of my back “This is Adrian Woodsmen, Alpha of the Blue moon pack.”

“A pleasure to meet you, milady,” in one swift movement, Adrian takes my hand and presses a kiss to my knuckles

“Allow me to introduce you to our housemates for the time being.”

He pulls me towards the couches and sits me down. Luke walks over to us and sits down on my other side, putting aside his bags, I put mine down as well.

"This is Ryan," Adrian gestures to a man with dark hair and equally dark eyes "My beta and partner."

"Nice to make your acquaintance," Ryan nods at me, his face passive

"I'm Joseph," A man with long, wavy brown hair says to me. His green eyes sparkling "Alpha of the Riverfall pack."

"My name is Freddie," The man sitting beside him says. He has that playful childlike face with bright blue eyes and silvery blond hair "I'm Joseph's delta."

"Pleased to meet all of you," I say, finally managing to take my hand away from Adrian

"Let me call our last duo," Adrian says as he leaves the lounge and goes up the little wooden staircase

"So, Elise," Joseph leans forward "How are you liking the Hunt so far?"

I shift a little in my seat, his gaze unnerving me "There's not much to like."

"Luke is lucky to have you as his partner," Freddie says with a grin "Must be nice to have someone to cook good food and keep you motivated."

Luke snorts quietly to himself, I throw him a quick glare. Should I pop Freddie's bubble and tell him that I'm not a perfect maiden? Probably not.

Footsteps reach my ears and soon enough, Adrian comes down the stairs with two other men in tow. My eyes widen at the sight of them.

Rich golden hair, crystal blue eyes, and a tall, well-built frame.

"Ethan?" I stare at him wide-eyed, standing up from my seat

"Elise?" he mirrors my expression before giving me a bright smile

In a few long strides, he's in front of me and before I know what's happening, he pulls me in a hug. It lasts for just a moment but the stares that come after it last longer.

"Are you alright?" He looks me up and down

"You offend me," I roll my eyes "I'm not alright. I'm amazing."

That earns me a round of snickers and chuckles. Ethan smiles at me, taking a step away to maintain a respectable distance.

“My apologies,” He says with a chaste bow before turning around to look at the man behind him “This is Tyler, my beta and companion.”

I remember him a little from the Crescent moon ball. Same black strands of hair, same hazel eyes.

“Ms. Attwood,” he nods, evidently surprising me. Does he know my name?

“Will, someone tells me how you two,” Adrian motions between me and Ethan “Know each other?”

Ethan opens his mouth to say something but a deep, hard voice cuts in.

“Not likely, Woodsmen,” He stands up and stands by my side “We’d like to retire to our rooms.”

Tension changes in the air. Adrian holds Luke’s gaze with his fierce brown eyes. Joseph observes them with a hint of interest. Ethan seems tense. Tyler, Freddie, and Ryan look ready to defend each of their Alphas if needed.

“There are only four rooms,” Joseph says “Two people will have to share one room.”

“Hmm, very interesting.” Adrian says, a sudden grin on his face “So, Elise, who would you like to sleep with?”

That sounds so damn wrong.

“That is not a question,” Luke narrows his eyes at him in a spiteful glare “She’s going with me.”

“No one asked you, Winters,” Ryan speaks, backing up Adrian “She can choose for herself.”

“Whoever Elise is comfortable with should keep her company,” Ethan says with a nod

“If you’ve forgotten,” Luke says with a dangerously calm voice “I’m her partner. She’s more comfortable around me.”

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“She didn’t have an option about being your partner, Luke.” Ethan gives him a measured look “Now she can choose.”

“Are you saying that just because she let you hug her?” Freddie raises his brow at Ethan

“Trust me,” a voice says in my ear, I almost jump when I see Joseph behind me “You need to choose wisely right now.”

I step away from him, giving him a wary look. What the hell have I gotten myself into?

I clear my throat, everyone turns their attention to me.

“We should all just share with our partners,” I say in a professional tone “We’re still opponents.”

“That’s a reasonable argument,” Tyler nods at me

“So it’s settled,” Luke says. Did I imagine the hint of triumph in his voice? “Where’s our room?”

“There are two rooms on the second floor.” Ethan says “One of them has our luggage, you can take the other.”

Luke nods and grabs our bags from the floor, Joseph turns to me with a smirk on his face.

“If you’re scared, Elise dear,” he says like a true gentleness “My room is just in front of the stairs.”

“And if you see his face and get scared,” Adrian says “My room is just beside it.”

“I doubt she’s afraid of the night,” Luke says “She’s been sleeping under the open sky for almost two weeks.”

“All the more reason to sleep comfortably tonight,” Adrian winks at me

I offer him a tight smile before hurrying towards the stairs, Luke follows behind. We find our room and as the door closes behind, I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. Goddess, that was too much testosterone.

“Don’t let them get to your head,” Luke says, glancing at me from the corner of his eyes “Alphas tend to get antsy when they’re away from females for too long.”

I crinkle my nose in distaste “You don’t do that.”

The barest smile flickers across his face “I’m a rare piece.”

Regardless of the tension downstairs, when I collapse on the soft bed, I sigh in pure ecstasy. After almost two weeks of sleeping in a stuffy sleeping bag, I finally get to sleep in an actual bed.

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“What do you mean I’m not sleeping on the bed?”

Luke gives me a look “There’s just one bed.”

“Well, you can sleep on the couch,” I glare at him “I’m sleeping here.”

“Just look at its size, Hazel,” Luke points at the two-person couch “How can I possibly sleep on it?”

“We can share the bed.”

“Not a chance.”

I open my mouth to argue but then close it again. A devilish idea pops up in my mind.

Schooling my features in defeat, I sigh and get off the bed. Luke watches me suspiciously.

“Fine,” I say coolly “You can sleep on the bed.”

I move towards the door and give him a glance over my shoulder “Maybe one of the others would like to share a bed with me.”

I hadn’t even grabbed the handle when he says;

“Fine. We’ll share the bed.”

My lips curl upwards in a smile and I turn around to see Luke’s sour expression.

“See?” I put a hand on my hip and c*** my head to a side “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“You have no idea what you’re doing,” Luke says, disdain rolling off his voice “This isn’t a kid’s sleepover, Hazel. Grown-up men aren’t to be played with.”

Ignoring his comment, I take the cushions from the couch and create a boundary on the bed, diving it into two.

As I lay in the bed, waiting for sleep, Luke’s comment swirls in my mind.

Today I wasn't ready for what those idiots had in store for me, but tomorrow, they'll realize what they're dealing with.

Grown men aren't to be played with, I feel myself smirk unless you know how to win the game.

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Alpha's Hunt by Starlight Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Same mistakes

I wake up in a soft bed, coc**ed in my blankets. I stretch my arms as I sit up, light filters through the gap in the window curtains.

My feet pad against the cold wooden floor as I go towards the window and open the curtains. A smile tugs at my lips.

Sunlight is s**tered over the tall trees, birds are sweeping and diving through the air. Opening the window, I let the cool morning breeze brush against my face.

"This is life," I say to myself, crossing my arms at the windowsill

"Talking to yourself, Hazel?" A deep voice reaches my ears "That's not concerning at all."

I turn my face towards the source and see Luke coming out from the bathroom, a towel around his neck, hair sticking in all angles.

"Of course it's not," I roll my eyes despite my smile "When are you ever concerned about me?"

"Not often," He walks over to me and takes a glance at the scenery

For a moment, both of us let silence envelop us in a cozy embrace, watching as the sun continues to rise.

Something wet and heavy drops on my head.

"If I start doing that," Luke walks by me "I'll become a blood pressure patient."

I take the towel off my head and glared at him, he simply goes to the door.

"I'm going down to see if there's something to eat," He says before vanishing through the door

I take a shower and then look through my bag for clothes. With a sigh, I pick up a tank top and pair of not-so-short shorts. Why am I suddenly regretting my choice of clothes?

Don't worry, Elise. If anyone thinks it smart to bother you, you can handle it.

I let my hair frame my face and leave the room, my shoes in my hand. The wooden floor feels nice under my bare feet.

Just as I close the door and turn around, I bump into someone.

"Sorry," Ethan offers me an apologetic smile, steadying me by the arms "Are you okay?"

"It's fine," I return his smile "This hallway is too damn small anyways."

He nods with a chuckle before stepping out of my way "Ladies first."

"Why thank you," I grin as I walk past him and descend the stairs

Just as I reach the bottom, I spot Adrian and Ryan. Adrian raises his brows at my attire, Ryan looks pa**ive as ever.

"Good morning," I smile at them as I turn towards the lounge

I put my shoes on when I feel the couch form a dip by my side as someone sits down.

"Going somewhere, love?" Adrian asks

I straighten myself and give him a bright smile "I'm going for a walk, being copped up in a house is not my thing."

"Mine neither," he gives me a sly smirk "Mind if I join you?"

"Is there a reason I should?" I raise an eyebrow and stand up

I catch Luke's eyes as we pa** by him leaning against the kitchen doorframe, a steaming cup in his hand. He

straightens himself, eyes darting between me and Adrian.

"Ah, Winters, morning coffee?" Adrian says, casually resting his arm on my shoulder

"Going somewhere?" Luke completely ignores him, his eyes trained on me

"We're going for a walk," I reply cheerfully "It won't take long."

“And don’t worry about her safety,” Adrian smirks “As long as I’m with her, she’s going to be alright.”

He puts his arm on the small of my back and before Luke has a chance to say anything, steers me away.

I look over my shoulder and see Luke’s stormy glare at the man by my side. My lips tug upwards as I wink at him, barely catching his slack expression when we turn around the hallway.

My eyes a**es the small clearing in front of me as we leave the house. I take Adrian’s arm, much to his contentment, and steer him around the lodge, keeping the light conversation as I scan the residence.

Hmm, noshed. No fence. Where did they take our weapons? The trees are too far for someone to plan an ambush from close. Unless they have guns, of course.

“That’s one dense partner you have, love,” Adrian says, catching my attention

I sigh “My misfortune. He has no clue how to treat girls.”

Adrian leans a little towards me “I’d like to make it up to you.”

I look up at him from under my lashes, a shy smile on my face “Are you so sure you can do that?”

“Positive.” He gives me a wolfish grin

Our walk around the lodge ends and Adrian starts walking towards the trees. I brush my hand against the waistband of my jeans shorts, feeling the gun I kept there.

“Goddess, I don’t like trees with vines,” I say, holding Adrian’s arm tighter “They are so creepy.”

“Don’t worry, love,” Adrian says “I’ve got you.”

I lean forward, noticing how his eyes dart to my lips for a second. I resist the urge to smirk; what an easy kill.

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“You’re so good at this,” I say softly “Luke is always stumbling over the ground.”

His other hand moves towards my waist, I’m quick to place my hand on his arm. If he notices the gun, we’re probably about to be eliminated.

"I'm good at a lot of other things, love." He leans forward, our faces too close for my liking

"Oh, I'm sure you're better than Luke." I say "You must be so far ahead from us."

"Yeah, we're moving towards the southwest," Adrian smirks, his eyes shining, pleased to be called better than someone "You're probably looking at your future Alpha Supreme."

I swiftly pull away, a rueful smile on my lips "The future Alpha Supreme is even farther from my reach than you, Alpha."

With a sigh of misery, I cradle myself in my arms and start walking forward, leaving a blinking idiot behind.

"Hey, Elise!" Adrian catches up to me fast "Love, you're misunderstanding me, I'm not like others."

I look at him with a sad, sad smile "I know you're not."

The look on his face. Goddess knows how I stop myself from laughing.

"I don't understand," he says, eyebrows furrowed "Did I do something wrong? Just a minute ago, you, we were about to..."

Oh moon, just how desperately does this strip of an Alpha boy want to get laid?

"Oh my moon," I say, feigning innocence "Do you think I was going to... to seduce you?! how could you think that about me?"

His eyes widen "No, I didn't mean—

"No, I get it," I sniffle "Of course you would think that about a little omega girl."

"Elise, love, I didn't—

I run off to the lodge-like a heartbroken princess. When I enter, the lounge is empty, much to my relief. I quickly go up the stairs to lock myself in my room before that poor idiot can catch up to me.

When I go inside, I quickly turn and lock the door, catching my breath.

When I turn around, I see Luke sitting on the bed, the map open in front of him. he notices my breathless, red face and

the next moment he's standing in front of me.

“What happened?” he says, eyes looking me up and down “Are you alright? Did Woodsmen cross the line—

“No, no.” I exhale “I just came up the stairs fast.”

Luke raises an eyebrow “Didn’t the walk go as planned?” Sarcasm drips from his voice

I grin at him “Oh no, it went splendidly.”

Just then, the door rattles. Then someone knocks.

“Love, open the door,” Adrian says

Luke gives me a sus**ious look, I only gesture at him to stay quiet by putting a finger to my lips.

“Go away, Adrian.” I say in a wretched tone “Leave me alone.”

“Love, I didn’t mean to upset you, please open the door.”

Goddess, forgive me for enjoying this so much. And the fact that Luke looks beyond surprised doesn’t make it any

less amusing.

“I... I’m not upset, just, let me be for a while.” I say, sniffing “Please.”

A moment of silence pa**es “Alright...”

I wait until his footsteps vanish before I burst out laughing. He fell for it! He bloody fell for that little play!

Someone coughs, my laughter subsides and I turn to Luke. He crosses his arms and gives me a hard look.

“An explanation.” He says, leaving no room for argument

“Adrian wanted some company, I just made it a little dramatic.” I grin and tell him my little play

“Oh, he told me something.” I take a startled looking Luke’s arm and pull him to the bed

My eyes skim the map before I realize which path Adrian was talking about. The shortest route.

“They’re taking this path,” I point it out to Luke

Luke raises an eyebrow. Then shakes his head in disbelief.

"I can't believe he told you that," he says

I shrug, a smirk playing at my lips "The woes of human lust."

"There's no way Woodsmen can pave this route," Luke traces the line, ridden with crosses only a short way from here

"I'd tell him to reconsider, but well," he shrugs "He never told me, did he?"

My smirk fades away, leaving a small lump in my throat.

"Are they," I hesitate "Are they going to be okay?"

Luke raises an eyebrow at me "You've been playing around with him and now you're asking if he'll be alright?"

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"He asked for it," I huff "And I'm not heartless, I don't want anyone to die."

"Too bad that's not possible."

My shoulders slump, I give Luke a glance that will tell him exactly how much his pessimism is appreciated.

More like realism.

Luke sighs "Hazel if you tell him it's dangerous, he's not going to stop. It's his own choice."

I worry my bottom lip, feeling a bit disturbed. I know he's a lusty a**hole, but Adrian and Tyler are still people that are important to others. Everyone matters to someone.

Someone ruffles my hair, my eyes snap to Luke as he walks past me, the map in his hand.

"Don't stress yourself for things that aren't in your control," he says

"You're right," I shake my head "I'm going to get myself something to eat."

I go towards the door, my hand closes around the handle when I hear Luke call me. I look over my shoulder and catch his impa**ive gaze.

"Don't fool around with them again," He says

I grin "No promises."

I walk inside the kitchen and grab an apron from the hooks behind the door. I feel myself smile as I tie it around myself. It's been so long since I did some cooking in an actual kitchen.

I make myself an omelet and a cup of tea. I sigh in bliss as I take the first bite. Damn, I'd forgotten how good of a cook I am.

Once I wipe my hands on my apron after washing the dishes, I see Adrian come inside and I'm instantly reminded of my talk with Luke. So much for not stressing.

"Hey," he closes the distance between us "Are you alright?"

I give him a small smile "I'm okay. I think I over-reacted."

He grins, relief clear on his face "So, would you like to continue where we left?"

I raise an eyebrow, he quickly holds his hands up in defense "I mean the walk."

I bite the corner of my lip as I take off the apron and set it aside. Maybe...

"Sure," I finally say

He takes my hand in his and we walk out of the house again. Our walk is silent this time, Adrian holding my hand in his own but unlike what I experience with Luke, I don't feel my skin tingling. It's just his hand around mine. Nothing more.

Soon enough, we reach a little stream. I can't help my fascination as I see the crystal clear water.

"It's so pretty," I say in awe, watching my reflection on the fleeting water

"Yeah," Adrian says, but I can feel his eyes on my face rather than the stream

I feel his hands on my arms and he turns me to face him.

"Elise, I didn't mean to upset you," he says, he's so close to me. too close.

He starts leaning forward, eyes closed, lips puckered. I roll my eyes and do what any pure little maiden would.

"Oh you," I shove him away, turning my face shyly

Splash!

I gasp, Adrian comes to the stream surface, drenched completely. I hold back my laughter, almost choking on it.

That gave you the cold shower you needed, didn't it?

"Oh my moon, are you okay?" I help him up

"Perfect." He says, a sour look on his face

"Come on, we should get back," I say, he nods

Adrian goes to his room with a sullen look. With a snicker, I sink into a sofa.

"You seem pleased." My eyes fly open to see Joseph

He offers me a lazy smirk before he waltzes towards me, leisurely settling down beside me. I stiffen and shuffle a bit away, watching him warily.

"I'm not going to try anything," he says, rolling his eyes

"What are you?" I raise my brows "A mind reader or just creepy?"

He straightens himself, an offended look on his face "I am not creepy."

This time, I roll my eyes "Sure you're not."

"If you're referring to last evening," Joseph says "I was just messing around. I'm already mated."

"What?" I almost jump from my seat "You have a mate?"

"A very loving one," he says

"Then why did you even bother acknowledging my presence?"

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"I was teasing Winters."

I give him a look "That doesn't make sense."

"We can test that right now, Winters is probably going to come looking for you in a moment." His lips tug upwards at that

After a few minutes of awkward silence, someone descending the stairs. Joseph takes a sniff of the air, glances at me before he quickly goes behind the sofa, and puts his hands on my shoulders, leaning down so his face almost brushes mine.

Not a moment later, Luke enters and his eyes fall straight on us. His jaw clenches, the storm in his eyes go livid and he steps forward. I feel a lump forming in my throat. Maybe this wasn't a good idea...

"What are you doing?" he gives Joseph a death glare

"I'm just giving her a massage, Winters," Joseph says casually as he pulls away

"You should try this, Luke." I say, trying to act just as casual "Joseph's hands are magical."

"I'll pass," Luke narrows his eyes at Joseph

"Fine." Joseph shrugs and, shoving his hands in his pockets walks away

Before he disappears in the hallway that leads to his room, he looks back at me as mouths 'See?'

"I really can't leave you alone for a moment," Luke says to me

"Why?" I feign innocence "What did I do?"

He narrows his eyes to slits and all but bites out "Nothing."

Then he storms towards the stairs again. Goddess, that is one protective man.

With a sigh, I push myself up from the sofa and go out of the lodge. I lean against the wooden wall, staring at the trees ahead.

Why is Luke always thinking I'm some damsel in distress? Some weakling omega? Why can't he just trust me and know that I can fend for myself?

"Upset?"

I jump, snapping out of my thoughts to see Ethan behind me.

He walks up to me and leans down against the wall, right beside me. I hold my arms, and offer him a small smile.

"Not really," I shrug "Just tired after the long day I guess."

"Tired on a break?" He raises his eyebrow

“Guess I became a workaholic,” I grin

He chuckles softly “Seriously? That’s concerning.”

I look at him thoughtfully, words fall out of my mouth without permission.

“Why do you care about me so much?”

Ethan’s blue eyes snap to mine, for a moment he doesn’t answer. I almost think he wouldn’t but then he says.

“My brother’s mate was an omega.”

“Was?” I raise an eyebrow

Ethan nods turn his eyes to the trees in front of us “She was treated very badly by her pack. By the time she met my brother... she was too afraid, even of him. No matter how much he tried, it just didn’t work. She was already too broken. It broke him too.”

I stare at him, holding my breath “How are they now?”

“Dead.” A strained smile tugs at his lips “Both of them.”

I swallow the lump in my throat “What happened to them?”

“Celeste had a heart attack,” he says quietly “My brother attempted suicide. I was 15.”

Silence descends around us. Neither of us moves. Neither of us says anything.

Finally, I say “I’m not broken, Ethan.”

He glances at me then, his lips curve up in a smile “Maybe that’s why I like you so much.”

Unbidden, my cheeks heat up. Did he just say he likes me? As in like likes me? As in a guy liking a girl?

“If only Celeste had been strong like you...” Ethan trails off. He shakes his head as if trying to get rid of a pestering thought “After this Hunt, I’d like to know you more.”

“I...” my eyes dart across the place, trying to hold onto something innocent “I’m not sure that would be possible.”

Ethan raises his eyebrow “Why?”

I open my mouth to say something, but a loud voice interrupts

“Anyone wanna play cards?” Freddie peeks from around the wall. How long has the bloody been there?! “We found a deck in one of the drawers.”

“Me!” I say and quickly follow him to Adrian’s room, where he, Joseph, and Ryan are already seated.

Though I focus on the round we play, mom’s voice kept ringing in my ears.

‘Don’t make the same mistake I did Elise.’