

## 87 First Lesson

Eve~ 1

I stepped into the right wing training deck as Kael had directed, my heart thumping in my chest like a drum. The space was modern and sleek, clearly designed for intense training. Overhead, industrial-style lights cast a warm glow across the room, illuminating its features with sharp precision. The floors were a matte black, made of some kind of shock-absorbing material that softened each step, and the faint scent of cleaning agents mingled with a trace of sweat and effort lingering in the air.

In the center of the room was a raised sparring ring, its edges padded with thick cushions and its ropes taut and gleaming under the lights. The corners held sturdy metal posts, their bases scuffed from years of use. To the side, there were punching bags of varying sizes suspended from reinforced beams, along with rows of kettlebells, free weights, and resistance bands stacked neatly on racks.

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Mirrors lined the back wall, giving the illusion of more space and reflecting the equipment that filled the room. A long row of floor mats stretched out in front of the mirrors, clearly used for warmups or hand-to-hand drills. Near the entrance, a water dispenser and a small bench suggested this room was both functional and welcoming, though its purpose was anything but leisurely.

The atmosphere was serious yet strangely inviting. It was a space designed for building strength and skill—a room where sweat, discipline, and determination came to life.

I glanced down at myself, fidgeting with the hem of my old workout gear. It wasn't anything special—just a simple fitted black tank top and a pair of loose-fitting, high-waisted leggings. They were comfortable, practical, but not exactly what I should be wearing for my first real training session. The leggings were a bit too loose, the fabric clinging to my legs but not giving me the firm control I needed. The top—though snug—didn't offer much in terms of support for anything more than a leisurely stretch.

But they were the only things I had. My old yoga clothes. I'd hoped they'd be enough for tonight.

I couldn't stop the gnawing feeling of unease that swirled in my stomach. Was I being ridiculous? Was Kael expecting someone more... prepared? More fierce? But then again, it wasn't about impressing him, right? It was about doing this for myself.

I took a deep breath, exhaling slowly as I took a few tentative steps inside. My sneakers, new and still stiff, barely made a sound on the floor. I wasn't sure whether I should feel embarrassed or proud of myself for showing up. This was it—the first step toward learning how to stand on my own two feet, without relying on anyone else.

The thought of Hades flickered in my mind, and a fresh wave of nervousness washed over me. What would he say if he found out?

The thought made me straighten, trying to shake off the doubt that clung to my skin like the faint traces of perfume in the air.

I reached the center of the room, where Kael was waiting, a shadow in the soft light. He was leaning against the edge of the ring, arms crossed, his stance as casual as ever. But there was something about his gaze—sharp. For a moment, it was the beta that had taken me from my cell that was staring at me.

I flushed, self-conscious. "I, uh, didn't have time to—" I gestured vaguely at myself, the words trailing off. "But I'm ready. I'm serious about this."

Kael's smirk softened into something approving. "I can see that," he said, uncrossing his arms. "But we need to fix that outfit."

My heart skipped a beat. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing," he said, his eyes twinkling with humor, "but you need something that gives you more freedom of movement. You'll get tangled up in those leggings if we push too hard."

My stomach twisted again. "I don't... I don't have anything else."

Kael looked at me, really looked at me, and something in his gaze shifted—like he wasn't just seeing the princess but the woman behind the crown. "That's alright. We'll make do with what we have tonight, but next session, we'll find you something better. You don't have to make do, Ellen. Not anymore."

I swallowed the lump in my throat, surprised by his kindness.

"Thanks," I said, my voice barely a whisper, but it

"Thanks," I said, my voice barely a whisper, but it was enough to make him nod in acknowledgment. He gestured toward the mats in front of the mirrors.

"Alright then. We'll start with stretches. No need to rush, just get a feel for your body, your highness."

"Call me Ev--Ellen," I said and he nodded. I tried to relax. This was it. My first step in taking control of my own fate. 1

It was time to stop being afraid.

I dropped onto the mat, legs folding beneath me as Kael instructed. His voice was calm, firm, guiding me through a series of stretches that, at first, felt awkward and unnatural. I mimicked his movements, twisting my torso, reaching forward, pulling back. My blood pumped hard, rushing in my ears with every bend and reach.

The tightness in my muscles burned, a sting that made me wince but also stirred something deeper—exhilaration. I wasn't used to this, to feeling my body pushed like this. The ache in my thighs, the pull in my shoulders—it was uncomfortable but thrilling, a strange kind of proof that I was alive.

"Good," Kael said, circling me as I moved. His eyes were sharp, watching every stretch and twist. "Feel that energy. Let it flow. You're doing better than I expected for a first-timer."

The corner of his mouth twitched, almost a smile, but his tone stayed serious.

I didn't know whether to be proud or embarrassed, so I just focused on keeping up. My heart raced with every movement, each stretch deepening the ache but filling me with determination.

"Alright," he said, stopping in front of me. "Let's push a little further. Get into a standing quad stretch."

I stood, shaking out my legs as he demonstrated. One foot in hand, balancing on the other, pulling the bent leg back toward his hip.

I mirrored him, grabbing my ankle and pulling it up. My balance wavered, and my breathing came faster. My left foot—the one holding me upright—felt weak, the muscles quivering as I tried to steady myself.

"Focus," Kael said, his voice cutting through the buzzing in my ears.

I inhaled, trying to ground myself, but my ankle

I inhaled, trying to ground myself, but my ankle gave a sudden sharp twist. Pain shot up my leg, white-hot, as I stumbled forward.

"Ellen!"

Kael was there before I hit the floor, his hands gripping my arms, steadying me effortlessly. My ankle throbbed, a dull ache radiating upward, but I clenched my jaw and tried to wave him off. 1

"I'm fine," I said quickly, shifting my weight to my good leg. The words came out sharp, defensive, but I couldn't let him look too closely.

Kael's frown deepened. "You're not fine."

"It's nothing," I said, trying to pull back, but he didn't let go. Instead, he crouched, his hands already moving toward my foot.

"Sit," he commanded, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Reluctantly, I lowered myself to the mat, my ankle throbbing in time with my pulse.

Kael's grip was firm but careful as he unlaced my sneaker and slid it off. His fingers pressed lightly against my ankle, sending sharp jolts of discomfort shooting through me.

"Relax," he said, his voice softening just enough to

I stiffened as he began rotating the joint gently, testing the range of motion. His touch was clinical, precise, but something shifted in his expression. His brow furrowed, and his eyes darkened.

"This isn't a normal sprain," he muttered, almost to himself.

"It's fine," I said, my voice tight. I tried to pull my foot away, but he held it steady, his thumb brushing against the skin just below the bone.

Kael's gaze snapped up to mine, sharp and questioning. "Ellen, what happened?"

"Nothing," I lied, too quickly.

He didn't believe me. His fingers moved again, this time more deliberately, as if searching for something. His thumb pressed against a spot just above my ankle, and I flinched despite myself.

"This isn't recent," he said quietly, almost like he was piecing something together. His voice was low, but it carried a weight that made my stomach twist. "The ligaments feel stretched out, like they've been overstrained—again and again."

I bit my lip, the memory of cold metal biting into



I bit my lip, the memory of cold metal biting into my skin flashing behind my eyes. The chain had been tight, almost too tight, digging in every time I moved wrong. After five years, it was no surprise that it had long term effect on the joint. I did not feel the weakness of the ankle until now because I had not been active. But I couldn't let him know the truth.

"It's nothing," I said again, forcing the words out. "Just a weak ankle. It happens."

Kael didn't move, his eyes locked on mine. For a moment, I thought he might push further before he sighed deeply. "What ever you say, Ellen." He conceded but it was obvious he did not believe me. 1

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