

89 Secrets We Keep

Eve 1

The next session was awareness training. Kael stood in front of me with a padded training stick, twirling it dramatically like it was some ancient weapon of legend.

"Your job is to dodge and block," he explained. "Think fast. React faster. And try not to get smacked, because that'll be embarrassing for both of us."

"Got it," I said, raising my hands.

The first few swings were slow, deliberate, giving me time to adjust. I dodged left, then right, my movements tentative but improving with each pass. Kael's running commentary didn't let up.

"Good! Now keep your eyes on me. Don't look at the stick—unless you want to give it a hug, in which case, by all means."

I laughed despite myself, narrowly dodging a swing aimed at my shoulder. "You're supposed to be helping, not distracting me!"

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"Multitasking," he said cheerfully. "It's an advanced skill. I'll teach you that next week."

I laughed and pushed me him back with all of my strength and he actually allowed himself to fall over, laughing. Then my eyes caught something. There was bruising around his neck and my eyes widened when noticed a few finger prints. Realisation dawned on me, like a rock in my stomach; he had been strangled.

I knew a thing or two about Lycanthropic healing. Shallow wounds and bruises did not last on them, they heal and fade within seconds but only if the injury was inflicted by someone of lower rank. So it was already sickening that he was strangled but the it even odder that the bruising had remained. Unless...

Kael was up again, but I was caught off guard and put my weight one ankle. Pain lanced through the abused joint and it was my turn to fall over.

Kael was on his feet in an instant, his hand reaching out to steady me. "Ellen! What did I just say about your ankle?" His tone was sharp, but the concern in his eyes softened the words.

"I'm fine," I muttered, wincing as I tried to shift my weight. His grip tightened on my arm,

"I'm fine," I muttered, wincing as I tried to shift my weight. His grip tightened on my arm, keeping me from moving.

"You're not fine," he said, dropping into a crouch. He gently pulled my injured leg out, his fingers lightly grazing my ankle. His touch was careful, almost clinical, but his jaw clenched as he assessed the damage. "You shouldn't even be standing on this."

"It's just a sprain," I said, trying to downplay the pain. "I've had worse."

He looked up at me, his green eyes narrowing. "Don't give me that. How did this happen?"

I swallowed, the weight of his question settling heavily in my chest. I couldn't tell him—not yet. Not when the truth might lead to questions I wasn't ready to answer. "I just landed wrong during warm-ups," I lied, avoiding his gaze.

Kael didn't buy it for a second. His eyes hardened, and his grip on my ankle loosened as he straightened to his full height. "That's not the whole story," he said quietly. His voice wasn't accusing, but there was a resoluteness to it that made me feel cornered.

I bit my lip, unsure of what to say.



"Talk to me, Ellen," he pressed, his voice softer now but no less determined. "If you're in trouble —"

"I'll tell you about my ankle," I blurted, cutting him off, "if you tell me what happened to your neck."

His expression shifted instantly, the warmth and humor draining from his face like a flicked switch. His hand instinctively went to his neck, brushing over the faint bruises I'd noticed earlier.

"That's different," he said after a pause, his voice tight.

"Is it?" I challenged, crossing my arms despite the awkward angle of sitting on the ground. "You want me to be honest, but you're hiding things too. Seems like a double standard to me."

Kael let out a short, humorless laugh, running a hand through his hair. "It's not like that."

I held his gaze, refusing to back down. "We are," I agreed, my tone measured, "but if you're allowed your secrets, then I'm allowed mine. Fair's fair."

Kael studied me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then, with a weary sigh, he dropped onto the ground beside me, his legs



Kael studied me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then, with a weary sigh, he dropped onto the ground beside me, his legs stretching out casually like we weren't in the middle of an unspoken standoff. "You've got me there," he admitted, his voice quieter now. "Fair is fair."

The tension in my chest eased slightly, but I didn't let my guard down entirely. "So," I said, testing the waters, "we call it even? You don't ask about my ankle, and I don't ask about your neck?"

Kael glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, a faint smirk playing on his lips. "You're getting good at negotiating, Ellen. I'll give you that." He leaned back on his hands, his relaxed posture at odds with the shadow that lingered in his expression. "But fine. Even."

Relief washed over me, though I knew it was only temporary. Kael wasn't the type to let things go forever, and neither was I. But for now, we had an unspoken truce—a mutual agreement to keep our secrets buried, at least for a little while longer.

"Good," I said, leaning back against the padded wall of the training room. "Then let's stop with the interrogation and get back to something less serious. Like you trying to hit me with that stick."



Kael chuckled, the sound warmer this time, and pushed himself back up to his feet. "You're a glutton for punishment, you know that?"

"Better than sitting here letting you baby me," I shot back, grinning despite the throbbing in my ankle.

He extended a hand to help me up, but I waved him off, using the wall for support instead. The movement sent a fresh jolt of pain through my ankle, but I gritted my teeth and forced myself to stand. Kael watched me carefully, his eyes flicking to my injured leg, but he didn't say anything.

"Ready?" he asked, picking up the training stick again and twirling it with exaggerated flair.

"Always," I replied, raising my hands.

For the rest of the session, he kept things light, his usual humor and easygoing attitude masking the tension that lingered beneath the surface. But every so often, I caught him glancing at me out of the corner of his eye, as if trying to piece together the puzzle I'd become.

And every time, I caught myself doing the same to him because I had an inkling who had inflicted the injury for it to not have healed and the



And every time, I caught myself doing the same to him because I had an inkling who had inflicted the injury for it to not have healed and the knowledge chilled me to the core.

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