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I ended the call and turned my eyes toward Elias, who was standing in the living room staring at me with a puzzled expression, his travel bag still in his hand.

"Who's Neil?" he asked again, more firmly this time.

"He's the son of one of my father's Alpha acquaintances," I explained, my voice low.

"And doesn't he think you're dead?" Elias asked, clearly trying to piece everything together.

"No. Neil and his dad both know I'm still alive. My father tried to arrange a marriage between the two of us, "I told him.

"You were engaged to him?" Elias asked, his eyes briefly darkening to black before shifting back to their

usual blue.

"I guess you could technically call it that. But I wouldn't. It was more of a deal between our fathers. Neil

was on board because it saved him the trouble of searching for a mate—and he's every bit as cruel as the

rest of them. I didn't want anything to do with it. I swear. To him, I was nothing more than a convenient punching bag," I said, watching Elias's expression shift into something unreadable.

"Did he ever actually hit you?" Elias asked quietly.

"Yeah. He did. The first time we ever met. My dad left us alone in the attic so we could 'get to know each other,' but Neil just saw the bruises I already had and assumed he could get away with more. And he was right," I said, eyes dropping to the floor as shame crept in.

I heard Elias lower his bag to the ground, then his footsteps approached until he stood directly in front of

1. me.

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything before. I honestly didn't think Neil would ever resurface," I said, my voice

trembling slightly. Elias placed his hands gently on my shoulders, then pulled me into a firm embrace,

wrapping his arms securely around me.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come at you like that. I had no idea someone else out there knew you were still

alive," he murmured against my hair.

"I know. And I never wanted you to find out. I never wanted to see Neil again," I whispered.

"Lyra... was it just physical abuse?" Elias asked, his tone tense. I shook my head slowly, not trusting myself

to speak.

He didn't need me to say anything more—his chest vibrated with a low growl, restrained but threatening, the sound echoing in the air between us.

Somehow, he managed to keep himself from losing control and instead tightened his hold on me.

"None of that was your fault," he said firmly.

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"I wish I could believe that. But I didn't even fight him off that hard," I admitted quietly.

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"I remember what you were like when I first saw you in that house. If Neil was an Alpha's son, you wouldn't

have stood a chance. You didn't have the strength. And if you'd resisted too much, he might've killed you,"

Elias said, gently but firmly lifting my chin so I would meet his gaze.

"I'm sorry I kept it from you. I didn't want to tell anyone," I said softly.

"I understand. But don't worry. He's not going to get to you here. All he has is a phone number—someone

could've passed it along. It doesn't have a tracker, I made sure of that. He can't trace your location

through it. You're safe," he assured me.

"I'm really glad you're home," I told him, feeling some of the tension in my chest ease.

"Me too. Even being away just one night felt like too long," he replied.

"Why don't you take a shower? I'll start dinner," I suggested with a small smile.

"That's the best thing I've heard all day," he said, pressing a kiss to my forehead before picking his bag up

and heading upstairs.

I moved into the kitchen and began making dinner—steak with a side of vegetables and a fresh salad. Everything was nearly finished by the time Elias came back downstairs.

"That smells amazing," Elias said as he stepped into the kitchen.

"It won't be too long now," I replied, flipping the steaks one last time.

"No rush," he said. Then, after a pause, "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Of course," I said, glancing over at him.

"Did you sleep in my bed last night... with my shirt?" he asked, his tone playful but curious.

My face flushed instantly. I had completely forgotten to tidy up his room before he came back.

"Yeah... I couldn't sleep in mine. So I went into yours. Your scent helped me fall asleep," I admitted, feeling more embarrassed than I expected. But Elias just grinned at me, clearly amused.

"I don't mind," he said, eyes twinkling. "So... does that mean you'll be sleeping there again tonight?"

"Probably," I muttered, avoiding his gaze.

"Works for me," he said casually.

Of course it did. He was practically glowing. A sixteen-year-old girl cuddling up in his bed, wrapped in his shirt—every guy's fantasy, especially for someone like Elias, already twenty-four. But he didn't push it. He just looked... happy.

We sat down to eat, and as usual, Elias acted like he hadn't eaten in days, practically inhaling the food like it was his last meal on Earth. I knew he loved my cooking, but it still made me smile every time I saw him

eat like that.

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After dinner, I started stacking the dishwasher while Elias cracked open a beer and started telling me about the mission they'd just returned from. They'd managed to rescue around twenty children, and now they were working to find them proper homes. I could hear the pride in his voice, and I was genuinely impressed. He didn't talk himself up often, but this mattered to him.

Then the wind outside suddenly shifted—sharp, unexpected.

“Princess...”

The voice was faint but unmistakable. It whispered through the air like it had shape, like it could reach inside and twist something in me.

I jerked upright, staring out the window.

“Princess...” it came again, riding the wind like a warning.

“What is it?” Elias asked, already standing.

“There's something out there. It's calling me,” I said quietly, my eyes scanning the treeline.

Elias stepped up beside me and looked out. He saw the wind moving, but he didn't hear what I did. Not the

voice. Not the name.

Without a word, he stepped outside, checking the yard, the tree line, everything. But there was nothing. No movement. No presence. When he came back in, he double-checked every door and window, locking them tightly.

“There are patrols out across the whole territory,” he said. “Nothing’s getting in without being seen.”

“Ghosts have gotten in before,” I reminded him, “without anyone seeing. They’re being controlled... by the black witch.”

“Well, ghosts can’t hurt you,” he said automatically.

I pulled the neckline of my shirt down just far enough to reveal the faint, scorched imprint of a hand on my

chest.

“This one can,” I said quietly.

His jaw clenched, and his eyes widened as he stared at the mark. Rage flickered in his expression.

“Alright. That’s it. You’re staying with me tonight. You don’t sleep alone. If you hear anything—even if I don’t -you wake me up. Got it?”

I nodded silently, the weight of everything suddenly pressing down on me again. I tried to stay calm, but my hands were beginning to shake.

Then my phone rang—again. Same unknown number.

Neil.

Before I could even reach for it, Elias snatched it up and answered.

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“Lose this number,” he snapped before hanging up without waiting for a response.

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Elias took me upstairs, his hand resting lightly on my lower back. He didn’t say anything, but he could see it—I wasn’t holding it together nearly as well as I wanted to. And now that Neil had reached out twice in one day, I was rattled.

I needed a shower. Something to clear my head.

I left the bathroom door cracked open just slightly—not enough for Elias to see anything, but enough that if something went wrong, he could be in here in seconds.

Just in case.

Once I stepped out of the shower, I hurriedly got dressed and climbed straight into bed without wasting a

second.

Elias was already lying there; he had turned on the television and selected a movie for us to watch

together. He wrapped his arms tightly around me, like a protective shell, and we lay there in silence while the film played.

I tried to pay attention to the movie, but staying focused was incredibly difficult. Elias wasn't fully watching

either—I could tell. His entire body was tense, his instincts on high alert, locked into that protective mode.

Suddenly, I heard my phone ringing from somewhere downstairs. But I didn't move. The only people who

had that number were Elias and Luke. And Luke had no reason to call me directly—he'd go through Elias if anything was urgent. So we ignored it. But a few moments later, I noticed Elias stiffening as he started receiving a mind link.

"What's happening?" I asked him.

"It's nothing," Elias responded quickly.

"Don't lie to me," I shot back.

"There's something happening near the border. I told the patrol team to handle it. That's their job. I'm not leaving you right now," he told me.

"If it's something important and you need to defend the pack, you can go," I said quietly.

"No, I said it's under control," he replied.

"What exactly is going on at the border?" I pressed.

"They don't have a clear visual. But they're picking up sounds—wolves howling from a distance. No confirmation yet whether they're hostile or not," Elias explained.

"If you want to go and check it out for yourself, I understand," I told him.

"I'm not leaving," he repeated firmly. And I knew he meant it—he wasn't going to abandon me under any

circumstances.

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But only a short while later, he got another mind link, and this one was different. I could see it in the way his body tensed up all over again. Then came a noise—chaotic movement right outside the house.

I quickly climbed out of bed, walked to the window, and peered through the glass. What I saw made my breath catch—several pack warriors were dragging unfamiliar men into the territory, marching straight

toward our home.

Elias had already gotten up. I watched as he threw on a shirt and left the bedroom. I followed behind him.

We moved to the front entrance, and while I remained just inside, Elias stepped out onto the front porch to

confront whoever was coming.

The men they had brought in looked like they were Native American, and the warriors weren't being gentle

about how they handled them.

"Who are you?" Elias demanded, his voice cold and commanding.

"We've come to warn you about her," one of the men said, pointing straight at me. Elias turned his head to

glance back at me, and I felt all the other warriors' eyes shift in my direction, too.

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Everyone's eyes were locked on me, and I couldn't help but wonder what exactly they thought I'd done. I hadn't done anything wrong. Especially not to Elias or his pack. So what were they even talking about?

"Why would you need to warn us about my mate?" Elias growled.

"She's going to bring nothing but trouble to this land," the man at the front replied.

"And who the hell are you?" Elias snapped.

"Alpha Damon. These are my warriors. We're from the Grimstone Pack," he answered.

"The Grimstone Pack is two hours north of here. So why are you sticking your nose into our business?"

Elias asked, stepping down the stairs.

"We keep an eye on what's happening near our borders. Any possible threats. And that girl standing up there? She's the biggest one we've ever come across," Alpha Damon said.

"She's my mate. So if you want to keep your damn tongue, you better watch what you say," Elias growled

lowly.

"Do you even know what she is? She's going to drag danger here. The vampire council is looking for her. Their agents are everywhere. And we've heard whispers of werebears nearby. Witches too," Damon

warned.

"We're already aware of those threats. Appreciate the unnecessary warning," Elias said coldly.

"And you don't care?"

"We've already handled them once. If they come again, we'll handle them again. I'll do whatever it takes to protect her. You're an Alpha—you should understand that. I don't care who's after her. No one gets to her without going through me," Elias said through gritted teeth.

"This was a mistake," Damon muttered.

"Your guy over there got something right—it was a mistake. I'll give you one warning. Get the hell off my

land and keep your mouth shut about what you've seen, or I'll send every warrior I have to wipe you out.

And we both know how easy it would be to crush the Grimstone Pack, Elias threatened.

The warriors released the intruders. Damon gave me one last look before ordering his men to leave. They

walked off together, and I stood gripping the doorway tightly. Elias sent his men back to patrol, then

walked back to me.

"He's right, you know. Everyone would be better off if I wasn't here," I said, turning and heading back inside.

I walked upstairs, Elias following close behind, and sat cross-legged on his bed.

"No, he's not. He doesn't have a clue what he's talking about. That guy's never had a mate. He doesn't know what it means to love someone so much you'd die for them," Elias said.

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"I know. I could feel it coming from him. And the men who stood with him, they didn't seem to share his

feelings at all," I said softly.

"You really could sense that?" Elias questioned me with surprise.

"Yeah. But none of them are brave enough to oppose their Alpha. No one ever is," I explained quietly.

"Don't worry about those men. I'll wait a few days, then try to arrange a meeting with that Alpha and see if we can come to some sort of understanding. Provided he keeps quiet about you being here," Elias

assured me.

"Yeah, I doubt he'll say a word. Nobody's stupid enough to anger the Vanguard's," I responded.

“Good. Looks like my reputation is working exactly how I wanted it to,” he said with a slight grin.

“Yeah. I guess it is,” I agreed. Elias sat down on the bed behind me, leaning back comfortably against the headboard, and pulled me back against his chest.

My back pressed against his chest, and his arms curled protectively around me, wrapping me in warmth

and safety again.

He pulled the covers over both of us and turned the movie back on, but after everything that had happened, neither of us could really focus on the screen. Our minds were elsewhere, thinking about

tonight.

We never imagined that a neutral pack would come warning Elias to stay away from me. It was just another challenge added to everything else we had to face.

The next morning, I woke up before Elias and quietly dressed in some old, worn clothes. I went downstairs where Chris was already waiting for me outside.

“I didn’t want to wake Elias. He’s been through a lot these past couple of days,” I said softly.

“That’s okay. What’s the plan for this morning?” Chris asked.

“Just jogging around the territory. We’ll stay inside the tree line, but I really need to get in shape, and Elias is going to start my training,” I explained.

“No worries. So jogging is going to be your cardio workout,” he replied.

“Yeah, something like that. But I have to warn you, I’m nowhere near the fitness level you guys have,” I

admitted.

“That’s fine. I’ll take it easy on you today,” Chris promised.

“Thanks,” I said gratefully.

So, we started jogging away from the house and headed toward the woods, but stopped at the edge of the

tree line to stay visible to the pack’s houses.

I hoped that if Elias woke up, he could see us jogging and wouldn't panic. But I knew he'd worry anyway if I

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wasn't in the house. I left a note on my pillow for him before I left, explaining everything.

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By the time we finished jogging around the entire territory and returned to the house, I was drenched in sweat and utterly exhausted.

Elias opened the door immediately when we reached the front of the house and didn't look pleased. Once I caught my breath, I told him about the note I left for him.

He said he saw it but was still upset that I had gone jogging with Chris without waking him up first.

I told him it was because he hadn't been sleeping much lately, and I didn't want to disturb him. Besides, I had a guard with me, and we stayed within the tree line. Now, I felt completely wiped out. I collapsed onto

the veranda of the house.

"What did you do to her?" Elias asked.

"That was just one lap around the territory," Chris said.

"I really need to get in shape. I've never done anything like this before," I said, gasping for breath.

"Clearly," Elias replied.

"Just give me a moment to recover, then I want to start training," I insisted.

"I don't want you to push yourself too hard," Elias warned.

"I'm not pushing myself too hard. I want to train. I have to train. Did you take it easy on everyone else when they first joined your pack?" I challenged.

"I always gave them time to adjust before making them start training," Elias said calmly.

"Well, I don't have that luxury. Too many people want me dead. I have to be ready," I answered firmly.

“Alright. Come inside and have some breakfast, then we’ll begin your training,” he said.

“Okay, thanks,” I replied.

Elias helped me up, and we went inside. I drank a glass of water, then another, while Elias prepared breakfast. I sat at the table, still catching my breath.

“I told you, I don’t want you training with anyone else,” Elias said.

“And I explained why I called Chris,” I replied.

“I know, but now that I’m rested, from now on you will wake me if you want to go jogging or training,” he

insisted.

“Alright. I didn’t mean to upset you. I thought I was doing the right thing,” I said.

“I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t expect it to bother me so much seeing you train with someone else,” he

admitted.

“There’s nothing to worry about. Chris was kind yesterday and the only person I could think of to take me

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around, someone I knew you could trust,” I explained.

“I don’t trust any male with you. And Chris isn’t mated,” Elias said sharply.

“Oh. I didn’t know that,” I answered.

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Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Elias opened it to find one of the patrols from last night.

He stepped into the kitchen as Elias continued cooking breakfast.

“I just wanted to inform you that Alpha Damon and his men are still watching the pack. They’re keeping their distance for now, but they are observing us,” the guard reported.

“Did they try to cross the border again?” Elias asked.

“No, just watching. I thought you’d want to know,” the guard said.

“Thanks for the update,” Elias replied as the guard left.

I sank back into my chair and said, “Looks like we have another problem to worry about.”

“Don’t stress. I can deal with Alpha Damon. I wasn’t bluffing when I said we could wipe out their entire pack. He knows that. I’ll talk to him and they’ll back off,” Elias assured me.

“Do I want to hear how that conversation will go?” I asked.

“No. You better stay here while I handle it,” he said, and I nodded, knowing it wouldn’t be a friendly talk.

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I genuinely wanted to understand what that pack’s issue with me was. After all, we were located far enough from them that they didn’t need to be involved in any of our problems. They had every opportunity to stay out of it completely if they chose to. We never asked for their assistance, and Elias certainly

wouldn’t. He was the Alpha of the Vanguard. He would be the last one to ever seek help from anyone.

Once we finished breakfast, Elias left the house to go confront Alpha Damon, and I stayed behind to tidy

up the kitchen, still preoccupied with curiosity about what was actually going on between the two packs.

I caught a glimpse of Elias disappearing into the forest behind our house, but that was the extent of what I

could see from the window. The pack border was much deeper into the forest, and since Alpha Damon

wasn’t approaching the edge, Elias had to walk quite a distance into the woods to find him.

The longer I waited inside the house, the more restless and uneasy I became, so I decided to head out to

the training ground that was located just behind the house, the one no one else was allowed to step foot

near.

Elias had specifically ordered everyone to stay away from that area. He had set it aside for the sole purpose of training me privately.

I wasn't exactly sure what I was supposed to do there by myself, but eventually I noticed a few items

scattered around and I started arranging them into a makeshift obstacle course, then began training with

what I had set up.

As time went by, I began thinking Elias was taking way too long, and that made me even more anxious. I

started walking toward the woods, but I stopped when I reached the edge of the trees.

I stood there, staring out in the direction that Elias had taken earlier, hoping to catch even the slightest

glimpse of something through the trees—but there was absolutely nothing I could make out.

I shut my eyes and focused hard, trying to pick up on any sounds that might give me a clue, and before

long, I started to hear faint voices coming toward me.

The sound of the voices kept growing louder, and when I opened my eyes again, I was startled to find

myself already inside the forest. Somehow, I had wandered further than I realized, because I was now

standing just a few feet away from Elias and Alpha Damon's meeting.

I could clearly see Elias, and he was backed up by several of his pack members. Alpha Damon, too, had

his men positioned beside him.

I was practically right behind all of them, and I immediately thought I was in for a serious scolding since Elias had made it clear that I wasn't supposed to come anywhere near this conversation. But oddly enough, no one acknowledged me at all. No one turned around, no one spoke to me—they all just kept talking as though I wasn't even present.

"Keeping that she-wolf here is a real threat. We're aware that she carries royal lineage, and people will stop

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at nothing to capture her. The vampire council has already made it known they're after her. There's going to be hell to pay once they figure out where she is," Alpha Damon said.

"Funny coming from you. Don't you already have a deal going with the vampires?" Elias replied.

"These ones are different. You and I both know that not all vampires are the enemy," Alpha Damon

responded.

"Oh, right. So these must be the 'good' vampires who've decided that feeding off animals is a noble cause

now," Elias said.

"You know just as well as I do that it's the truth. As long as they aren't murdering anyone, then we have no intention of going after them. That's the agreement we've made with them," Alpha Damon stated plainly.

"And what makes you think we should believe that? Werewolves and vampires aren't meant to be allies. What's to stop the vampire council from siding with you and your bloodsuckers?" Elias challenged.

"Because your girl is a much bigger prize to them than we are," Alpha Damon replied flatly.

"Well, then that's not your problem. You live two hours away from this place. So pack up, turn around, and act like none of this ever happened. It's not hard. You don't control much land and it's far from here anyway. You can easily claim you didn't know a thing.

And if they end up coming to our door, we'll handle it ourselves. But I won't give up my mate just because you're afraid," Elias growled with anger.

"Alright then. Just don't come crying when things go wrong," Alpha Damon warned.

"I don't need a heads-up. Since the day I met her, we've been through hell already. And I'm ready to keep fighting every damn day if that's what it takes to keep her breathing and safe. So now, get off my land,"

Elias snapped.

"Let's move, boys," Alpha Damon said, turning away and walking off with his pack trailing behind him.

Elias stood still until they completely vanished from view. Then, finally, he turned and started heading back toward our side of the border, with his men following closely behind him.

I remained in place as one of the patrol guards walked toward me. He didn't notice me at all, and I instinctively reached out my hand, thinking he might walk right into me, but instead, he passed directly through me as if I wasn't even there.

I stared down at myself, glancing over my body in disbelief, then turned my head to look at the group of men moving farther away toward our territory, feeling a deep sense of confusion settle in.

My thoughts were all over the place as I shut my eyes again, trying to make sense of what had just

happened and what it could possibly mean.

When I opened my eyes again, I was standing at the edge of the forest where I'd originally been before everything happened. But I hadn't walked back there. Just like I hadn't consciously walked to that meeting in the first place.

I initially thought I had transported my entire body to that place, but now I wasn't so sure. It felt more like it

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was just my awareness or consciousness that had projected itself there—because no one had seen or acknowledged me being present but me.

“Lyra,” Elias’s voice pulled me out of my swirling thoughts as he appeared from the trees and walked

toward me.

“Hi,” I greeted him quietly.

“Are you okay?” he asked with concern.

“Yeah, I just started getting a little anxious. You were gone a while,” I admitted.

“I know. Sorry about that. But I think I managed to convince them to step back and stay out of our way,” he said reassuringly.

“Okay. That’s a relief,” I replied softly.

“Come on. Let’s get to training,” he said, gesturing toward the back.

He noticed the rough obstacle course I had pieced together and, to my surprise, he actually seemed to like it. He decided we should keep it as part of our warm-up routine.

But he didn’t want to ease into it—he preferred to jump straight into proper training, and that’s exactly what

we started doing.

We’d been at it for around two hours when I found myself completely soaked in sweat and utterly drained,

but I still pushed to keep going, insisting we continue.

Elias seemed a bit concerned about how I was holding up, but I told him I wasn’t ready to stop. I wanted to

keep going, no matter how rough it got.

He let the training continue, though I could tell his intensity dropped after that. He was going easier on

1. me. But since we were still going through full-on combat exercises, I kept getting hurt in the process.

Each time Elias landed a hit that injured me, I could see the guilt written all over his face—he clearly hated

causing me pain. But this was what I needed. I understood training wouldn't be simple or painless. It was

necessary if I was ever going to stand a chance at defending myself. That was what mattered most.

Eventually, by the time the afternoon rolled around, we headed back inside. I was limping from the

soreness and bruises, but I pushed through it and made my way upstairs. I went straight into the bathroom

for a long shower, washed the sweat and grime out of my hair, and afterward I changed into a set of

oversized, soft clothes that didn't cling to my aching body.

When I came back downstairs, Elias was already in the kitchen preparing something to eat for both of us.

Just then, my phone started ringing.

I went over to the counter to pick it up and noticed it was Neil calling.

"He's called three times since we got back inside," Elias mentioned. I glanced at the call history, and to my shock, I saw that Neil had attempted to reach me twenty-four times that day.

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Without saying a word, I pulled the sim card out of the phone, snapped it clean in two, and dropped it into

the trash.

"There. Problem handled," I said casually as I walked to the fridge, grabbed a drink, and moved toward the table.

"I'll get you a replacement. I need to make sure I can reach you when I'm not around," Elias said, sounding firm about it.

"Sure. Just keep in mind that we might end up needing to change it again soon, because it didn't take much for Neil to get hold of this number," I replied.

“Fair enough,” Elias said with a nod.

I couldn’t figure out what had Neil so obsessed with me all of a sudden. Was it because I had just turned sixteen, and now that I was of age, my father’s blessing made me fair game for marriage? I had no clue what was behind his sudden desperation to reach me. But deep down, I knew it was tied to my powers somehow. Neil and his father probably thought they were entitled to a share of whatever power or influence I had. Just more people who saw me as something to use.

My mind started to wander, going back to that night when Neil and I were trapped together in the attic. My father had claimed it was part of helping us bond before the wedding. But in truth, it was just a way for Neil to see how much he could get away with—how far he could push me without making me scream or fight back. And he pushed it far.

I could still feel the warmth of his breath when he was on top of me. That memory came back so vividly that before I knew it, the glass I was holding shattered in my hand.

Elias turned quickly, alarmed by the sound, and stared at me. But I just lifted my gaze to meet his, whispered an apology, and bolted up the stairs without another word.

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When I made it upstairs, I headed straight into the bathroom and placed my hand beneath the running water, letting the blood rinse off.

Elias appeared at the bathroom doorway, taking in what I was doing, and the concern on his face was clear. He didn’t understand what had caused me to break the glass.

“Lyra. Talk to me.” he said gently.

“I’m sorry. It’s not a big deal.” I responded, trying not to let my tears show.

“It clearly is. Tell me what’s going on.” he insisted, stepping into the room and assisting me with my injured

hand.

“Sometimes memories just come back on their own. I don’t want them to, but they show up anyway.” I

explained quietly.

“Alright. Then what made you break the glass?” he asked.

“Neil.” I muttered. Elias gave a small nod, clearly understanding what I meant.

He wrapped my hand carefully, even though we both knew the wounds wouldn’t last—they would heal

soon enough.

Elias encouraged me to go downstairs with him to eat something. If we were going to keep up this

training, I needed to maintain my strength.

So I ate, though I stayed quiet for most of the afternoon. I didn’t feel like talking much and I was struggling

to quiet the thoughts in my mind.

Elias’s concern was obvious, but I couldn’t change that. I had to find a way to stop thinking about Neil and everything that had happened back at my old home. I wished I could block it all out, but that was far from

simple.

I really wanted to erase every part of it from my memory, but deep down I knew it was my past that was pushing me now—to work harder, to grow stronger. I wanted to forget, but also I didn’t. If that contradiction made any sense.

After we finished the meal, I stepped out onto the veranda and sat down. I watched people walking

around, chatting, just living. In the distance, others were busy with training. Their discipline and structure

impressed me deeply.

“Hey there.” a voice said, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Hey Chris. How are you?” I asked as I turned toward him.

“Doing alright. How about you? You seem a bit off.” he said, noticing my demeanor.

“I’m fine. Nothing to stress over.” I replied calmly.

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"I saw a bit of your training with Elias. You're starting to look impressive out there." he said.

"Thanks. But honestly, I still suck at it." I admitted.

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"You've only just started a few days ago. The guys over there have been training for years to reach that level." he pointed out, motioning toward the warriors in the distance.

"Yeah, I know. I'll get there eventually." I told him.

"We also have a gym, if you're interested. It's good for building some muscle." he offered.

"I'd like that. Where is it located?" I asked with curiosity.

"It's at the far end of the village, in that house-like building. No one lives there—it's all gym space." he

explained.

"Alright. I'll definitely take a look sometime." I responded. Just then, the door opened and Elias stepped

out onto the veranda.

When I glanced up at him, I saw the intense look he directed at Chris.

"Don't you have something else to be doing?" Elias questioned sharply.

"Yeah, I guess I do. Good talking to you, Lyra." Chris said before heading off.

"What was that all about?" I asked him directly.

"What do you mean?" Elias replied.

"You scaring him off like that—what was that for?"

"I don't like him being around you so often. He needs to understand that."

"How is he supposed to know that?" I questioned.

“Because you’re my mate and he’s an unmated male. That’s how it works. Everyone knows that.” Elias explained, lowering himself to sit next to me.

“I didn’t realize that was something everyone just knew.”

“I didn’t expect you to. But he should definitely be aware of it.” Elias answered.

“Okay. But you do realize we’re only friends, right?” I asked.

“I get that you see it as just friendship. But you shouldn’t underestimate an unmated male who gives you that much attention. It’s not always just friendly.” he said seriously.

“Alright. I’ll try to keep that in mind.” I told him.

“Thanks.” he said simply.

“You don’t have to worry about anything. I’m not going to do anything inappropriate.” I reassured him.

“I know that. But you’re still not strong enough to fight back if something were to happen. And without

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marking you, I wouldn’t be able to sense if you were in danger.” he said.

“Yeah, I understand. I’m sorry.” I said quietly.

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“You don’t need to apologize. I’m not angry with you.” he said, reaching over and taking my hand in his.

We sat there like that for a while, just holding hands in silence, until Elias was called to the training field for his Alpha responsibilities. I didn’t know what exactly he had to do, but he left the house, and I found myself alone again. I made myself a cup of coffee, took my book about the royals, and returned to the

veranda to keep reading.

I hadn’t read much on the royal family over the past couple of days, and I really needed to catch up. I was

still documenting where each member had been on different dates, still searching for clues about what happened to them.

“Hey Lyra.” I heard Hailey say as she passed by.

“Hey. What are you doing?” I asked her.

“Well, we’re heading into town to do some shopping. Want to come along?” she offered.

“I’d really love to. But I doubt I’d get permission to go.” I replied.

“You can’t stay trapped in this house forever.” she said firmly.

“Well, with that storm rolling in, I don’t think your shopping plans will go too well.” I said, glancing at the dark clouds that were quickly approaching.

“Storms never last. We can always go once it passes. How about tomorrow?” she suggested.

“Sure, I’d really like that. I’m just not sure Elias will be all that thrilled.” I admitted.

“Don’t worry about him. I’ll arrange for security to come with us. But seriously, you need new clothes—no

more of Elias’s old stuff or the pack’s hand-me-downs. You need clothes that are your own style.”

“That honestly sounds like a lot of fun.” I said with a smile.

“Hell yeah, it does.” she replied excitedly.

Hailey stayed to chat with me for a while longer, and the clouds moved in even faster than we had

anticipated.

The rain started pouring down heavily, and when I looked toward the training field, I saw Elias still pushing

the warriors to train despite the weather. Honestly, that probably wasn’t a bad thing—it helped them prepare for any conditions. No one can control the weather, and I suppose this kind of discipline is what makes them the best. It’s because of the way they train.

Not long after that, hail began pounding down, so I grabbed my things and made the decision to head inside. I wasn’t accustomed to this kind of weather. I had never even stepped outside the packhouse back home, so I’d never really experienced rain like this before. I couldn’t tell whether I liked it or not.

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The moment I stepped inside, a loud crack of thunder echoed through the air and I let out a startled scream—it had frightened me.

Back in my father's packhouse, I always knew when there was a storm, but because it was such a massive stone house, the sound never really carried through. Even when I was in the attic, I couldn't hear it because the roof was made of tile. This house, however, was made of wood, and I could hear everything

loud and clear.

Suddenly, I heard screaming coming from outside the house, and I rushed to the window to see what was

going on. Was someone attacking us?

When I looked out through the front window, I saw objects falling from the sky and crashing into the ground with violent force, making the earth tremble with every impact.

People were running all over the place, trying to dodge the things shooting down from above.

I opened the front door and looked upward; through the storm clouds, I could just make out the faint glow of the moon. I turned my head and saw Elias sprinting back toward the house with the warriors close behind him, all of them trying to find shelter.

Elias was shouting instructions, making sure everyone knew what to do to stay safe, and I turned back inside, panic rising in me as I tried to comprehend what was happening.

I ran into the living room and crouched in the far corner, curling up tightly and staying completely still,

frozen with fear. I had no idea what I should do.

I shut my eyes tightly and silently begged for everything to end.

Elias POV

As soon as the meteor shower began, I took off immediately, needing to make sure my pack was moved to the safest areas possible—if that was even an option. We didn't know where these flaming stones

would land.

I looked up at the sky and noticed the moon breaking through the clouds even while the storm raged on. That wasn't normal. And then I saw that the meteors seemed to be originating from the moon itself. As if

the moon were purposely hurling them at us.

I spotted Lyra on the front veranda of the house, but once I saw her dart back inside, I felt a bit more at ease. At least inside the house, she should've been safer. That's what I told myself.

I ran into the center of the village, shouting to everyone to find safety, to head into the woods if they had

1. to. That seemed like the best chance they had.

But many stayed behind, helping me gather and protect the children, the pregnant women, and those who were currently too weak to move.

Just as I started sprinting back toward my house, the largest meteor yet came streaking down from the sky.

I could hear its sharp whistling as it descended at terrifying speed, and before I could react, it slammed

directly into the roof of my house, erupting the entire structure in a violent explosion.

I screamed Lyra's name, but before I could reach her, a powerful and blinding light burst forth from the

meteor and the sky above it.

The light was so intense that I had to shield my eyes, unable to look at it. It was searingly bright—too much

to bear—and everyone else in the village did the same. No one could see anything beyond that

overwhelming light.