

## Chapter 14: Elira's First Day

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ELIRA

I stood frozen by the car, the morning breeze brushing against my skin, when I felt it—an unshakable weight pressing down on me.

A stare.

I looked up.

And there he was.

Darius Vane.

Leaning on the balcony like a shadow waiting to fall. His golden eyes were locked on me, unreadable at first—until I recognized the fury in them. Cold, sharp, unrelenting.

He didn't say a word, but he didn't have to. His gaze alone spat all the cruel things he would've said aloud if given the chance.

I could hear them.

Manipulator. Schemer. Pathetic little omega, playing pity games to get what she wants.

I bowed my head, unable to meet the fire in his eyes. Then I hurried inside the car, gripping my skirt tightly as if it could hold me together.

The door shut with a soft click.

The ride started quietly, but my mind wasn't. Thoughts stormed inside me, threatening to swallow whatever calm I had left. I pressed my forehead against the cool glass, trying to breathe.

And then—

Light.

The city.

I blinked, taken aback by the sudden colors and life outside the window. I'd been asleep during the entire ride to the Vane estate, never having seen any of this. In the daylight, the capital was... stunning.

Tall glass buildings kissed the sky, sleek modern vehicles moved in harmony, and many people walked the streets with purpose.

My chest lifted slightly.

So this is what the world looks like when you're not chained.

"Is this your first time seeing the city?" Dianne's voice pulled me gently from my thoughts.

I turned to her and nodded. "I was asleep the first time."

"It can be overwhelming," she said.

"I don't mind," I replied, then hesitated. "Um... Dianne? Can I ask something?"

She tilted her head slightly.

"What grade are you in?"

"I already graduated last year," she said easily. "From a different academy. But since I've been assigned to you, I'll be enrolling again—just a few classes, for protocol."

"Assigned?" I echoed.

She nodded. "By King Darius and Beta Sorin."

"In school," I asked, "they have... grade levels, right? So what happens to someone like me?"

She looked at me as if unsure how to answer. I cleared my throat. "This is my first time going to school."

I had expected her to mock me, to laugh—but she didn't. Instead, she nodded, thoughtful.

"The Academy will evaluate where you are first. You won't be placed in a class where you don't belong. I was already thirteen when I first attended school, after the Vanes took me in."

"They took you in?"

She nodded. "Yes, Miss. My parents were killed by rogues, and Queen Selene helped me—took me into their care. They even gave me an education."

Queen Selene truly had a good heart.

Dianne grew quiet after that, and I didn't ask any more questions.

I looked back out the window. My heart was still restless.

I wasn't a child anymore.

What if I get placed in a class full of younger students? That would be humiliating. But then again, did it even matter?

I shook the thought away.

No.

No, it didn't matter.

Not the age. Not the stares. Not the whispers that might follow me.

I'll listen to the teachers. I'll study well. But not because I'm afraid of starving.

And not because I want to prove Darius wrong... or avoid disappointing Queen Selene.

I want to do this for me.

Because maybe, just maybe... I deserve to achieve something, too.

Even if it's small.

Even if it's slow.

Even if I fail a hundred times before I get it right.

At least this time... I'm trying.

\*

I sat in the lobby with my fingers twisted together, trying to stop my legs from bouncing. The exam was over.

I still couldn't believe it.

I had answered the questions—answered them.

Not all, maybe. But most of them... I understood.

It was strange.

I never thought I'd be able to sit in a room with a real exam and not be completely lost. But as I stared at those papers earlier, something shifted. The questions—they weren't unfamiliar.

In fact, a lot of them felt... familiar.

I smiled to myself faintly.

Beta Callum.

My father's beta. Harsh and cold most days, but there were moments when he'd grumble lessons at me while I cleaned, or quiz me while I

was doing chores—never admitting it was teaching.

I thought he was just trying to distract himself from boredom.

Now I realized he was preparing me.

He taught me numbers, history, basic rules of the world. He told me stories when I was too tired to move, and he'd pretend it was nothing.

And the rest?

I owed that to Lorelei. Or rather, the books she threw away when she got bored of them. She'd discard them like trash, torn pages and all. I'd wait until no one was around, sneak them into my little corner, and read them in the dark.

I didn't understand most of the words back then. But I read them anyway. Again and again. Until I could.

And today... those words came back to me.

A soft smile crept onto my lips, though my fingers still trembled.

I stood from the chair, walking slowly toward the large glass window overlooking the academy grounds. I needed to breathe. To think.

Outside, the wide field stretched across the grounds, glowing under the daylight. Students scattered like birds, some running, some walking in tight groups, others laughing without a care.

This is what school looks like.

Not something distant or imagined. Real.

The bell rang, sharp and clear, echoing through the air.

The doors burst open. Students flooded the grounds. A few of them glanced my way, probably curious about the girl just standing there, looking like she didn't belong.

I didn't meet anyone's eyes.

Not yet.

But in my chest... something stirred.

Hope? Maybe.

Nervousness? Definitely.

"Miss Ellra?"

I turned, startled. A young assistant from the admissions office stood before me, holding a sealed folder in her hands.

"They've reviewed your results," she said with a small smile. "The Headmaster would like to speak with you."

My heart stuttered in my chest.

I nodded, brushing my palms against my skirt to keep them from shaking. I followed her through the halls, not knowing what awaited me behind those doors.

But this time... I wasn't walking away.

I was walking toward something.

And I was ready to try.

\*

DARIUS

Sorin entered the office just as I finished signing the last document on my desk.

"Valeria's father called," he said, stopping a few feet away. "He wants a meeting with you. He says you're not answering his calls."

I froze, my hand suspended midair.

My knuckles slowly curled into a fist.

I already had an idea why Alpha Daniel wanted to speak with me.

It was about Valeria, of course.

The pressure in my chest began to build—tight, coiling pain that throbbed behind my ribs and climbed to the back of my skull like a warning.

A reminder.

I looked up at Sorin and shook my head once.

"Tell him I'm busy," I muttered. "And that I'll be leaving on a business trip. I don't have time for that."

Sorin exhaled. "Why didn't you just choose Valeria? What if she's the one—"

"She's not. I don't want her to end up like her sister..."

"And... Sylvia?"

I avoided Sorin's gaze, standing and walking over to the window.

The glass was cold beneath my fingertips.

"Why did you choose Elira?" he pressed. "Clearly, it's not just because our mother asked you to take her in."

I stared out at the horizon, jaw tightening.

"You already know the answer to that."

Sorin nodded. "Right."

He paused for a beat, then added, "How sure are you, Darius, that you won't like her? That you won't have feelings for her? She's getting your attention—"

"Shut up," I snapped—sharper than I meant to. My voice echoed through the stillness of the room.

I looked away, flexing my fingers and ignoring the weight pressing against my sternum. It was getting harder to breathe.

"I won't fall for someone like her."

"After manipulating our mother to let her study, after pulling that stunt of trying to kill herself—do you really think I'd ever like her?" I muttered.

Sorin didn't flinch, but his voice softened.

"Then at least stop being cruel to the poor omega, Darius. You could've just ignored her—"

"I can't ignore her," I said through gritted teeth, turning away from the window.

The words came out harsher than I wanted, more honest than intended.

Sorin's brows furrowed.

"She reminds you of—?"

"No," I cut him off. "She doesn't remind me of anyone."

I lied.

She did. And that was the problem.

She was dangerous.

Not because of what she could do.

But because of what I could feel.

"I won't let it happen again," I said quietly, more to myself than Sorin. "I won't bring ruin."

Sorin was silent.

"You think I'm cruel?" I whispered. "This is mercy."

Sorin's voice was tight with frustration. "You think tormenting her is mercy?"

"I'm keeping her alive," I said. "And I'm keeping this kingdom standing."

"You're keeping her alive as a punishment to her? Yeah, right, Darius. Keep doing that, and I have this feeling you'll regret later."

My brows furrowed as I turned sharply. "You're eavesdropping again."

Sorin leaned casually against the doorframe, arms crossed. "Mother asked me to come—just in case you lose yourself in her scent."

"Shut the f\*ck up."

He laughed, acting like he zipped his mouth. "I'll tell Alpha Daniel that you're busy with your...wife."

Damn you.



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