

Chapter 22: Not a Cursed One

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I didn't sleep.

Not really.

My body lay still in bed, but my mind never stopped—reliving everything that had happened the night before.

Darius.

His voice. His hands. His anger.

The way he touched me.

The way I felt something—heat—spreading through me like a fire I couldn't put out.

The way he growled before vanishing into the night as a wolf, black as midnight and just as cold.

It haunted me.

But more than that... it confused me.

Terrified me.

Was that what Miss Helga meant? That strange ache crawling beneath the surface? That pull toward someone who shouldn't make sense?

No.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

I turned to my side, staring at the faint sunlight that filtered through the curtains.

It was already morning.

Saturday.

No school. No training.

No Darius.

He hadn't come back—at least not that I knew of. I hadn't heard his footsteps in the hall. I hadn't dared leave my room to find out.

I pressed a hand against my chest, trying to slow my racing heart.

Just breathe, Elira.

You survived another night.

You'll survive today, too.

Before I could sink deeper into my thoughts, a soft knock tapped at the door.

I sat up quickly.

"Elira," Dianne's voice called gently from the other side. "Are you awake?"

"Yes," I said hoarsely. "Come in."

The door creaked open, and Dianne stepped inside with a soft smile that looked like it carried good news.

I blinked. "What is it?"

"Queen Selene has returned," she said. "She came back this morning... and she's asking for you."

My eyes widened.

"The Queen?"

Dianne nodded. "She's waiting in her room. You should go."

I swung my legs off the bed, suddenly more alert.

Queen Selene had left the kingdom the day I was sent to school. I didn't even have a chance to thank her.

Aside from Dianne, she was the only one who had made me feel... safe. She didn't treat me like I was dirt. She didn't look at me like I was broken. She even told me once that I was a gift to my late mother.

She gave me comfort when I needed it most.

And because of that... a small part of me feared something would happen to her.

Because I'm cursed.

Because anyone who gets close to me ends up hurt.

But she's here.

She's safe.

A quiet breath of relief slipped from my lips. I'd been praying for her ever since she left—like a silent ritual I couldn't stop.

"All right," I whispered, rising slowly. "Let's go."

The halls were quiet as Dianne and I walked side by side, the soft echo of our footsteps the only sound filling the long corridor.

"Did you..." Dianne asked hesitantly, glancing at me, "receive a harsh punishment from the King last night?"

Her words made me falter.

Just one step.

I remembered—

The cold wall.

His grip.

The way his voice had echoed in my chest... "Should I discard her?"

I turned slightly to glance at Dianne beside me—unharméd. Breathing.

Relief bloomed in my chest like sunlight after a storm.

He didn't do it.

He didn't hurt her.

My feet stopped.

"Elira?" Dianne looked back.

"Maybe..." I said quietly, "maybe they should assign someone else to watch over me."

Her brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

I looked down. "I don't want to put you in danger. Darius almost... discarded you because of what I did. And it wasn't even your fault. You tried to convince me to leave. You did everything right. But I—"

"Elira." She cut me off, her tone firm.

I met her eyes, startled.

"Here you are again," she said, her voice tight. "Feeling guilty for something you had no control over. Stop that."

"But—"

"No." She stepped in front of me, halting my steps. "I'm doing fine. And I've told you this before—if something bad happens to me, that's my fate. Not yours. You don't get to carry that burden."

My chest ached.

Still... it was hard not to feel like I was dragging her down.

"But if you really don't want me around—"

"No!" My voice cracked, then softened. "That's not what I meant."

There was a long silence before I found the courage to speak again.

"You're my friend... Of course I want you with me."

The words hung in the air between us, raw and unfiltered.

I... wasn't supposed to say that out loud.

But it was true.

Dianne wasn't just a servant. Not just a watcher assigned to keep an eye on me.

She was more.

Someone I never had in my life.

Her lips parted slightly, then she blinked fast—tears welling.

She stepped forward, taking my hands gently in hers. Her fingers brushed over the bruises, soft as feathers.

"Thank you... for seeing me as your friend, Elira," she whispered. "You're the King's wife. I'm below you. You shouldn't see me that way... but I'm glad you do."

She sniffed. "Because I see you that way, too. You're not just someone I watch over. You're my friend. No..." She shook her head. "You're my sister. And I won't mind being in danger—if that's what it takes to be with you. To protect you."

"Dianne..."

Dianne smiled and tapped my hands. "We need to go, Elira. The Queen is waiting for you."

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I stood before the Queen's door, my heart pounding.

Dianne gently touched my back. "Go on," she whispered. "She's waiting for you."

I nodded, swallowed hard, then raised a shaky hand to knock.

A soft voice called from the inside, "Elira?"

Dianne opened the door for me.

There she was.

Queen Selene.

Standing by the tall windows, her silver-white hair loose around her shoulders, bathed in morning light. Her gown was a shade of pale blue that reminded me of calm skies, and her eyes—moonlit and kind—met mine with warmth that nearly undid me.

"Queen Selene, welcome back," I whispered, bowing my head.

She stepped forward immediately, arms open.

"Oh, Darling. Stop calling me that, that's too formal. Come here, child."

For a second, I stood frozen until she smiled at me, urging me to come at her.

When I still didn't move, she walked towards me and embraced me.

I closed my eyes as I felt her hug—soft, warm, motherly. The scent of lavender clung to her skin. I hadn't realized how cold I'd been until that moment.

"I was praying for your return," I mumbled, my voice muffled against her shoulder.

"And I carried you in mine," she replied. "Every single day."

She pulled back to study me, cupping my face with delicate fingers.

"You've grown more tired since I left," she said softly. "But stronger too. I can feel it."

I lowered my gaze. "I... wanted to thank you. Before you left. But I wasn't able to."

Her thumb brushed the side of my cheek.

"You owe me no thanks, Elira. You've survived things no one should have to. If anything, it's me who's proud of you."

My throat tightened.

How could someone speak so gently to someone like me?

Someone cursed?

Someone broken?

I almost asked her that. I almost told her everything.

That Darius had frightened me. That the heat was changing me. That I didn't understand what was happening to my body, my emotions, or my place here anymore.

But I couldn't.

Not yet.

So I just said, "I'm glad you're safe. I was... afraid something bad would happen to you."

Queen Selene's expression softened.

"Because you think you bring harm to those who care for you?" she asked.

I looked up, startled.

She smiled, sad and knowing. "I know how that fear feels. But don't let it rule you. You are not a curse, Elira. And you are not alone anymore."

I opened my mouth to reply, but the tears in my throat held the words hostage.

Queen Selene stepped back, smoothing my hair gently behind my ear.

"Now," she said warmly, "come. Walk with me. Tell me what has happened while I was away."

Maybe Queen Selene is right. Perhaps I'm not really a curse.

Because if I were... I wouldn't have found Queen Selene and Dianne in my life, right?



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