

Chapter 24: Too Close

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I stepped back, my hands instinctively flying to cover my back.

But Darius didn't stop.

He walked with purpose, heavy and measured, like he knew exactly what he was doing. Like I was a thread, he intended to pull.

"D-Dianne can do it," I said quickly, my voice shaky, barely above a whisper.

But he was already behind me.

I felt his presence like a shadow pressed against my skin.

Hot, quiet, undeniable.

"Stay still," he said lowly, and I froze.

My breath caught as his fingers brushed the small of my back, finding the zipper.

They were warm.

He pulled it up in one slow, deliberate motion.

Each inch felt like it tightened something inside me—and I was sure it wasn't because of the gown.

Then, just as I thought he'd step away—

He didn't.

His hand lingered at the top of the zipper, just below the nape of my neck. Then I felt it—

His fingers brushed my hair aside slowly, tucking it over my shoulder.

I couldn't breathe.

My heart thudded violently in my chest. The air turned thick.

That same sensation.

Heat slithered beneath my skin, blooming across my chest, down to my stomach, to places I didn't want to think about.

Not here.

Not in front of him.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Not again.

"Y-You can let go now," I whispered, unable to turn around.

But he didn't answer right away.

Instead, I heard him breathe slowly like he was trying to control something deep inside.

Then his voice, low and rough, just behind my ear:

"You shouldn't open the curtain like that again. Not when you're half-dressed."

I swallowed hard.

"I didn't know you were there..."

"I'm not referring to myself, Elira," he said, his breath hot against the back of my neck before he finally stepped away.

Before I could even comprehend what Darius had just whispered behind me, a sudden clap broke through the thick air between us.

"Beautiful!" Queen Selene beamed, her hands meeting in a soft, delighted applause.

I jumped slightly, blinking as I turned toward her. My cheeks burned.

The Queen walked closer, her eyes shimmering with joy as she studied the gown on me. "You look absolutely stunning, Elira. Doesn't she, Darius?"

I glanced nervously at him.

He was silent for a second too long.

Then, with a blank expression—tight-lipped and unreadable—he gave a single nod.

"Yes," he said flatly, like the word had to be dragged out of him.

I could tell he didn't mean it. Anyone could tell that.

The Queen chuckled, clearly not fooled. "Such enthusiasm, my dear son."

She turned to me again. "You should try on more dresses, Elira. Let your husband help you choose what suits you best for the party."

I stiffened.

That party.

He frowned. "What party?"

Queen Selene raised a brow at him. "Have you already forgotten? Valerie's mother's birthday. It's this weekend. You missed it last year, remember? I covered for you."

Darius groaned, clearly displeased. "That's on the full moon."

"Yes, and?"

The Queen smirked at her son. I could tell she was enjoying his frustration far too much. "There's Elira now—"

"Don't go there," Darius warned, his voice low.

Queen Selene only laughed. "Relax, son. You just need to show up for an hour. Then go vanish, lock yourself up, howl at the moon—whatever it is you do. No one will stop you."

"Besides, I'll ask Sorin and Dianne to accompany Elira so she won't be left alone."

Dianne suddenly gasped. "Queen Selene? W-what do you mean by that?"

The Queen turned toward her with a sly grin. "I saw a gown outside that would suit you perfectly, dear. Come, let's take a look. I want your opinion too."

Dianne's eyes widened, stammering. "M-My opinion? But I—"

"Come, darling," the Queen said as she looped her arm with Dianne's and began guiding her toward the exit. "Let's leave these two to choose what they'll wear. They need the privacy."

My heart dropped.

Wait. What?

My eyes darted to Darius.

I don't want to be left alone with him. Not now. Not ever.

I tried to say something, but the Queen just gave me a wink before vanishing through the curtain, Dianne trailing helplessly behind her.

Now, it was just me.

And him.

I shut my eyes for a brief moment, drawing a shaky breath.

Before Darius could open his mouth, I blurted out, "I didn't ask the Queen to bring me here... to shop for me. I-I still have a lot of dresses in my closet. I don't need to buy one. And besides, I'm not going to attend—"

"I don't like that one," he interrupted, his tone flat—bored.

I blinked, confused, until I followed his gaze.

He was staring at me.

No—not me. The gown. Specifically... the neckline.

Heat crept up my neck.

"Too much skin," he whispered, but it reached my ears.

His eyes hadn't lingered long, but it was enough to make my pulse spike.

His attention drifted from me to the dress rack. Without saying another word, he walked over and began shifting hangers with a rough, impatient rhythm, the soft swish of fabric the only sound in the room.

Then he stopped.

Pulled out a deep navy-blue dress—elegant, modest, sleeveless but high-collared—and turned toward me.

He held it up. "This one."

I didn't move.

I just stared at it... at him.

His eyes narrowed slightly, and then a smirk curled at the corner of his lips. "Do you want me to put this on you myself?"

My face flamed.

"N-No!" I rushed forward and snatched the dress from his hand, hugging it tightly against my chest.

"Hurry up, I don't want to be stuck in this place all day," he said, his hands slipping into his pockets as he walked towards the lounge.

My hands were still trembling when I stepped back into the dressing area, the curtain falling shut behind me.

But even behind the thick fabric... I could feel his presence.

This time, I was determined to wear the gown without any help.

I twisted my arm behind me, jaw clenched, and fought with the zipper of the gown Darius had chosen.

It wasn't easy—my neck strained, my shoulder throbbed—but I gritted my teeth and kept at it.

I would not let myself end up in that situation again.

Not with him.

Not with the way he made me feel.

After a moment of struggle, the zipper finally cooperated with me. I exhaled shakily, stepping back and facing the mirror.

And froze.

The girl staring back at me didn't look like the weak, trembling omega I once believed I was.

She looked... radiant.

The deep navy dress hugged my frame modestly but perfectly, its subtle shimmer catching the soft light in the dressing room.

My cheeks held more color now—not from embarrassment, but from health.

My skin was no longer sallow or dull. And my hair... looked softer, fuller, falling neatly over one shoulder like Queen Selene had arranged it earlier.

I hadn't realized it until now—but I had changed.

I was still Elira—Hollowpack's cursed omega.

But not the same one who once cried herself to sleep on the floor of a cold room.

Despite everything—the brutal training, the harsh words, the punishments—I had been fed. I'd been given warm baths. I'd slept in a soft bed.

Even if I didn't know how, I always ended up there... I'd stopped waking up on the floor.

I placed a hand on my chest, watching the slow rise and fall in the mirror.

Was this really me?

My lips parted, but I couldn't say a word. Not even when something sharp echoed through the wall—

A familiar voice.

"What do you mean we can't use this VIP room? Of course we can. Don't you know who we are? I already reserved this! I even called yesterday to confirm it—"

My eyes widened.

That voice—

No...

It can't be.

I moved closer to the curtain, heart pounding, the gown rustling softly with every step.

It was her.

I'd recognize that entitled tone anywhere.

Lorelei.

My stepsister.



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