

Chapter 29: A Test

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The morning air bit at my skin as I stepped outside.

It was still early, but I couldn't sleep anymore, so I decided to take a walk.

I was planning to go to the garden where Queen Selene brought me last time—where we had lunch.

As I walked along the path toward it, I caught sight of someone up ahead.

Alexis.

She stood beneath one of the trees, casually twirling a training staff in her hand.

When she saw me, her brows lifted. "You're up."

"I am," I said, stopping in front of her. "Good morning, Miss Alexis. Do I have training today?"

"Only if you ask me to." She raised a brow, slightly amused.

I smiled and nodded. "I want to."

"Are you sure? Word is you collapsed hard enough to worry the Queen."

"I'm fine now," I said with a steady voice. "I want to train."

She studied me for a second. "Okay, then. You should eat first and meet me at the training ground later. I'll introduce you to your other instructor."

"Other instructor?"

She nodded, her expression turning serious. "We'll wait for you this afternoon."

I pulled my hair back, tying it into a loose braid as I checked myself in the mirror.

I still looked a bit pale... but the burning heat was gone.

I was fine.

I was ready.

The knock came just as I reached for my jacket.

"Where are you going?" Dianne asked as she peeked inside, her brows knitting with concern.

She sighed when I only smiled at her. "You're really going to train? You don't need to force yourself. You can rest. King Darius isn't even back yet. No one will question it if you stay in bed."

My smile faded slightly at the mention of Darius, who, even now, hadn't returned.

But I was sure he would. He's the King. This is his kingdom.

And I didn't want him thinking I slacked off the moment he disappeared.

Even if he made me train to make me suffer, just like he said.

I've been thinking maybe... I could take it as something positive.

Maybe this training can help me.

Everyone in this pack has undergone it.

I should be no exception, no matter how weak I am.

And maybe training can make me... stronger.

"I've already rested," I said gently, slipping my arm into the sleeve. "

Three days unconscious, then another full day of doing nothing. That's four days of rest. I'm not weak anymore."

"You're still recovering—"

"I'm not helpless." I turned to face her fully. "I need to train, Dianne. Even you have trained, right? I should be no exception."

Dianne's mouth opened slightly as if to protest, but she said nothing.

I gave her a small smile. "Besides, I haven't gone back to school. You said I'm excused until next week, right?"

She nodded reluctantly. "Yes. I cleared that with the academy. They understand."

"Then I'll use this time to do something useful."

I zipped up my jacket and adjusted the strap across my chest. "I've been given medicine. Damon said the suppressants should help."

Her eyes flickered with concern. "But... you haven't felt any side effects

yet, have you?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. He said it's case by case. Sometimes it doesn't show for a while or sometimes... not at all."

A small silence stretched between us.

"You're really set on doing this, aren't you?" she asked quietly.

I nodded once. "Yes."

Dianne sighed and stepped back. "Be careful, then."

"I will."

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The wind shifted as I stepped onto the training ground.

Alexis was already waiting—leaning against a wooden post, arms crossed, her gaze sharp.

But she wasn't alone.

Standing beside her was a woman I'd never seen before.

Tall. Broad-shouldered. Her dark auburn hair was pulled into a tight braid, and her eyes were like steel, cold and calculating.

She wore the standard training uniform, but it looked more like battle armor on her. Something about her made the air feel instantly heavier.

Alexis straightened as I approached. "You're on time, Elira. Are you sure you want to train today?"

I smiled and nodded. She smiled back.

The other woman didn't.

"You're Elira?" the woman asked, her tone dry.

I swallowed and gave a polite nod. "Yes."

She didn't return it. Instead, she looked me over like I was nothing more than a stray leaf blown into her yard.

Alexis cleared her throat and stepped between us. "Elira, this is Captain Carol. She runs combat and shift-discipline training for the elite units in our pack."

"Elira," Carol repeated, like she was tasting the word and didn't like the flavor. "The omega the King chose. Much to everyone's surprise..."

I stiffened.

"Carol..." Alexis warned, but Carol stepped closer to me, eyes narrowing.

"Can you shift?"

I hesitated.

It should've been a simple answer. But it wasn't. I never had. Not fully.

Sometimes, my eyes would burn gold. Sometimes, my teeth would sharpen. But the shift never came completely.

"I—" My voice faltered. "I can't. Not... fully."

Her brow lifted, and a bitter smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "Figures."

"A weak omega. Unable to shift. And this is who our King married."

She turned her back on me like I wasn't worth another glance. "And yet, here you are. Wearing our pack's ring. Holding a title others have bled for."

Her voice dropped lower, edged in disdain. "Let's see if you're even worth the dirt you stand on."

"You're going into the woods for today's training," she said, pointing toward the forest beyond the field.

I followed her gaze and swallowed hard.

The forest.

My hands clenched as memories surfaced, me running through trees, terrified.

"W-what's in the forest?" I asked quietly.

Carol's smile was all teeth. It didn't reach her eyes.

"Your first test. There's a flag marked along the trail. Find it. Bring it back. Use whatever Alexis has taught you—if you actually learned anything."

"C-Carol, she just got back," Alexis interjected. "Maybe this is too much —"

"This isn't too much, Alexis," Carol snapped. "There's nothing in those woods that can kill her. Unless she's careless."

She turned back to me and tossed a duffel bag at my feet.

"Come back before sunset—or don't come back at all."

The bag was heavier than I expected when I picked it up.

My heart thundered.

I didn't know what waited for me in those trees.

But I took a step forward anyway.

Because if I didn't face this...

I'd never become anything more than what they already believed I was.

I sat on a moss-covered rock, my fingers tightening around the map I found in the duffel bag they gave me.

The paper was crinkled, slightly damp from my sweaty hands. A bold red X marked what I assumed was the flag's location.

A waterfall was sketched nearby, with curved lines that looked like they were meant to represent flowing water.

But I didn't hear any water.

No rushing sound. No distant splash. Nothing.

Just birds. Leaves. Wind.

I sighed, squinting at the map again, trying to make sense of it. I couldn't understand it. I'd never even used a map before this.

I looked up from the paper, scanning the woods around me.

Trees. Trees. More trees.

No waterfall.

Definitely no flag.

I shifted the bag's strap on my shoulder and stood, brushing off my pants.

The forest floor was uneven, with roots, dips, and damp patches everywhere. I had to stay steady or risk tripping and twisting my ankle.

"I should've passed the falls by now," I muttered.

But nothing looked familiar.

Everything looked the same.

I chewed on my bottom lip and kept walking.

Every step felt heavier.

My legs ached, and my shoulders were starting to burn from the weight of the bag. My breathing came faster, not from panic, at least not yet, but from pure exhaustion.

Already.

It hadn't even been that long.

I stopped again, placing a hand on a nearby tree, trying to catch my breath.

Pathetic. That's what Carol would say if she saw me right now.

Should I regret deciding to train today? Maybe. I hadn't fully recovered if I was already this tired...

No. I'll be fine. I shouldn't regret my decision. I can do this.

I gripped the map again and forced myself forward, one step at a time, even though the forest's silence made me feel smaller with every breath.

And then—

I smiled.

I heard it.

The waterfall.

The sound of the waterfall grew louder, rushing and constant, like a steady heartbeat echoing through the trees.

A smile tugged at my lips. I'm close.

The excitement rushed in too fast.

I picked up my pace, brushing past hanging branches and weaving through the narrow path, not even thinking to slow down—

Until it happened.

My foot caught on a thick root hidden beneath fallen leaves.

"Ah—!"

My balance tipped.

I stumbled forward, but the ground wasn't flat anymore.

It sloped.

Steeply.

I tumbled, my body rolling down the short incline with branches scraping my arms and rocks jabbing into my side.

I tried to stop myself from grabbing anything, but my hand only caught air and dirt.

My shoulder hit something hard, and then—

I landed.

Hard.

Flat on my back.

Pain burst through my right foot the moment it twisted beneath me.

I sucked in a sharp breath, gritting my teeth as I lay still, staring up at the patch of sky between the trees.

My heart was racing, not from the fall but from the shock.

Slowly, I sat up.

My hands were scraped.

My shoulder throbbed. But my ankle pulsed the most, sending sharp pain up my leg every time I shifted.

I looked down.

Already swelling.

Tears burned behind my eyes. Not from the pain. Not really.

But from the frustration.

"I didn't even make it to the damn flag yet," I muttered bitterly, pressing my palm against my forehead.

I tried to stand.

Failed.

The moment I put pressure on the ankle, I cried out softly, collapsing back to the ground.

Great, Elira.

Just great.

Now, what will you do now?

