

Chapter 31: He's Back

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ELIRA

Each step was hard. I thought I was close to passing this test, but I was wrong.

If there's another word that would describe me besides being cursed, it is this word: unlucky.

I'm unlucky.

My ankle throbbed harder now, worse than before. The pain had spread, like something tearing under my skin every time I moved.

But I didn't stop. I couldn't.

The flag was in my bag.

I just had to make it back.

And I'll win this test, just like what Lucan said.

I gritted my teeth, limping along the dirt path, hoping it was still the right one.

The trees around me were tall and swaying, whispering in voices only the wind understood.

My lips were dry. Cracked.

I reached for my water bottle, but it was empty. I'd already drained the last few sips an hour ago. I'd thought I was almost there then.

But now?

I wasn't sure anymore.

The path had twisted. I'd lost count of how many turns I'd taken. And with the way my body ached, I could barely focus on the landmarks. If there even were any.

I pushed forward anyway, one hand pressed against a tree trunk for balance.

The bark scraped my fingers, but I didn't care. I couldn't feel them much anymore, scratches, cuts, bruises... all numb now.

Then I heard it.

A low rumble in the distance.

Thunder.

My heart dropped.

I looked up and groaned as I saw the light fade from the sky, swallowed by thick, black clouds. The forest darkened quickly, like a candle blown out in a room full of shadows.

"No..." I whispered, breath shaking.

The wind picked up, cold and sharp, and then...

The rain came.

It started soft.

Then, it turned brutal.

It poured into thick sheets, soaking my hair, clothes, and skin. The dirt path beneath my feet turned to slick mud, and I nearly slipped just standing still.

I held onto a nearby branch, trying to keep steady. But it cut into my palms, already raw and stinging.

Every part of me was soaked and trembling.

I wanted to run, to rush forward and get out of this place.

But I knew if I ran, I'd fall. My foot was too weak. If I take one wrong step, I might not get up again.

So I limped.

Slowly.

Carefully.

Step by miserable step.

I don't know how long I walked like that.

All I knew was that it was getting harder to see. It's harder to breathe. It's harder to believe I could still win this.

And then the path forked.

I froze.

Left? Right?

I didn't remember. The rain had washed away every footprint I could've

followed. Everything around me looked unfamiliar now.

I stared in both directions, heart pounding, soaked to the bone, and completely unsure.

I picked one.

And I walked.

But the trees got denser, the light dimmer.

I chose the wrong path.

I'm lost.

The sun was gone.

And so was the hope of finishing this test.

I failed.

My hands shook as I leaned against the trunk of an old tree, its bark rough and slick from the rain.

It was so cold.

I bit the inside of my cheek hard, trying to stop the tremble in my jaw.

Don't cry. You've made it this far. Don't break now.

But the forest was so quiet. Too quiet.

And the dark... it reminded me of another forest.

Another night.

I closed my eyes, and suddenly, I was small again. My knees scraped. My arms wrapped around me. My arms muffled my sobs as I tried to disappear into the shadows.

I was hiding from the ones who hurt my Mama and brother.

I remember hugging myself so tight it hurt, hoping they wouldn't find me. Hoping my father would come and save me.

But he didn't come.

And I cried until I couldn't anymore.

Just like now.

I sank down onto the mud, hugging my knees to my chest as the sky cracked again with thunder. My clothes clung to my skin, my hair dripping over my face.

"I'm trying," I whispered, my voice cracking. "I'm trying so hard..."

But sometimes...

Sometimes, it doesn't matter how much strength you gather.

Sometimes, the weight is too heavy.

Sometimes, the cold gets in.

And sometimes, no matter how much you want to believe everything will be fine... you can't help but break down.

The tears spilled freely now, hot and fast against the cold of the rain. I covered my mouth with my hand, trying to quiet the sounds, but they came anyway.

Soft, aching sobs that I couldn't stop.

I was crying like the child I used to be.

Alone.

Lost.

Afraid.

"Is this your new method now?"

The voice cut through the rain like a blade. Cold. Sharp. Familiar.

"Crying alone in the forest? What—hoping the storm will do the job for you?"

I froze.

That voice...

I slowly looked up, heart pounding in my chest.

Through the curtain of rain, his figure stood tall—dark coat soaked, hair plastered to his forehead. He looked like he had been running.

Darius Vane.

He was back.

And he looked furious.

He walked toward me with slow, deliberate steps.

His golden eyes locked onto mine with a fire that burned through the storm.

"I should've known," he said, his voice laced with venom. "You push yourself too far. Again. You get injured. Get lost. Collapse. Is this what you do? You think if you keep playing on the edge, d*ath might finally take you?"

I didn't answer.

"Let me be clear, Elira," he snapped, stopping just before me. His voice was low now, dangerous. "You don't get to escape that way. D*ath isn't your way out. Not from me. Not from this."

His words should've scared me. I should have feared him.

But I didn't.

Because right now, I didn't care about his harsh words.

All I cared about was that he was back.

And the dream I had, where he was there, where he saved me—

Finally, I wasn't alone anymore.

Something inside me broke.

Before I could think. Before I could stop myself...

I stood on shaky, bruised legs and closed the space between us.

And I hugged him.

I threw my arms around his neck and buried my face against his shoulder, trembling.

He didn't move.

His entire body went rigid under my touch.

But I didn't let go.

I held him tighter. Not because I was strong—

But because I was falling apart.

And I needed someone to hold onto.

"I don't care what you think," I whispered, my voice cracking. "B-but thank you for coming here... for finding me even if you hate me. Even if you're only here to make sure I don't escape you through d*ath..."

I clung to him harder.

"T-thank you, Darius."

Darius didn't answer right away, I was expecting he would push me away.

But...he didn't.

His arms stayed stiff at his sides.

The rain poured harder, soaking through what little was left dry between us. I could barely feel my fingers anymore.

The silence stretched too long.

"A-Are we going h-home now?" I asked, my teeth chattering so hard the words barely formed.

He didn't reply.

Instead, he moved.

His coat dropped from his shoulders in one fluid motion. Warm, thick, and far too big for me, it draped over my shivering form before I could even react.

I blinked up at him, lips parted.

Then, without warning, he bent down, slipped an arm beneath my knees, the other behind my back, and lifted me off the muddy ground like I weighed nothing.

"W-Wait—" I tried, weakly pushing against his chest, but my limbs barely moved.

He didn't look at me.

He didn't say a word.

His gaze remained forward, jaw clenched, soaked hair clinging to his brow as he carried me through the rain like he couldn't stand another second of me lying there.

But his grip...

It wasn't harsh.

It was steady. Careful.

Protective.

I rested my head against his chest, the exhaustion crashing into me all at once. My ankle throbbed, my skin burned with cuts, and my whole body shook uncontrollably beneath his coat.

Commented [Ma1]:

My vision blurred.

The trees around us smeared into shadows, the world tilting slightly.

The side effects Damon warned me about...

They're here.

It's hitting now.

Hard.

I tried to look up at him again and saw the cold, cruel Lycan King who once told me I was perfect to use and break.

But he felt different now.

What I saw now was something else.

A man with rain dripping from his lashes, arms wrapped around me like I was something worth saving.

Something he refused to let go of.

I thought he would bring me back home, but he didn't.

When I looked around, Darius had already stepped into a cave, still carrying me in his arms.

The rain roared outside, echoing like a storm trapped in a shell. Inside, the air was damp and cold, the shadows clinging to the walls like they'd been waiting for someone to return.

He crouched near a dry corner and set me down carefully.

The moment my back touched the stone floor, I reached for him.

My fingers wrapped tightly around his wrist, trembling.

"W-Where are you going?" I whispered.

"You need warmth or you're going to freeze," he muttered, pulling the coat more snugly around my shoulders. "Let go, Elira."

"I d-don't want to..."

He paused.

"Don't leave me." My voice cracked. I didn't mean for it to sound so desperate, but it came out that way anyway. "Please."

Darius froze.

In the shadows, I couldn't see his face.

All I could see was the rain-slicked hair falling over his brow, and I could feel his chest's steady rise and fall.

He didn't move away.

He didn't speak for a moment.

Then finally...

"I'm not leaving. I'll just be right here," he said.

The words were quiet. Cold. It was like he was losing patience with me.

But it was enough.

"Just stay here," he added, voice low and rough like the storm outside.

I let go of him.

I curled into the coat he gave me, letting my body sink into the lingering warmth.

Even if he wasn't holding me anymore, I could still feel the safety of his presence.

After a few minutes, I heard the soft scratch of a lighter, followed by a flicker of orange light. Sparks danced in the dark, catching on the smallest twigs.

He shielded the fire with his hands, coaxing it to life.

Slowly, the cave began to glow.

Not much, but enough.

The firelight lit his face, casting golden shadows over his sharp cheekbones, and the quiet tension still etched into his features.

He looked colder in the firelight. Distant.

Then... I don't know if I was hallucinating, but I swear I'd seen this before.

A younger version of him.

Just like this.

Making a fire for me in a cave.

"H-Have we met before?" I asked softly.