

Chapter 11: Grumpy Dragon, Gentle Vampire

GIRL'S POV

Everything felt heavy. My limbs, my eyelids, even the breath caught in my chest.

Was I still sinking?

There was darkness, velvety and endless. But far above, I remembered a light. A ball of fire in the sky.

Then I felt hands—strong ones—pulling me from the cold. Moments later, warmth enveloped me. It was strange, yet somehow familiar.

It didn't make sense—none of it did. Maybe it was a dream. Maybe I was still drowning. Or maybe I'd crossed into some place where people go when they die. I couldn't tell anymore. So I let the darkness, the warmth, wash over me completely.

I stirred after what felt like an eternity. My throat burned. My chest ached. My skin tingled with cold. But I wasn't dead.

I was wrapped in something dry, thick, and warm. Blankets.

Slowly, I cracked my eyes open.

My vision was blurred at first, but when it cleared, a familiar face hovered above me, framed by wet strands of black hair and a jaw clenched with something I couldn't name. I blinked, half-convinced I was hallucinating. But he was there. Kierygan.

I looked away, avoiding his eyes, and shifted to my side. That's when I noticed Evander, kneeling beside the bed.

I heard the low rumble before I recognized his voice. "Glad you're awake," Kierygan said.

But he didn't look, or sound, glad at all. His

brows were drawn, his jaw tight. And those eyes—always hard to read—still managed to cut right through me. So I stayed quiet.

Kierygan folded his arms. “Do you have a death wish, girl?”

I tried to open my mouth, but my lips were trembling too much. Instead, I bit down on them.

“You’re free to roam the palace grounds,” he said. “In fact, I encourage it. But I didn’t expect you to wander that far. What were you thinking?”

His voice never rose, but it didn’t have to. It frightened me all the same.

I swallowed hard, summoning what little courage I had. “I’m sorry. I... I didn’t mean to,” I began, already stumbling over the words. “I just... I was...”

I didn’t get to finish. Evander’s voice broke

in, to my relief. Because the truth was, I didn't know how to explain it. Not without sounding foolish. Not without making Kierygan even angrier than he already seemed.

"It's alright, girl," Evander said gently.

"Alright?" Kierygan snapped, making me flinch. "If I hadn't come back a day early, she'd be a corpse under the ice, and you wouldn't even know."

Evander stood, his expression tightening. "I'm just saying, maybe don't scold the girl who nearly drowned. She's already frightened enough."

Kierygan scoffed. "You're right," he said coldly, pacing a few steps before turning on him. "I shouldn't fault her. Because it's your fault! You were supposed to watch her!"

Kierygan and Evander continued shouting at each other. I stopped listening to what

they said. Their voices blurred into noise: sharp, angry sounds that scraped against something raw inside me. One blamed the other. The other argued back. Neither backing down.

And it was all because of me.

They were fighting over something / did. Something foolish.

Somehow, it bothered me more than the Mistress' punishments. More than Master's belt. This was worse. This shame, this gnawing guilt twisting inside me. I couldn't take it.

I wished they would just punish me already, just get it over with.

I curled in on myself, pressing my hands over my ears, squeezing my eyes shut as if I could will it all away.

Stop. Stop. Stop. I kept repeating in my

head, because I couldn't bring myself to say it out loud.

"Will you two knock it off!" a voice that wasn't mine cut in, saying the words I couldn't. "You're scaring the poor girl."

Just like that, the shouting stopped.

I opened my eyes slowly.

The first thing I saw was a flicker of light—crackling threads of energy dancing across my skin, vanishing as the bracelet drank them in. Then, the soft sound of approaching footsteps.

A woman with dark, beautiful skin stepped into view beside me. Her dark hair was swept into a neat bun, and her warm brown eyes held a steady, quiet kindness. She crouched in front of me, her voice gentle when she spoke.

"It's all right," she said with a calm smile. "

Forgive these two brutes.”

She leaned a little closer and added softly, “I’m Danaiah. I’m a healer.”

Danaiah’s hand reached out slowly, her fingers aglow with a soft, pearly shimmer. The light pulsed gently as she hovered her palm above my chest, then my forehead, then down the length of my arms. It didn’t burn, it soothed.

“Hm,” she murmured, her brow knitting slightly as she worked. “No signs of hypothermia... surprising, considering she’s little more than skin and bones.”

I dared a glance at her face. I didn’t understand what she meant, but there was no judgment in her expression. Just quiet puzzlement, like someone stumbling across something unexpected, but not alarming.

“She seems stable,” Danaiah said at last,

glancing over her shoulder at the others. "Just exhausted. No fever, no broken bones. Honestly... it's remarkable."

Then her gaze returned to me, softer now. "How old are you, child?"

I hesitated, my lips parting but no words came. I gave a small shake of my head.

Danaiah's eyes widened slightly. "You don't know?"

"No," I whispered, lowering my gaze. "I'm sorry."

She gave my shoulder a gentle pat. "That's quite all right. There's no need to apologize."

With a quiet exhale, she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, her eyes still studying me. "You look around fourteen or fifteen," she said thoughtfully, then frowned. "But I can't be certain. You're far too thin... clearly malnourished."

Her gaze shifted toward Kierygan, and her voice took on a firmer edge. "She needs proper care. Years without proper food, sunlight, or movement must have stunted her growth."

Kierygan didn't respond right away. I still couldn't bring myself to look at him.

After a moment, Danaiah stood and gave a small nod. "I'll check on you again later," she said, then turned and walked out, her footsteps fading down the hall.

Silence settled once more.

Then Kierygan walked to the window and pulled the chair from my table. He dragged it to the other side of the bed, opposite Evander, and sat down.

He narrowed his eyes at me, and I braced myself.

"Tell me again how you ended up on the

lake," he demanded. "This time, I want a clearer account."

I swallowed hard, trying to gather my thoughts, to give him the kind of explanation he wanted.

"I was waiting for him," I said softly, glancing at Evander. "He was supposed to take me to Ashteryn. But when he didn't come... I thought I'd go on my own."

Kierygan shot Evander a look that could've turned him to stone. Evander just lifted a shoulder in a silent shrug.

"Continue," Kierygan said, eyes fixed on me again.

I looked down at my hands, unable to meet his gaze. "Then... Mirael called out to me. She said she wanted to spend time together. She took me somewhere quiet." I hesitated, remembering the secret she offered me. The butterfly. Did that need to

stay hidden, too?

"I followed a butterfly," I admitted. "I didn't realize I'd wandered onto a frozen lake... I didn't know. I'm sorry."

Evander knelt beside the bed again, his brows drawn together. "A butterfly?" he asked. "In winter? That's... unusual. There shouldn't be any flying around this time of year."

Panic fluttered in my chest. Did he think I made it up? "I swear I'm telling the truth," I said quickly, clutching the blanket tighter.

He shook his head gently and brushed a loose strand of hair from my face. "No, no, sweetheart," he murmured, tapping a finger lightly against the tip of my nose. "I didn't say you were. It's just... strange, that's all."

His gentle voice, his kind eyes and smile made the cold in my chest begin to ease.

But on the other side of the bed, Kierygan still looked anything but calm. Worse, he looked furious. I couldn't tell if it was because of me, or because of Evander.

Kierygan finally stood and looked down at me. "I'll take you to Ashteryn tomorrow," he said, voice firm, but eyes locked on Evander. "It's the only way to be sure you'll get there. Safely."

Evander's head snapped toward him. "I'll take her."

"You already messed up once," Kierygan shot back. "I'm not risking it again."

Without waiting for a reply, Kierygan turned and stalked toward the door. But before stepping out, he glanced back. First at me, then at Evander, still kneeling beside the bed. "The girl will rest now," he said, like it was an order.

Evander smiled softly and leaned in. "Don't

mind that old, grumpy dragon," he whispered. "Kierygan's just being... well, Kierygan."

He gave me a wink and that bright, easy grin of his—the kind that made the room feel lighter. I couldn't help it. I smiled back.

But when I risked a glance at Kierygan, I froze. He looked like he might start breathing smoke. I quickly wiped the smile off my face.

He held the door open, impatient. "Now, Evander."

Evander's smile widened, and I had to force myself not to smile again. At last, he rose to his feet and strolled out, all calm and unbothered.

Kierygan shut the door behind him with a firm, final click, saying nothing more.

