

Dressed to Dance

The training field looks like hell's playground, with shifters of every size and shape stretching, rolling their shoulders, and jogging the perimeter. Wolves crack their necks, lions flex their claws, a bear shifter roars and drops into push-ups that rattle the ground. Kael spots me instantly, waving like we're best friends. His grin is so wide I want to smack it off his face. He jogs over, his eyes roaming up and down my body before he whistles low. "You're training in that?" I follow his gaze, grimacing at my pleated skirt, blazer, and worst of all, the heels clicking against the packed dirt. "Lovely," I mutter. He snorts, jerking his chin toward the squat stone building just off the field. "Go grab a kit. Trust me, you'll want it." I don't want it, but I fear I will need it. The kit is worse than the uniform: tight black shorts that barely hit mid-thigh and a thin sports bra that leaves far too much skin exposed. Every scar I've ever tried to hide is suddenly on display. The worst of them burn across my back, memories lashing me harder than the humans ever had. Being caught, stripped, whipped and used. I shove the memories down, lift my chin high, and walk back out to the field. The coach, a hulking shifter with a shaved head and arms like tree trunks, looks me up and down, unimpressed. "Are you sure you're in the right class, little one?" Snickers ripple through the crowd. Kael slides in close, slinging an arm over my shoulders like it's the most natural thing in the world. My whole body flinches, and I shove him off with a sharp jerk.

The coach's brows rise at that, a flicker of interest sparking. "Good. You'll need that fight. Today we're doing physical combat. No magic. No shifting. Just your bodies." His voice booms across the field. "Pierce. Rivers. Demonstration." The laughter hits like a wave. Snide comments, jeers, jokes about how long I'll last before Kael flattens me. Kael himself

just grins, rolling his shoulders, eyes sparkling with amusement like he's been waiting all day for this. I step forward, chin high, my heart pounding. As I move to face him, the sun catches my bare back, and the laughter falters. Gasps ripple through the crowd, sharp and sudden, followed by grimaces. Even Kael's smirk slips for a moment, his auburn-flecked eyes flicking over the scars carved deep into my skin. Coach frowns at the students. "What is it? What are you all gawking at?" I stop, turn my back to him, and let him see. The scars tell the story better than I ever could, angry welts crisscrossing my skin, proof of pain I've survived. The field goes silent, and Kael's smirk doesn't return. The silence drags, heavy and uncomfortable. Dozens of eyes burn into my back, and for once, it isn't hunger or mockery; it's worse. It's Pity, curiosity and horror. My chest tightens, heat creeping up my neck. I hate it. I hate their gawking, their whispers, their grimaces like I'm some broken thing on display.

From the side of the field, a tall boy steps forward, his stride steady and unhurried. Broad shoulders fill out a loose white training shirt, the sleeves rolled carelessly to his elbows. Blond hair sticks up like he hasn't bothered with it, and his golden eyes are calm, steady like stormlight caught in human form. Without a word, he pulls the shirt over his head, muscles rippling as he peels the fabric free. He holds it out to me with the faintest smile tugging at his lips. "For you," he says simply. His voice is low, warm, carrying no judgment, only... understanding. I stare at him, stunned. Then at the shirt in his hand. The silence of the field shifts, curiosity buzzing as sharp as the scars still burning across my back. I swallow, reaching for the shirt with careful fingers. "Thanks," I mutter, my voice rougher than I mean.

He doesn't comment. He simply waits until I pull it on, the soft fabric falling low enough to hide the marks. Only then does his smile widen, a

quiet, reassuring curve that steadies something in me I hadn't realised was shaking. For the first time since stepping onto the field, I don't feel naked. I am grateful. Truly grateful for that. The shirt hangs loose on me, soft and warm, and I tug the hem down further before anyone else can get another eyeful of the scars. My pulse still thuds painfully in my ears, but at least the whispers have dulled. The teacher clears his throat, snapping the class's attention back to him. His expression is unreadable, though the faint crease between his brows says plenty. "Enough gawking," he barks, voice cutting across the field. "This is combat training, not story hour. Pierce, Rivers, into position. We're going to demonstrate how to take down an opponent smaller than you." A ripple of laughter surges through the students again, though it's thinner this time, more cautious. Kael's smirk comes back in full force. He flexes his hands, rolling his shoulders as he prowls into the circle, his auburn eyes locked on me like a predator that's just been permitted to pounce. "Ready to dance, trouble?" he drawls. I square my shoulders, tug the borrowed shirt tighter, and step up to face him. My heart hammers, but I force my chin high. "Try me." Kael's grin widens. "Oh, I plan to." Coach crosses his arms, nodding once. "Good. Begin."

The teacher's command barely leaves his mouth when the world flips. One second, I'm standing across from Kael, chin lifted, ready to try at least. The next, the ground comes up and smacks me in the face so hard stars burst behind my eyes. Pain shoots through my jaw, my lip splitting against the packed dirt. I blink, stunned, the taste of iron on my tongue. Laughter roars around the circle. Kael stands over me, grinning, hands loose at his sides like he hasn't even broken a sweat. "Lesson one, Rivers," he says, voice dripping with amusement. "Don't blink." Heat surges in my chest,

humiliation burning hotter than the pain. I spit blood into the dirt and push myself up onto my elbows, glaring up at him. He cocks his head, that wicked grin stretching wider. "C'mon, Rivers. You gonna lie there all day?" The snickers of the crowd sting sharper than the ache in my face. I swear to myself then that I am not going to give them the satisfaction of seeing me stay down. It's time to dance.



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