

Pet or Stray?

Kael doesn't stop with the first hit. Every time I get to my feet, he puts me right back in the dirt. A sweep of his leg, a shove to my shoulder, a flick of his wrist that sends me sprawling again. He doesn't strike to hurt, not really.

I have no broken bones, no cracked ribs, but he never gives me room to breathe and never gives me a chance to so much as lift my fists. The whole time he grins, cocky and careless, his auburn eyes sparkling with mischief. The crowd loves it. Heat flames in my cheeks, the laughter scraping raw against my ears. By the fifth tumble into the dirt, my pride burns hotter than the bruises. I stay down, chest heaving, glaring up at him with all the fury I can muster. "Had enough already?" Kael teases, brushing imaginary dust from his shorts. "And here I thought you were scrappy." Coach's voice cuts in before I can spit back a retort. "Enough. That's the point made. Pair off now, find someone of the opposite size. Let's see how well you handle adapting." Students scatter, calling partners, already sizing each other up. Kael sighs dramatically, then crouches down in front of me, hand extended, grin still firmly in place. "C'mon, Rivers. Don't pout. I'll even let you hit me next time." I clench my fists in the dirt, ready to slap his hand away. Before I can, a shadow falls over both of us. A broad shoulder slams into Kael's as someone moves past, it's firm enough to make Kael stumble half a step. He stops just long enough to glance down at Kael, his voice low and even. "You've had your fun. Time to actually teach the girl something now, instead of just picking on her."

Kael's grin falters, surprise flashing in his eyes before he barks out a laugh.

"Oh, look. The dragon's got himself a pet to protect. You look after her now, Evander." Evander, the one who gave me his shirt, doesn't rise to

the bait. He extends his hand to me, his golden eyes meeting mine with quiet understanding. Evander's hand is warm and steady, pulling me up like I weigh nothing. I stumble, brushing dirt from my knees, then freeze when I actually look at him. He is massive. Taller than Kael by at least half a head, shoulders broad enough to block the sun. His shirt still hangs loose on my frame, but on him... gods, the sheer size of him makes it clear he doesn't need it. His chest is carved muscle, his skin faintly dusted with sweat that catches the light. Everything about him screams strength, but not the careless, playful kind Kael wields. This is controlled and grounded. "Here." His voice is low, calm, as he presses a cool bottle of water into my hand. I blink, fumbling with the cap. "Thanks." His gaze flicks over me, lingering just long enough to check my split lip and dirt-streaked arms. "You alright?" I nod too quickly. "I've had worse." His eyes soften, but he doesn't push. Instead, he steps back, motioning to the circle of dirt between us. "Alright then. Let's start simple. Show me how you'd block if I came at you." I raise my hands awkwardly, like I'm about to slap him instead of defend myself. Evander's lips twitch like he wants to smile, but he keeps his tone even. "Not bad. But you'll break your wrists like that. Here..." He reaches out, gently adjusting my arms, shifting my weight onto the balls of my feet. "Elbows tucked. Hands up. Don't flinch from me. Watch me."

His touch is careful, never lingering longer than necessary, but my skin buzzes all the same. He steps back, lifts his hands. "Okay. I'm going to move slowly. You block, then push me away. Ready?"

"Not really." He chuckles, the sound low and steady. "You'll be fine." For the next ten minutes, he actually teaches me. Slow, patient demonstrations

on how to deflect a shove, duck under a swing, and shift my weight to avoid toppling over every time someone touches me. He corrects me gently, steadying my balance when I falter. For once, I'm not the punchline and when I manage to shove him back even half an inch, his smile lights his whole face. "There. See? You can do it." I find myself smiling back, chest tight. "Maybe." He shakes his head, still grinning. "No maybe about it."

I'm still catching my breath, sweat sticking my hair to my forehead, when a familiar voice cuts through the noise. "Well," Kael drawls, striding over with that wolfish grin plastered across his face. "Did you take care of my stray for me?" I groan, wiping my face with the hem of Evander's borrowed shirt. "Your stray?" Kael winks. "Don't get cranky, Rivers. It's a term of endearment." Evander's lips curve, calm and unbothered, but there's steel in his voice when he answers. "Your stray? You mean my pet, and she's fine here, in my capable hands." The words roll off his tongue so casually, so sure, that I almost forget to breathe. Kael barks out a laugh, clapping Evander on the shoulder. "Gods, you've got some bite today, Drayke. Careful, or I'll think you're actually serious." Evander's golden eyes flick to me, then back to Kael. His smile stays steady. "Who says I'm not?" The air between them sparks with something playful and sharp-edged, but not hostile. A back-and-forth that speaks of years of friendship. Kael grins wider, tossing me a wink. "Guess the stray's got herself a dragon babysitter then. Blink twice if he gets too protective, Rivers." I roll my eyes, tugging at the shirt. "I'd rather a babysitter than someone who thinks combat training is the same as kick-the-stray." Kael clutches his chest like I've wounded him. "Ouch. That one cut deep."

The bell rings, and I grab my bag from the dirt, sling it over my shoulder, and make a beeline for the path that cuts back toward the dorms. Kael and Evander walk a little ahead of me, shoulder to shoulder. Just when I think I'll get away without another jab, Kael glances over his shoulder, smirk already in place. "Aw. Looks like my stray's following me home." I roll my eyes so hard it hurts. "I'm not following you. My dorm is that way." Evander's brows lift, his stride slowing as he turns back to look at me properly. "Wait, you're in there?"

"Yep." A look of amusement sparks in Evander's eyes. "Well, isn't that convenient?" Kael drawls, clapping Evander on the back. "Means you get to keep your pet close for comfort." I sputter. "I am not anyone's pet." Kael just grins wider, unbothered. "Sure, sure. Keep telling yourself that, Rivers." Evander's lips curve faintly, but he doesn't contradict his friend. His gaze lingers on me a moment longer, steady and unreadable, before he turns back toward the dorms. I exhale hard, dragging my feet along the path. The universe clearly has a twisted sense of humor.

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