411 WEIGHT OF WORRY

Jasmine woke with a start, her body tense before her mind could catch up. The dim morning light filtered through the animal-hide curtains, casting soft shadows across the stone walls of her room. The fire in the hearth had burned low, leaving only a bed of glowing embers, but she still felt cold. A deep, aching unease gnawed at her stomach, the same one that had plagued her the night before. 1

She turned onto her side, pressing a hand against her belly, feeling the faint flutter of life inside her. The baby was still. Sleeping, perhaps. Unbothered by the storm that had raged through the night or the fear that now curled around Jasmine's heart.

Xaden should have been back by now.

The thought pressed heavy against her chest. He had left days ago, leading his warriors to handle the threat of the rival pack. He was strong—unmatched in battle—but something inside her whispered that something had gone terribly wrong.

Jasmine sat up slowly, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. Her body ached, not from

exertion but from the tension that had settled into her bones.

A soft knock on the door made her lift her head. Before she could answer, the door creaked open, and Nia stepped inside. The older woman's gray-streaked hair was pulled back into a thick braid, and her expression was unreadable, though her sharp eyes missed nothing.

"You should eat," Nia said simply, setting down a wooden tray on the small table near the hearth. Steam rose from a bowl of thick stew, but the sight of food only tightened the knot in Jasmine's stomach.

"I'm not hungry," Jasmine murmured.

Nia sighed. "That doesn't matter. You need to eat for the baby."

Jasmine exhaled sharply. That was the only argument that ever worked on her. She stood, draping a shawl over her shoulders before crossing the room. She dipped a spoon into the stew, taking a slow bite, even as her thoughts churned.

"I need to speak to Erik," she said after a moment.

Nia gave her a knowing look. "Worrying will not change anything."

Jasmine met her gaze. "But doing nothing will drive me mad."

Nia said nothing more, but the older woman's silence held a quiet approval.

A Second's Reassurance

Erik was standing near the pack's main gathering area, speaking with a group of warriors when Jasmine found him. His dark hair was tied back, and his face was lined with exhaustion, but his stance was firm. He was the kind of man who carried his duties like armor—unshakable, steady.

Jasmine quickened her pace as she approached, her heart hammering.

"Erik."

He turned, his brows lifting in surprise before his expression softened. "Jasmine," he greeted. "You should be resting."

She ignored that. "Have you heard from Xaden?"

Erik's jaw tightened, just slightly, before he forced a reassuring smile. "Not yet, but we

knew the journey might take longer than expected. The storm last night would have slowed them down."

Jasmine studied his face. He was trying to soothe her, but she could see the faint flicker of concern in his eyes. He was worried too, even if he wouldn't say it.

"What if something happened to him?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Xaden is the strongest warrior I know," Erik said firmly. "He has survived worse. If there was a fight, he would have won."

Jasmine wanted to believe that. Needed to believe that. But the feeling of dread that had clung to her since last night refused to ease.

"I just... I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong," she admitted.

Erik exhaled through his nose, crossing his arms. "Your instincts are sharp, Jasmine. But until we have reason to believe otherwise, we must trust that Xaden will return."

Jasmine swallowed, nodding, even though it did little to ease the weight pressing against her chest.

A few of the warriors had begun to glance her

way, their curiosity evident. A pregnant woman, speaking so freely to the Alpha's second-in-command, was enough to draw attention.

Erik must have noticed too because he gave her a small nod. "Go inside, Jasmine. Get some rest."

She knew there would be no answers here. No reassurance strong enough to quell the storm inside her. But still, she forced herself to step away.

The Afternoon Lessons

By the time midday arrived, Jasmine had exhausted herself with worry. Her pacing had driven Nia to the edge of patience, and when the older woman finally turned to her with a firm look, Jasmine knew what was coming. 1

"Enough," Nia said. "If you are going to be restless, at least put that energy to use."

Jasmine arched a brow. "And how do you suggest I do that?"

Nia pointed to the wooden writing board set near the hearth. "Your lessons."

Jasmine sighed, running a hand through her hair. Learning to read and write had never been something she imagined for herself. As a slave,

she had never been allowed such knowledge. But now, under Xaden's rule, Nia had insisted she learn.

Jasmine hesitated before finally moving to sit on the cushioned bench near the writing board. Nia placed a small piece of charcoal in her hand.

"Write your name," the older woman instructed.

Jasmine inhaled deeply, pressing the charcoal to the surface. Her strokes were careful, deliberate. J-A-S-M-I-N-E. The letters were still uneven, but the sight of them stirred something warm in her chest.

"Good," Nia said approvingly. "Again."

Jasmine repeated the motion, the act forcing her to focus on something other than her gnawing fear. The quiet scratch of charcoal against the board was soothing in its own way.

For a while, Nia continued guiding her, instructing her to write simple words, correcting her when necessary. The afternoon stretched on, the tension in Jasmine's chest easing just slightly as she lost herself in the rhythm of learning.

At one point, she paused, glancing up at Nia. "Why do you care so much about me learning this?"

Nia met her gaze, her expression unreadable for a moment. Then she said, "Because knowledge is power. And power is something no one can take from you."

Jasmine swallowed, looking back down at her work.

Power.

She had spent her life being powerless. A woman, a former slave, a mate to a man who still saw the world in terms of dominance and strength. And yet, here she was, shaping words with her own hands, carving out something that belonged to her alone.

For the first time that day, the weight of worry lifted just slightly.

Xaden was still out there. She still didn't know if he was safe.

But here, in this moment, she had something to hold on to.

And sometimes, that had to be enough.

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The afternoon sun hung lower in the sky as Jasmine stretched her fingers, flexing away the ache from gripping the charcoal. Her writing lessons had been long, but they had given her something to focus on, a brief escape from the gnawing worry about Xaden.

As she gathered her things and made her way back toward her room, a familiar voice called out to her.

"Jasmine!"

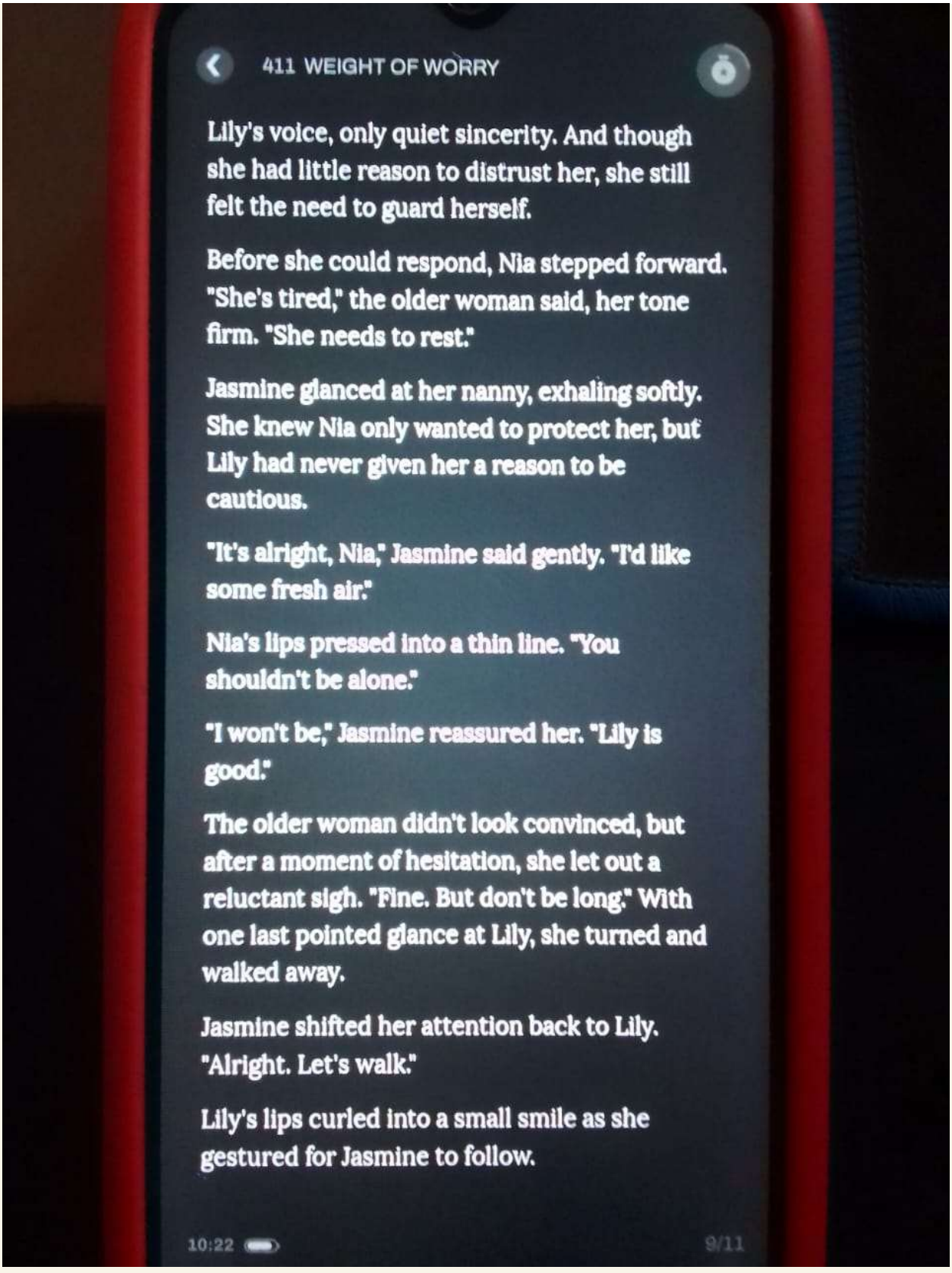
She turned to see Lily approaching, her long auburn hair braided over one shoulder. Dressed in a simple, elegant tunic, she moved with effortless grace, her green eyes warm as they settled on Jasmine.

Jasmine stiffened instinctively. Lily was Xaden's first mate, the woman who had once held his full attention before Jasmine entered his life. Yet, despite the situation, Lily had never treated her cruelly. In fact, she had always been... kind.

Still, Jasmine remained wary.

Lily stopped a few steps away, tilting her head slightly. "Would you care for a walk?"

Jasmine hesitated. There was no hostility in


411 WEIGHT OF WORRY
Lily's voice, only quiet sincerity. And though she had little reason to distrust her, she still felt the need to guard herself.
Before she could respond, Nia stepped forward. "She's tired," the older woman said, her tone firm. "She needs to rest."
Jasmine glanced at her nanny, exhaling softly. She knew Nia only wanted to protect her, but Lily had never given her a reason to be cautious.
"It's alright, Nia," Jasmine said gently. "I'd like some fresh air."
Nia's lips pressed into a thin line. "You shouldn't be alone."
"I won't be," Jasmine reassured her. "Lily is good."
The older woman didn't look convinced, but after a moment of hesitation, she let out a reluctant sigh. "Fine. But don't be long." With one last pointed glance at Lily, she turned and walked away.
Jasmine shifted her attention back to Lily. "Alright. Let's walk."
Lily's lips curled into a small smile as she gestured for Jasmine to follow.
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As they strolled past the pack's gathering areas, a breeze swept through the trees, rustling the leaves overhead. For a while, they walked in silence, the only sounds being the distant chatter of warriors and the rhythmic crunch of their footsteps against the dirt path.

Jasmine finally spoke. "Why did you ask me to walk with you?"

Lily glanced at her, amusement flickering in her expression. "Do I need a reason?"

Jasmine lifted a brow. "People don't usually go out of their way to befriend the woman who took their mate."

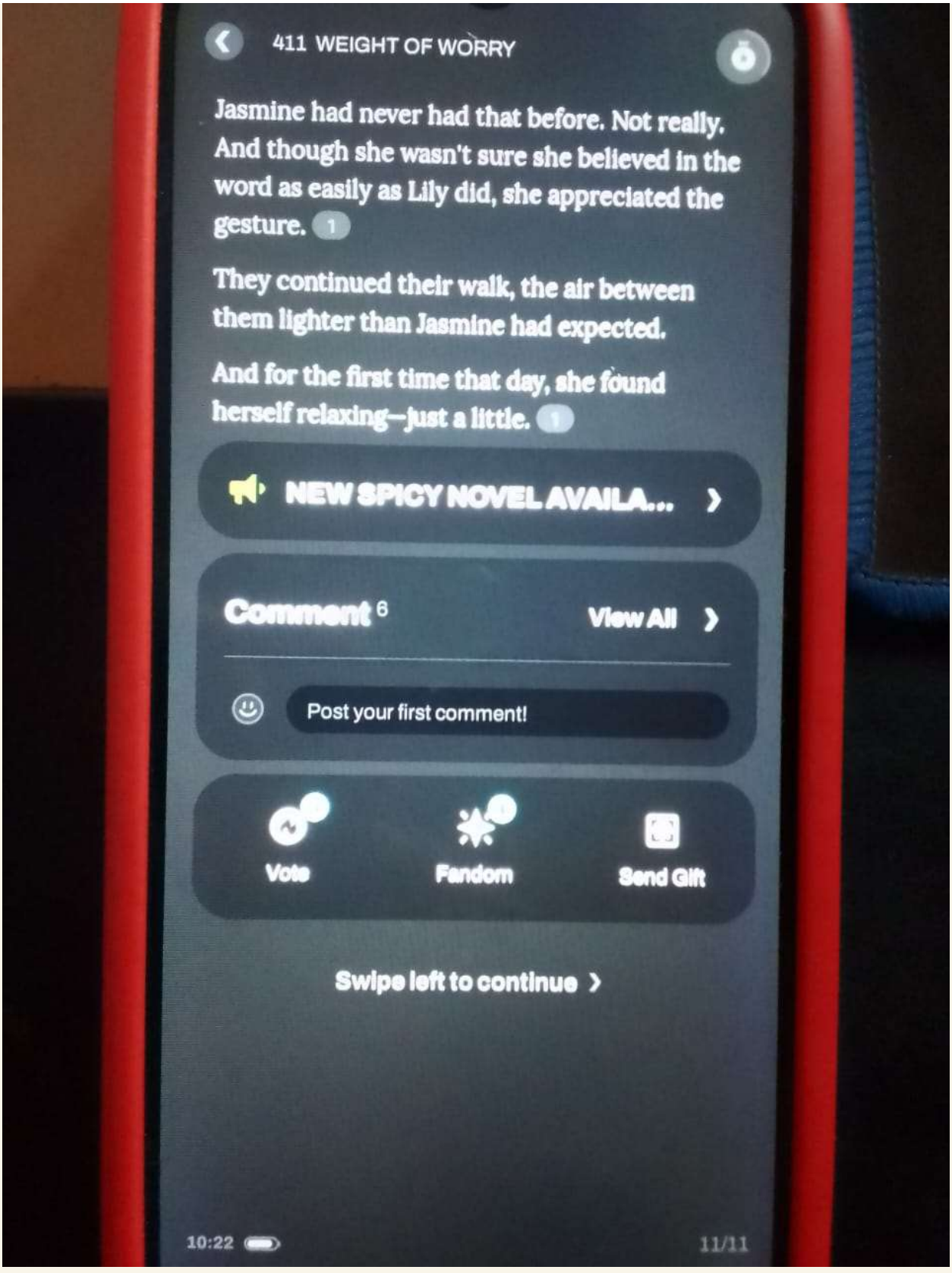
Lily laughed softly. "You didn't take Xaden from me, Jasmine. He made his own choices."

Jasmine looked at her closely. There was no resentment in Lily's voice—just calm acceptance.

"Still," Jasmine murmured, "I wasn't expecting this."

Lily offered a small shrug. "There's no point in hostility. You and I are part of the same pack. That makes us family."

Family.


411 WEIGHT OF WORRY
Jasmine had never had that before. Not really. And though she wasn't sure she believed in the word as easily as Lily did, she appreciated the gesture. 1
They continued their walk, the air between them lighter than Jasmine had expected.
And for the first time that day, she found herself relaxing—just a little. 1
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10:22
11/11