

The Whispers of Ember

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M.F. van Raak - Nijhof

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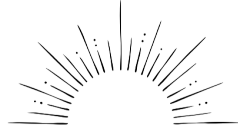
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For my husband
Thank you for listening to every wild idea I ever had.

For my daughter
Never be afraid of new adventures.

"Are you really willing to risk everything you have... for me?"

Chapter 1. The Camp



As the sun slowly slipped behind the mountain peaks, a long shadow crept toward the camp like a predator, and my nerves were getting worse by the second.

Alpha group—Justin’s unit—still hadn’t returned, and night was falling fast. Beta had made it back hours ago, already safe behind the makeshift walls of our little village, probably sorting through whatever supplies they’d managed to collect today.

In our camp, Alpha was in charge of exploration and expanding our territory. Beta focused on gathering essentials—food, water, medicine. Survival basics.

I sat on the stone wall that circled our camp, eyes fixed on the deep green forest. The forest darkened by the second, like it was holding its breath. I let out a sigh. The air felt heavier now, and the silence that followed was so deep, it roared in my ears.

Then—movement. A flicker on the edge of the woods. Five figures emerged from the trees. For a moment, my heart stopped. My breath hitched. But once I saw them clearly, relief surged through me.

Justin was talking to his father, and two others were helping a limping Nolan. The sight of him sent a chill through me—his trousers were soaked in blood, and the pale look on his face said he’d lost a lot more than he was letting on.

Justin had a nasty gash across his cheek. The bleeding had stopped, but the blood had dried dark red—almost black—in streaks along his jaw and neck.

Even before I opened my mouth, Henry started talking.

“It could’ve been a lot worse. Nolan took the brunt of it. We’d reached the ravine to check if Beta could fetch drinking water from there, and that’s when the ground started shaking. We knew it was risky, just didn’t know how much. Justin jumped just in time when a rockslide hit, but Nolan was too slow—got pulled down part of the slope. He lost a lot of blood. Let’s hope Elly can patch him up.”

Over the past few weeks, the dragons had been getting closer for reasons we still didn’t understand. Exploration had become harder, and made Alpha’s missions increasingly dangerous. The mood in the camp had grown grim—so much loss in so little time. We’d lost good people this past year.

As I walked toward my home—a large, reinforced tent with wooden beams for flooring and support—I thought about how Justin had been acting lately. Henry had started relying on him more and more, and as a result, Justin had pulled away from me. He’d sent Caiden—his best friend—after me, like some kind of personal guard dog, to keep me out of trouble.

Every step I took felt heavier. When I turned onto my lane, I noticed a few kids playing nearby, blissfully unaware of the dangers outside the walls. Many of them were orphans, found by Alpha and Beta over the years.

I was nearly at my tent when Caiden appeared from the shadows.

Of course...

I sighed. The exhaustion of the day caught up to me in an instant. I didn’t exactly appreciate him hovering all the time, but fine—there were worse-looking men to be stuck with.

Caiden was undeniably handsome—chiselled jawline, dark brown hair, deep-set eyes that carried a trace of mystery. Half the women in the camp had already fallen for his charm, and he clearly enjoyed the attention. He gave me a crooked smile

and leaned against one of the tent poles, that infuriating sparkle in his eyes already in place.

"Hey there."

One brow arched, I stopped right in front of him. "What do you want, Caiden?" I asked, trying hard not to sound annoyed.

He winked and dropped onto a wooden stump with the arrogance of a man who thought he owned the dirt beneath it, stretching his legs and crossing his ankles.

"Where've you been all day, Aria?" he asked in that fake-innocent tone of his. His eyes gave him away—he already knew the answer.

The past few weeks, Caiden had shown up everywhere I went. Every single place. No matter what my tasks were, he had some excuse to be there. Justin had specifically sent him to watch over me. I knew every trip outside the walls was a risk, but with Caiden hovering, I didn't get a moment to breathe.

"You know damn well where I was," I muttered. "Willow and I spent the morning cutting and marinating the meat she collected yesterday. Made a few cloaks from the hides too. After that, I went to check with Elly if she had enough ingredients for the paralysis salve. And before you ask—no, I didn't leave the camp."

That last sentence had become a routine. Every time I gave him an update, he had to know where I'd gone, who I'd talked to, what I was planning.

"Can you just leave me alone for one day? I'm starting to have nightmares about you," I said, shifting restlessly on my feet. I was bone-tired. I just wanted one moment of peace before grilling Justin.

Caiden laughed and stood, stepping up close—too close—and dropped his voice to a whisper right next to my ear.

“We both know there was a time when your nightmares were dreams.”

I nearly punched him right there, but he slipped away with a smirk and another wink.

“Sleep tight, Aria. Sweet dreams,” he called as he strolled off toward his own tent.

I pressed my fingers to my temples. It hadn’t even been a particularly dramatic day, and yet a headache was already creeping in.

Back inside my tent, I shrugged off my jacket and waited at the entrance, hoping Justin would come by soon. I wanted to hear everything—firsthand.

I grabbed the bread Willow had given me earlier. The meat I brought was cold by now, but it still tasted fine. I brewed some tea and got comfortable.

The ravine where they’d gone was beyond our current territory. I couldn’t stop wondering—had they seen anything new? Were the dragons moving?

It was a while before Justin came back. He glanced my way as he walked toward his tent. Shadowed eyes met mine—worn but searching. The gash on his cheek had been treated—probably Elly’s work.

With a long sigh, he dropped down next to me. I handed him the last bit of meat I’d saved—he always forgot to eat.

“You should get some sleep, little sister,” he said. Most people in the camp were already out cold.

He devoured the food in seconds and gave my shoulder a grateful pat.

“So... how was the ravine? Any sign of dragons? Do you think they’re pulling back?”

Justin chuckled. “You never quit, do you? No, we didn’t see them today. But we got close. And then the rockslide hit.”

He looked uneasy, but I didn't press him. I just nodded, waiting.

"Hopefully you'll sleep well tonight."

I frowned. "Why?"

His answer caught me off guard.

"Because Henry wants to bring you along tomorrow—with Alpha."

...

Justin looked tense as I strapped the two blades to my thighs. He was pacing back and forth while we waited for the others. Clearly, he still wasn't thrilled about the decision. The argument last night had been about whether I should join the expedition.

"Are we really sure it's smart to take Aria with us?"

Henry believed I was ready. And as the leader of the group, he had the final say. A part of me was glad to finally be included officially, but that didn't stop the nervous buzz crawling over my skin. A tight pressure sat heavy on my chest and refused to leave.

Henry sat on a bench against the wall, his face lined with age and looking more worn than usual. He hadn't said much that morning, but when Justin made one last attempt to change his mind, Henry laid a hand on his shoulder and let his head drop in quiet defeat. "There comes a time when you must step forward. I waited to bring Aria into Alpha on your request... but the time's come."

There was a pleading look in Henry's eyes—asking Justin to let it go. But Justin turned away and stormed toward me.

He checked my blades, adjusted my pack silently, like this was the only way he knew to say he cared. Three other men joined us—I only recognized one of them.

James was younger than Henry, long blond hair tied up in a bun on top of his head. His arms were laced with scars—deep, old ones etched into his skin.

People whispered about James in the camp. No one knew where he came from or when he'd joined. But he pulled his weight, so no one asked questions.

Nolan wasn't with us—probably still recovering from his injury.

Justin looked anxious. Honestly? So was I.

“Keep your head up—it'll be fine. If I stay close, does that help a little?”

I gave a weak nod, defeated, and we set off through the gates with the rest of the group. The day was dry, the sun just peeking over the horizon.

My mind wandered as we walked. Justin had been on countless recon trips, but I'd never seen him carry a weapon. Not all dragons were equally dangerous, but every single one had the power to wreck everything in their path.

The question circling my mind: which dragon guarded the ravine—and what kind would it be?

Soon the flat woods gave way to cliffs. The deeper we went, the steeper the walls grew. Rocks everywhere, rising like jagged teeth out of the earth.

We stopped, taking a break on a few large stones. Henry sat beside me, pulling out his canteen.

“Today's just recon. We've seen a red dragon here a few times before—protective of its young, unpredictable. If you see movement on the cliffside, say something. They can camouflage.”

Camouflage? That was new. Every dragon had different powers. Some tracked scent, others could peer into memories. But hiding in plain sight?

That was dangerous.

After a few hours walking the ravine, we turned back. We didn't see any dragons, but later in the afternoon, we heard a roar echoing from the mountains.

When camp came into view, I tapped Justin's shoulder. He glanced over at me.

"Told you nothing would happen." He rolled his eyes, but he smiled.

"Fine, you win. But that means you're coming with us again tomorrow, lady!" We both laughed as we passed through the gates.

Caiden stepped out from the shadows with another guy next to him. I'd seen him around but never spoken to him. He was smaller than Caiden, younger maybe, with bright blond hair and eyes that looked blue from a distance. He smiled—and dimples appeared in his cheeks.

I guess I looked too long, because Caiden caught me. He smirked, raising an eyebrow.

I said goodbye to Justin and walked past Caiden toward Willow—she probably needed help prepping the meat.

"Evening, Aria. Did you like what you saw?" Caiden teased.

I rolled my eyes and shoved his shoulder. The guy next to him laughed—kindly, not mocking.

"You can admit it if you were looking at me, Aria. Wouldn't be the first time." He wiggled his eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes again and left the bunch behind. The adrenaline of the day still lingered. I needed food—and Willow.

Her hut sat near the back wall of the camp, well protected. The warmth of her fire always spilled out like a welcome. The shadows felt heavier here, darker, framing the space like watchful eyes. I could see why Willow chose this spot. She

rarely talked about her past, but something told me she found comfort in the quiet.

I knocked. The door creaked open—Willow stood there, holding a cloth and covered in dust.

“You’re not done yet? I can come back tomorrow morning.”

Missing dinner wasn’t ideal, but I didn’t want to push her.

Willow shook her head. “Don’t worry, I’ve got extra. David and Caiden brought back a deer from the nearby forest.” She handed me a wrapped bundle.

As I turned to leave, something flickered in the shadows. I stared—nothing. Gone already. My paranoia was clearly still in overdrive after a day of rock-watching.

I kissed her cheek and stepped back outside.

Night had fallen completely. Only the candles lining the paths offered any light. It was a perfect reflection of how we often had to make do.

No sign of Caiden, thankfully. When I reached my tent, I spotted Justin sitting outside his own. When I turned to wave, he gave a small nod, then disappeared inside.

Chapter 2. Relief



That night, I wasn't haunted by dreams. The silence ran deep. The air was calm and the soft breeze outside lulled me to sleep within minutes. It was one of those rare nights where the weight of the day melted away, and for the first time in ages, I woke up peacefully as the early light crept gently into my tent.

The sun hadn't climbed far yet, but there was already a soft golden glow filling the space. I stretched and took in a long breath of crisp air, savoring the stillness. It felt good—this quiet—but something still lingered in the back of my mind. Nolan. I wondered how he was doing, whether he felt any better, whether Elly had been able to help him.

After a few minutes of staring at the roof of my tent, I finally got dressed. My hands moved on autopilot, dressing me before my thoughts could catch up.

When I stepped outside, the sun's warmth kissed my skin. The air was still fresh, but the ground had already started soaking in the heat. No wind. Just stillness. One of those mornings where the whole world feels paused, crisp sky above, the mountains clean-cut against the horizon.

The path to the infirmary wasn't long. Elly's practice stood right at the centre of the camp, one of the few stone buildings that remained fully intact. It was always a comfort to walk there knowing it was a place of healing, of hands that knew how to put people back together. Her space was a calm beacon in the middle of all our chaos. The walls were solid, and the scent of herbs and dried flowers always hung in the air like a soft blanket.

The infirmery door was always open to anyone in need. Elly had made sure the space was warm and welcoming, even on the coldest days. The fireplace rarely went cold and the beds were just soft enough to trick your body into feeling okay, even if it was far from it.

“Good morning, Aria!” Everly called, her voice chipper as she busied herself sorting bundles of dried herbs near the entrance. Her basket overflowed with little jars and pouches, hands moving fast as she worked one sprig at a time off a hanging line.

“Hey, Everly,” I answered with a smile. “How are you today?”

Her eyes lit up instantly, always with that shy sparkle that made her look younger than she probably was. She couldn’t have been more than a few years past childhood, but her focus and curiosity were old beyond her age. Always moving, always learning—her hands knew every herb, every root, and every recipe Elly had taught her.

“I’m good!” She beamed as she tucked a lavender sprig into a jar. “Just prepping these for the next few weeks. Elly gave me some extra work to do—but I actually really like it.” She glanced proudly at her nearly full basket. “And you? Any new adventures since yesterday?”

I laughed softly. “Thankfully, no. Quiet day.”

She nodded, going back to her herbs. “Elly’s inside, I’m guessing you’re here for her?”

I nodded and stepped closer. The air was thick with the earthy scent of crushed leaves and sweet flowers, blending with the last cool whispers of morning.

“Yeah, just need to talk to her for a second.”

“She’s in the back,” Everly said cheerfully. “Probably still with her last patient.”

“I’ll wait, thanks,” I replied, and turned toward the door. The wood creaked softly as I pushed it open.

Elly’s practice always had this hush to it. Not empty, not cold—just... calm. The kind that settles over you the moment you walk in. Herbs lined every shelf, bottles full of tinctures and strange pastes were stacked like treasure. The fire in the hearth crackled gently in the corner. It smelled like sage, mint, and something sweet I couldn’t place.

Nolan sat halfway down the room, A book lay open on his lap. He looked better than last time—less pale—but exhaustion still clung to his features. When he saw me, he raised a hand and gave a tired smile.

“Aria,” he said softly, voice warm but with a rasp underneath. “Didn’t expect to see you. Everything okay?”

I smiled and stepped further inside. “Yeah. I just wanted to check on you. How’re you feeling?”

He shrugged, but his eyes said more than his words. “Better than yesterday,” he said. “But healing’s slower than I’d hoped. Elly says I need rest.” He shut the book and set it aside with care.

“That sounds like Elly,” I said with a grin. “She doesn’t miss a thing.”

Nolan chuckled, though it came with a wince. “Yeah, she keeps a sharp eye on me. Not that I mind. Good to have company, too—it gets dull in here.”

I nodded and glanced around the room. It was quiet, almost comforting. “I’m glad I can sit with you for a bit,” I said, dropping into the chair beside him. “You look like you’re healing well.”

His leg was wrapped neatly in white bandages, the kind Elly made herself—soft but strong.

“Looks clean,” I said, leaning in to check. “She’s really done a good job.”

Nolan smiled, that patient kind of smile that only people in recovery seem to have. “Yeah, she’s the best when it comes to this kind of thing. She’s keeping me off my feet—which drives me nuts—but I’ll be back soon enough.”

I was about to answer when Elly walked in carrying a tray. The smell of fresh soup and herbs filled the room instantly. She spotted me right away and smiled, slow and soft.

“Hey, Aria. Keeping this grump company?”

Nolan scoffed, pretending to be insulted, but she just gave him a sweet smile.

“Kidding. You’re one of my most charming patients.”

He laughed, shifting upright. “I try.”

Elly placed the tray on the table beside him, handed him a steaming mug, and raised an eyebrow. “This time, drink the whole thing. These herbs will speed things up.”

Nolan sighed dramatically but took the cup. “Yes, Elly. For my health.”

She grinned, satisfied. “Good. Aria, do you need anything? Or just checking in?”

I shook my head. “Just checking on him.”

Elly nodded and turned back to Nolan. “If he keeps this up, he’ll be back on his feet in a few days. Though no wandering off just yet.”

Nolan sighed again, but this time it was just tired acceptance. “I know. I’ll behave.”

Elly’s gaze softened. “Rest is just as important as action. Let your body do the work it knows how to do.”

He nodded, and I could see he meant it—even if he missed the open air.

“You’ll come back stronger,” I murmured quietly. “And when you do, we’ll go out together.”

He smiled, and I felt a wave of relief settle over me. He’d make it.

I gave his hand a quick squeeze and stood up. The fire crackled, casting odd shadows around the room. Elly followed my gaze for a second but didn’t say anything. Instead, she walked me toward the door.

Outside, the air was brighter, the camp already humming with quiet movement. Elly turned to me.

“Seems like a peaceful day. How are you feeling?”

I offered a small smile. “Tired, but good. You?”

She shrugged. “Same as always—always in motion.” Her eyes drifted toward the center of the camp where people had started their daily chores. “The quiet’s good for us.”

I nodded. “We need this. Especially now.”

Elly paused. “Yeah... but sometimes even in quiet, things appear that we didn’t expect.”

Her words lingered in the air. I didn’t quite know what she meant—but I felt it in my chest, like a warning dressed up as wisdom.

We kept walking.

Chapter 3. Gathering



The days that followed passed in peace, like the world had paused for a breath. Even with the erratic weather—heavy downpours one minute, threatening skies the next—Alpha group’s excursions went smoothly. No new injuries, no unexpected trouble. Just steady, quiet progress. The camp had taken on a kind of calm, almost cozy in its stillness, like everyone could finally breathe again.

That morning, a thick mist rolled over the camp as I stepped out of my tent. The air was crisp and damp, heavy with the scent of wet grass and earth. My breath came out in little puffs as I wrapped my wool scarf tighter around me. Off in the distance, I spotted Justin. He sat on a fallen log near the campfire, carving at a piece of wood with slow, focused strokes. His face was calm, fully concentrated. The slash across his cheek still showed—deep red and angry-looking—but it didn’t seem to bother him. Honestly, it kind of made him look more dangerous. Rugged. Stronger, even.

I lingered for a moment, caught by the quiet way he moved—so different from the chaos of the last few days. Then I turned away and headed out. The ground squelched softly under my boots, still soaked from the night’s rain. I had tied my hair up high in a quick ponytail and thrown on my oldest clothes. The blouse I wore had patches and stitches in every corner. The fabric had gone thin from years of use, soft as linen but fraying at the edges. No way was I ruining the new clothes Larah had made me—not just to dig around in the mud.

I made my way to the gathering spot where Willow was already waiting for me. She carried a woven basket over one arm and was busy tightening her boots. Her face lit up when