

## Chapter Thirty-Five: The Thread That Binds

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Phera POV:

The shopping district of the Red Moon Pack was alive with the chatter of its inhabitants, awash in the soft glow of the setting sun. The air held the rustic scent of pine and damp soil, as though the natural world was ever-so-gently reminding us that even in our civilization, we were never far from the wild.

Beside me, Newmara, my older sister, pushed a cart laden with a variety of items, from chic dresses to home essentials. Her eyes skimmed over a display of fragrant bath oils, yet she hesitated to add any to the cart.

"How are you and Adam?" I asked cautiously, trying to navigate the palpable awkwardness that hung between us like a heavy fog.

She touched her neck where a delicate bonding mark lay—a mark that signified her lifelong commitment to her mate, Adam.

"We're good, Phera. We're very good."

"That's great to hear," I replied, although the words tasted bittersweet in my mouth.

My own mate situation was infinitely more complex, and Newmara was all too aware of it. Our history with the triplets had been a point of contention, a rift that had driven me away from the pack and put distance between us as sisters.

## Chapter Thirty-Five: The Thread That Binds

"Listen," Newmara began, her tone tinged with hesitance, "I've heard you've been spending a lot of time with the triplets. The pack's buzzing about it."

I picked up a silk scarf from a nearby stand, my fingers nervously playing with the soft fabric.

"Well, packs do love their gossip," I murmured.

Newmara sighed, her eyes meeting mine. There was an aching sincerity in them, laced with a guilt I knew she had carried for years.

"Phera, how are you handling all of this? With them, I mean."

It was the unspoken question, the shadow that had loomed over our sisterly outing today. I could feel the weight of Newmara's regret over what happened all those years ago. A regret that I, too, carried, albeit for different reasons.

"I'm not sure," I finally confessed. "They're... different. And yet, in many ways, they're exactly the same as they were back then. They're compelling, Newmara. It's not just the mate bond, which is powerful enough on its own. They see me, all of me, and I don't know how to deal with that."

Her eyes softened, her lips parting as if to speak, but then she stopped herself. After a pause, she said,

"Compelling can be both good and bad. Just like the past can be both a treasure and a trap. You need to decide what it's going to be for you."

Her words sank into me, pulling up a sea of thoughts and emotions I wasn't ready to wade through—not yet, at



Chapter Thirty-Five: The Thread That Binds

least. Still, I knew she was right.

As we made our way to the checkout counter, the complexities of the past and the present seemed to fold into each other, like interlocking threads in a still-unfinished tapestry. Whatever my choice would be, one thing was certain: it would take more than a single conversation to untangle this intricate weave. But for the first time in years, it felt like Newmara and I were ready to start pulling at the threads, together.

"Thank you,"

I said softly as we walked out into the warm embrace of the evening, our bags swaying in rhythm with our steps.

"This is just the beginning, isn't it?"

She nodded, her eyes meeting mine in a moment of shared understanding.

"Yes, Phera. It's just the beginning."

And so, beneath the ever-changing sky of our shared home, the world around us buzzing with life and potential, we took our first tentative steps toward an uncertain but hopeful future.

As we settled into one of the quaint cafes that lined the shopping district's main avenue, I felt the weight of our unspoken past hanging in the air. The café was cozy, bathed in the warm, amber light of chandeliers made from wrought iron and crystal. A soft tune played in the background, harmonizing with the distant chatter of other patrons. Yet, despite the peaceful ambiance, tension strung itself between Newmara and me like an invisible thread.

## Chapter Thirty-Five: The Thread That Binds

The moment stretched between Newmara and me as if time itself held its breath, waiting for the pivotal words that could mend or break the fragile bonds that held us. I took another sip of my latte, feeling the warmth spread through me but failing to thaw the ice that had settled around my emotions.

"Do you ever think about that day, Newmara? The day when everything changed between us?" I found myself asking, almost against my better judgment.

Newmara looked up, her eyes meeting mine, and I saw a mixture of pain and regret.

"Every day, Phera. There hasn't been a day when I haven't regretted how we let you down."

"It wasn't just 'we,' Newmara. You had a choice, too. Why didn't you stand up for me? For us?"

The question had been haunting me for years, always lurking but never voiced. Newmara sighed deeply, her eyes averting from my gaze as she spoke.

"You're right; I had a choice. And I chose poorly. I let my judgment be clouded by what I thought was 'greater good,' and I didn't consider how much I was hurting my own sister in the process."

I leaned back, looking out the window for a moment, watching the life of the Red Moon Pack pass by. Our pack had grown and prospered, mirroring the complex changes within my own family dynamics.

"So, you thought you were saving me by steering me away from them? The pack was a mess, I get it. But don't you think I had the right to face those challenges with them?"

## Chapter Thirty-Five: The Thread That Binds

They were my mates, Newmara."

She nodded slowly, her eyes still filled with a heaviness that only years of regret could produce.

"Yes, you did. And that's my failure, Phera. I underestimated you. I underestimated them. And I thought that by keeping you apart, I was somehow doing you a favor. I was wrong."

I chewed on her admission, contemplating the sincerity in her eyes. It was a bitter pill to swallow, realizing that sometimes the ones who love us could hurt us the most.

"And now? Now that years have passed, and they've proven themselves worthy Alphas, what's your sage advice?"

"Now," she finally looked me in the eyes again, "I say you should give them a chance. Let them show you how much they have changed, how much they can love you. They've waited for you, Phera, and they are ready to face any challenge, any 'snake in the garden,' as long as they can do it with you."

My heart pounded in my chest as I absorbed her words. I thought about Damon's fervor, Axel's relentless support, and Zane's quiet strength. Each of them had woven themselves into the fabric of my heart in their unique ways, and pulling away now would mean unraveling the threads of a future that I was just beginning to envision.

"Thank you for being honest, Newmara. I still don't know what my future holds, but it's comforting to know I have your support, however late it may be," I finally said, feeling an odd sense of relief.

Newmara squeezed my hand across the table, her own

## Chapter Thirty-Five: The Thread That Binds

eyes misty.

"It's never too late to write a new chapter, Phera. Don't let our past mistakes cloud your future happiness. They love you; that's the one thing time hasn't changed. And that love can be the strongest shield against any 'snake' that might come your way." 1

The words hung in the air as we left the café, each of us lost in our thoughts but bound by a renewed, if fragile, sense of understanding. As I walked away, I couldn't help but ponder her words. Love as a shield. Was I ready to wield it, or would I continue to use it as a sword, keeping everyone—especially my mates—at bay? Only time would tell, and the clock was ticking.

Just as the warmth of sisterly reconciliation began to envelop me, it was abruptly shattered. The pack attack alarms blared through the atmosphere, reverberating in every fiber of my being. The sound was jarring, a call to immediate and instinctual action that turned my blood to ice. The undercurrent of urgency surged through me, solidifying the precariousness of our existence within seconds.

Simultaneously, the triplets' voices came through the pack mindlink, as unified as their physical beings but laced with unmistakable tension.

"All women, children, and elders, proceed to the bunkers immediately. Warriors, assemble at the east and south borders. This is not a drill."

The gravity of their combined voices hit like a wave, pulling us toward survival and battle, toward fear and bravery. My heart pounded, not just with my own anxiety but the collective dread of our pack.

## Chapter Thirty-Five: The Thread That Binds

Newmara and I locked eyes, the lingering warmth of our earlier conversation suddenly overlaid by a chilling sense of foreboding. She opened her mouth as if to speak but closed it again, as there were no words that could appropriately address the situation.

"We should go," she finally said, the heaviness of the moment settling around us like a shroud.

"I know,"

I agreed, but despite the urgency, my feet felt like lead. Thoughts raced through my head. The pack, my family, my mates—the triplets who had been weaving themselves back into my life, filling spaces I didn't even know were empty. What did this mean for us? For me?

A ripple of shivers cascaded down my spine as I pondered Newmara's words from our conversation. Love as a shield, she had said. As we hurried toward the designated bunkers, her counsel reverberated in my mind. I felt a momentary twinge of guilt; while I had been preoccupied with the complexities of love and mating, the safety of our pack was jeopardized.

"We'll talk later," Newmara promised, her eyes reflecting the mingling of regret and determination that churned within both of us.

I nodded, knowing that 'later' was a precarious term in times like these. In this world, moments were stolen, lives were lost, and futures were rewritten in the blink of an eye. As we reached the entrance to the bunker, Newmara turned to me, her expression a blend of worry and sternness.

"Phera, you need to go in. You're the Luna of this pack,

## Chapter Thirty-Five: The Thread That Binds

mated or not. It's where you belong right now."

Her words hung heavily in the air, begging for my agreement. But I couldn't.

"I am the Luna, yes," I affirmed, my voice thick with conflicting emotions. "But that also makes me a warrior for this pack. I can't just hide."

Newmara's hands gripped my arms, an attempt to physically move me into the safety of the bunker. But in a swift motion, guided by adrenaline and conviction, I reversed our positions. With a surprising burst of strength, I pushed her inside instead.

"And as a warrior, you should know that each role in a battle is important, including inspiring hope and assurance. You're going to be a mother; your place is here, safe."

I slammed my palm against the control panel, the steel doors beginning to close. As they did, our eyes met, a silent exchange in a noisy world.

"Forgive me, Newmara," I mouthed just as the doors sealed shut, locking her away from the chaos that was about to unfold.

My back against the cold steel of the sealed door, I took a moment to collect myself. Duty and love, both equally persuasive, waged a war within me. Yet, as I turned away, I knew I had just made a choice—one that would echo in the days to come, for better or for worse.