

Lita's Love for the Alpha

Things We Don't Enjoy

The walk to the shower room was familiar. So was Ren at her back, nudging her forward, though he was a bit more gentle than he'd ever been before. She still didn't know what to make of it. She hadn't seen him since the pits and they weren't exactly on speaking terms. So she didn't ask what he thought about Chris being dead. Or why Maxim had yet to replace him.

The exhaustion she felt was familiar too, though now her legs shook. A week of torture would do that to a person, even a strong one. Though, all things considered she hadn't been tortured much. More than once over the course of her stay, her mind imagined knives and pliers inflicting pain. She imagined ropes and gags and her own screams... her own blood dripping to the floor... but that hadn't happened. Instead Maxim had chosen torture through deprivation. Mild, all thing considered but it wasn't something to scoff at either. Barely any edible food. Barely any rest. Barely any hygiene. No sunlight. No fresh air. No communication. Deprivation was its own brand of awful.

Lita rubbed at the chafed, swollen skin of her wrists as if it would undo the stinging, heavy sensations of cuffs. She'd worn them for a week, nearly going crazy with pain from pulling at them. Then anger as they didn't break, didn't weaken, and continued to clink against her to the damn cell wall. And then, poof, without warning Maxim had waltzed in and ordered them removed. As if her life were simply a measure of his desires and orders. As if what happened to her and why, was solely in his control, solely in his power. Which, technically, it was. And she hated it.

She had known killing Chris would rain down Maxim's wrath. But she also knew it had to be done. And she'd wanted to be the one to do it.

Damn straight, Nyx growled.

When Ren uncuffed her from the wall, the sudden lightness was disarming. Those metal bracelets had hung on her like anchors, heavy, painful reminders of her captivity and at whose mercy she existed. It was sickening. Almost as sickening as the sudden weightlessness she now felt as her steps echoed along the corridor. The air wasn't fresh but it was fresher than it had been in her cell. There wasn't any sunlight but there was more overhead light than she had seen in a week. Lita was still exhausted and lightheaded but at least she was standing. All of those things were marked improvements in her condition.

She hated that she felt grateful for those things, that she was happy to be free. She hated that her mind was already prepared to do anything to spare her from going back in that cell. As if her freedom was something she needed to fight for. As if it wasn't a right.

Maxim was probably enjoying the fact that she owed her relief to him. Probably sitting in his stuffy fireplace chair, toasting to his ability to make her hurt. But if he thought that would make her forget that she owed her discomfort to him as well, he was sorely mistaken. Chris had tried to make her hurt. And look what happened to him. Maxim would be no different. Heat and anger pounded her chest, relentless in its desire to tear this whole place down around him.

Her steps faltered hard after the first turn of the hallway. What had been strong, if not slow steps had grown clumsy and ill-measured. Ren was a constant presence at her back, doing his best not to shove her forward, which was oddly thoughtful of him. Especially since she'd probably land face first on a hard ground. Chris would have loved that. And it made her even happier to have ripped his throat out.

She didn't trust Ren. But he was always the better of the two. And he'd fought alongside her. That had to be worth something. That had to give them at least a little comradery. Perhaps that was why he didn't shove her.

As Ren gently nudged her to turn down another hallway, she realized they weren't headed to the shower room she'd originally used. This wasn't the same direction. Down this hall, there were no doors, only smooth metal walls that turned to drywall as they ascended. And they *were* ascending she realized, as if it was a back passageway leading back up to the main floor. But why? For a heartbeat, she worried Maxim intended for her to bathe somewhere more public than the shower room and god help her if that was the case.

Lita tripped again, feeling her legs go wobbly and numb. Ren's warm hand grabbed her elbow before she could fall. She stifled the urge to say thank you because he was still the enemy. And stopping her from falling was basic human decency.

He didn't let go as they went through a set of metal doors that led to a bathing chamber. Not a shower room, but a room made with a large bath in the center and nothing else. The tub was large, wide enough to fit two or three people and made of stainless steel. There were drains placed all around it and Lita had the sudden sick feeling that it wasn't meant for bathing.

Her blood cooled until her arms turned to gooseflesh. What was that big tub used for? Torture? The image of her head being dunked until she drowned played heavy in her mind.

"It's a birthing tub," Ren answered her silent question, "Made larger for the midwives to assist. I'm sure you don't care as long as you're clean." That wasn't entirely untrue, Lita admitted to herself. Her filthiness was driving her insane. The tub wasn't fancy or anything, no more than a utilitarian metal basic but she was grateful that it wasn't public and she was grateful they didn't use it to torture people. She would take what she could get.

Without a word, Ren helped her into a nearby shower seat. Her legs gave out almost immediately and the rest of her almost followed. Luckily his hands had been there to hold her up or she would have slipped off the chair and onto the floor. Not only had she been basically floor-ridden for a week but she'd hardly eaten in just as long and the toll was noticeable. The walk there had all but robbed Lita of the energy reserves she did have. Which had probably been Maxim's point. Bleed out all her fight, all her energy, all her will. Then bring her to eat dinner among wolves.

As if on cue, Ren crouched down to her sightline. It wasn't exactly pity she saw there, in his eyes, but perhaps, unease. Perhaps he didn't like what he had to do but he sure as shit wasn't going to make the same mistake as Chris. He wasn't going to defy orders or put his own neck on the chopping block. And he knew that she was dangerous now. She could see the way his mental gears moved the longer he stared at her. Perhaps he was wondering how he hadn't noticed it before, the strength, the Alpha wolf, or the rage. Or perhaps he was wondering if she was going to make his life hard and fight, or submit to the inevitable.

Because him undressing her... and helping to wash her... was inevitable. She knew that the second her legs gave out. And even though she hated the thought, hated the idea of anyone other than Cole touching her skin, she knew she wasn't strong enough to do it alone. Maxim had ordered it and Ren was going to make sure it was done. If she couldn't do it herself, he would do it for her. Lita saw it in his eyes. Saw the unease but ultimate resignation of what was about to happen.

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She also knew she was covered in vomit and remnants of piss and foul smelling dampness that was likely a mix of body sweat and blood. She was past needing to bathe. Past needing to clean her wounds, a collection of scrapes she'd gotten while fighting in the pit. There was even a scratch or two from Chris's claws. Even the bruised, metal-burned skin of her wrists and ankles were raw and needed to be cleaned.

So when Ren reached a tentative hand out for the hem of her shirt, she didn't flinch away. Nyx growled and rolled herself onto her haunches in protest but even she had to know they were out of options. Infection was a serious risk at this point, even with her injuries being minor. Without having eaten in a week, her immune system was likely running on fumes. So she let him lift the shirt, sucking her arms in through the sleeves until he could pull it over her head. As soon as her hands were free she snatched them over her breasts, pressing them over every indecent part of herself. She was topless and shivering. Weak as a fucking kitten and so damn disgusted with herself.

She hated that she tasted the saltiness of shame as he tossed her shirt into a bin clearly marked for trash. Because what the hell did she have to be ashamed about? She didn't chain herself to a concrete wall with barely enough room to make it to the toilet hole. She didn't ensure that her hygiene needs hadn't been met. So whatever Ren thought as he crouched again, bringing his fingers to the lip of her pants, he could take up with Maxim. And he could go straight to hell right alongside him.

When his cool fingers reached the skin of her hips, she twitched. She couldn't help it. There was something so fundamentally wrong about another man seeing her naked. It wasn't fear, like it had always been with Brian. But respect. She respected Cole and their bond. She didn't want to do anything to sully it. But she didn't really have a choice. She didn't want to feel Ren's fingers. But they were there. Lita watched him sweep his gaze from the back wall he'd been staring at the whole time, to her eyes.

"I-" he paused, frowning and closing his eyes, "For what it's worth, I don't enjoy doing this any more than enjoy it being done."

Lita almost laughed. *Almost*. Because she thought he was saying he didn't enjoy helping her bathe, didn't enjoy touching her filth. But as she studied the hard lines of his face and the sincerity of his eyes, she swallowed it.

"I don't enjoy making you feel uncomfortable and I definitely don't enjoy being forced to strip you when you so obviously don't want to be touched."

Lita stopped breathing.

"But you do need to bathe. Can you undress yourself?" he asked, clearing his throat. Testing out more weight on her legs, Lita realized she couldn't. She all but ate her own air as she looked for the game, the moment he would do something awful because she'd shown weakness. She wanted to prepare for that. But it didn't look like a lie. Of course, he could just be a good liar but... it felt true.

The silence between them was answer enough for him. And as his eyes locked back on the wall behind her head, Lita relaxed as he resumed removing her pants, managing only to wiggle her hips enough for him to get them off. He stood and tossed those into the trash bin as well before heading for the tub.

Lita didn't bother turning around to watch what he was doing. She could hear the hard splash of water flushing into the basin, could hear the opening of tubes and smell the faint pleasant scent of perfumes. Then she did turn, because why the hell would Maxim want her smelling good? Clean? Maybe. Sweet smelling? Suspicious. There wouldn't be a single good reason for him to do that. From the shower seat, she could see Ren upturning a bottle of bubble bath into the basin and scrunching his face as if he was just as confused as her.

She fought the urge to ask, pretty sure that Ren didn't know why anymore than she did and pretty sure that even if he did, she wouldn't like the answer. Soundlessly, they both listened to the tub fill, him never once looking her way and her, never once letting down her guard. When he swiped the handle to shut off the water, she nearly gasped at the silence of it. And for a beat neither of them said anything.

"Can you walk yourself over or do you need help?" He asked. It was so quiet she almost startled like he'd yelled it.

"I-" she wanted to walk herself. Wanted to say she could do it. Hell she wanted to crawl on her hands and knees before she asked for help but she knew the reality was stark. She had no strength. And she likely would hurt herself before she made it to the tub.

Ren nodded slowly, turning his eyes to the ceiling as he came back for her. One arm under her shoulder, wrapped around her back and the other hand holding onto her dangling forearm. In one heave, he had her hoisted up and walking, or more accurately, dragging along the floor.

When they reached the tub he palmed her waist, nudging her with his hip until she lifted her leg in. Once both feet were in and she was lowered into the bubbles, her whole body melted. The heat and the sweet scent mixed with exhaustion to lull her into safety. She let her guard slip.

And when she finally looked back up to Ren, she noticed he was no longer looking at the ceiling. He was staring at her, at the bubbles, or more likely what he'd seen before she hit the bubbles. And her stomach sank, rolled and tightened. For all his not-evilness, he still looked. He still saw what he shouldn't have seen and he wanted... what did he want?