

Lita's Love for the Alpha

Foundations Crumble

Lita tracked her eyes across the dark of the sky that crested into dawn. From the main compound doorway, she could see to the pits. It was chilly, dampness in the air that hung fog like a film over the world. This kind of morning always had her feeling uneasy. For as long as she could remember, days like this spelled disaster. And for once, she hoped the disaster had already come and gone. The battle was over. Maxim wasn't coming back for any more dinner talk. Or torture. The men had been burying bodies for hours. That was a side effect of conflict, Lita had never considered. People, other than Maxim, dying. But they had. And the losses were from both sides. Cole admitted that they'd lost pack members too but that each of them knew what they were fighting for. Cole had always taken on people that no one else. Wolves that needed a pack and a place to belong. And those people were willing to put their lives on the line for him. She hadn't recognized the names he listed. And while it wasn't long, even one name was too many. Her heart already wrenched for the families. Even though they may have been loners, even they had family somewhere. People who might miss them.

And then her mind turned to more practical things. How would they explain the deaths? Would there be a human investigation? Would they have to fake a story? Or would they simply be brushed aside as missing people buried in unmarked graves?

Her gut tightened as she considered the loyalty that her pack had shown. Most of them didn't even know her, had never even met her, and still, they came. And fought and some died so she could be free. There would never be enough gratitude she could show to balance that. But she would try. Far against the horizon, she could see the bleeding of colors from deep blue to orange. The breeze kicked up, whipping through the doorway and she shivered, pretending not to limp as she turned back into the foyer.

She and Cole hadn't yet stepped out into the main drive of the compound where Maxim's pack had been lined up and brought to their knees. It bothered her to see it, some part of her recognizing that begging position. The months that felt like years spent begging not to be hit. She recognized the defeat in their eyes and it twisted her heart. Many among them were innocent, she was sure. Bullied or abused into serving Maxim's will. Many were probably born under his thumb. How many among them were ever given a choice? She assumed none had that choice if his son had to flee.

At this hour, and in her current state, she couldn't tell her pack apart from Rafi's so she bit her tongue about the situation and waited for Cole to return. He'd gone with Alex and Andres to investigate the cells below the house. And likely raid any security information they could find now that the building had been cleared.

It wasn't supposed to take long, but that had been an hour ago now. Lita didn't think she could stand and watch people kneel for another minute. She needed to find him. No one innocent would be hurt, she told herself. That was the hill she would stand on. Hurting innocent people was not what she was about and it wouldn't be something she would become. Or else, they were no different than the monsters they were fighting.

Ace bounded into the entryway. He scanned the area like he was searching for something. His face: strained and paling, turned surprised as he saw her and he came to a stop right in front of her.

"What's wr--"

"Have you seen Jaz?" he blurted, a pulse of hysteria threading into his voice. Before she could finish asking what was wrong or answer him, he'd already started looking inside the rooms just off the entryway, "Jaz?!"

"Why would Jaz be here, Ace? This isn't the place for..."

"I know," he ground his teeth and tugged at his collar, "And I promised Cole I wouldn't bring her but... I mean you've seen how pushy she can be when she wants something! Plus she didn't want to stay behind alone. Hell, I didn't want her to stay behind alone either."

"What about all the other humans in the pack? She wouldn't have been alone, Ace," Lita could already feel herself scolding him. It was irresponsible to bring a defenseless person knowing there would be a battle.

"If I'm not with her, she's alone, Lita," his voice turned hard and for a second she could see the strange desperation in his eyes. She was starting to think she'd either missed a lot over the last week or Jaz and Ace had been fooling everyone into thinking they were just casual...

"I know I shouldn't have brought her. I really do, Lita. But I did so it's done now. I-I told her to stay with the vehicles but..." she'd never seen him so serious.

"But what?"

"But she's not there and I don't know..."

"You checked all the vehicles?" Lita felt her own bead of hysteria building, "Did you ask the other wolves?"

"Of course I did! But no one saw her. I mean literally, no one even knew a human was waiting out there. That was the idea at first but now... I mean, what if we missed one of Maxim's men? What if she's trapped somewhere? And where the hell is everybody? I can't find Cole or Alex or--"

"Ace," she showed him her palms, slowly lowering them to urge him to calm despite her raging pulse, "Calm down. I don't know about Jaz but Stace, Brody, and Mark are outside with Maxim's pack."

Lita grabbed his arm, pulling him in the direction Cole and the others went, "And the rest are through here. I think they were headed to the cells. Or... they might be in the offices by now."

"Lita stay here; you're still injured. Cole would kill me if you got even more hurt. He just got you back."

"Don't think for a second I'm going to wait around like a fool while my friend is missing in a place like this? Move your ass."

Adrenaline began to ripple back through her as they walked and she lost her limp. She wasn't going to admit that Ace might have been right about her injury because she could feel the hot trickle of blood down her leg. But it didn't matter until they could find Jaz. Each room they passed, was searched. Calling her name became a rhythmic exercise as it echoed through the halls.

"You're bleeding," Ace turned back, eying the stain building through her pants.

"I'm fine," she swatted her hand, brushing past him towards the sound of raised voices. As they got closer, their werewolf hearing kicked in and they could hear Cole arguing with someone. Her father, Rafi? Or was it someone else?

They picked up their pace, subconsciously growing more frantic the closer they got to the offices. Something was wrong. They could tell even as they didn't know what it was.

"I didn't have a choice!" Lita and Ace froze midstep, blood freezing in their veins. It was Jaz and she sounded like she was crying. What should have been a welcome relief felt sour. Why was Cole arguing with Jaz? She hoped it wasn't because of Ace bringing her. If Cole had a problem with that, he should take it out on the guilty party.

"IT DOESN'T MATTER! THERE'S NO EXCUSE JASMINE! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU'VE DONE?!" That time it was Andres. Lita had never heard Andres yell at anyone. Ever. Especially not a female. He was always the gentleman, always the flirty protective one. Hearing how angry he was at Jaz sent more fear through her veins than anything else.

"Who the fuck does Andres think he's talking to?" Ace growled, rushing towards the room with renewed force. Lita followed, reaching for him as if to stop the unstoppable thing that was about to happen. Because she could already feel it building. The sense of foreboding. The question she'd asked herself a hundred times until Cole told her it was Brian. *How did Maxim know where she was? How could anyone have tracked a phone number they didn't have?* It had never made sense. She believed Brian would betray her to Maxim but even he couldn't share what he didn't know.

Ace burst through the office doors, forcing everyone into stunned silence and as Lita rounded his large body she took in the scene. Cole was standing near the windows, eyes red, claws out. He took great heaving breaths as Alex forced him back. Andres had Jaz by the arm, a fistful of papers in his other hand, crumpling against his anger.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Ace growled, shoving Andres back until he released her, "Don't you ever touch her like that!" Andres' answering snarl *traitor* sent ripples through Cole and Alex as Jaz whimpered, collapsing to the floor. Lita's gut told her to run to her friend, to help her. To protect her. But that word... traitor. It unsettled her.

"You have to believe me, Lita. I-I didn't tell him. I didn't k-know," Jaz gasped, crawling, "H-he got to me a l-long time ago. When I was young and my father got mixed up with the wolves. I had never even heard of a werewolf before my father was murdered by one. I had two choices, Lita. Spy on Cole or meet the same fate as my d-dad. And we all know how Maxim hated humans and females. Who knows what he would have done to me... but it- it wouldn't have been quick I'm sure."

Lita cringed, eyes brimming with tears. She began to shake, to take a step away.

Her eyes wide as saucers, Jaz scrambled to her feet, taking Lita's hands in her own to stop her from running, "You have to believe me! I swear, PLEASE, believe me!"

"GET YOUR HANDS OFF HER!" Cole howled, wrangling two or three extra steps from Alex. Andres skirted around Ace to help hold Cole back. The entire room stood on a tightrope. One wrong move and everything would fall. Such a delicate balance.

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"Somebody better explain something or I'm punching first and asking questions later," Ace insisted, looking between the men. His voice had lowered, shoulders locking in a defensive position and she was sure it had more to do with shielding himself from whatever Jaz had to say, than anyone else. Lita felt Jaz shudder.

"She sold Lita out to Maxim!" Cole spat, "Spied on us until she could get her alone and VULNERABLE--" The venom in his voice clamped down on Lita's heart. She felt like she couldn't breathe.

"I didn't! I swear! I would never. I-I didn't know he was tracking my phone. I s-stopped reporting in after we became friends," Jaz's eyes welled. Her nose ran.

"I wouldn't do that to you. B-but it is my fault he found you. He followed me. So you can blame me for that BUT I DIDN'T TELL HIM WHERE WE WERE!"

Lita's mind began to race. If Brian had told Maxim a general proximity... and Jaz's phone tracking had done the rest... but... she'd been spying on them all--

"How long?" Lita asked, surprised by how cold her voice could sound when she willed it to.

"With Cole? Years," she dropped her face in defeat, knowing how it would sound, "But with you, I-I only spied for a few weeks. After that, after I saw that you two were probably mates... me and you had developed a close friendship... I just couldn't keep doing it, you know? So I stopped calling in. And he threatened to ruin my life but I still didn't call."

"Why'd you ask to come then, Jaz?" Ace asked quietly, his body language hiding any of his emotions, his eyes hard, "Why'd you ask me to bring you here?"

"I-it's not like that," she sobbed, "But I knew he'd have stored my reports in his office. Things that would incriminate me. I thought if I could just get to them first, no one would have to know!"

As Jaz fell into a chaotic sob, Lita looked to the floor, to the crumpled pages of transcripts. Her eyes sharpened, Nyx did the rest by forcing their eyes to shift until she could read the words. Her eyes scanned the conversations Jaz had relayed. Private conversations. About Lita's abuse. About Brian. About her family. All things Maxim hoped to use to break her. All things he only knew because her friend had told him.

The room grew small and cold. Isolating. Her body felt like it was on fire. Humming and raging inside. Lita took a breath, pulling in more air than she knew she could take. Then promptly turned to the side and vomited.

She had always wondered if there was anything that would hurt worse than her parents being complicit with Brian. If there would be any betrayal more damaging than that one. Because of how much she loved them and how much she depended on them to keep her safe. And now she knew the answer was yes. This hurt worse. Because of how broken she had been when she met Jaz. And how far her life had come. Jaz was part of her new foundation. And the block was shifting, crumbling right before her very eyes. And it risked bringing her whole world down.