

Lita's Love for the Alpha

Bonus Chapter- Where's Cole?

Ugh, this is so stupid! Lita thought to herself, holding up yet another bodycon dress over her damp towel, hoping she'd see herself in a different light. Confidence was tricky like that, one minute she felt amazing, the next, her head was an ocean of self-doubt.

It was something she and Elise had been working hard on but some days were better than others. For example, when they'd all arrived at the showcase earlier that day, Lita had been feeling strong and proud. The fancy dresses and five-star accommodations hadn't made her nervous. Being in her home city hadn't made her stomach sour. But now, imposter syndrome made her a nervous wreck. She couldn't stop thinking about *everything* going terribly wrong.

Lita stretched the material in different directions, trying to find a silver lining for her new body. Muscles gave her a new shape, banishing the thin, undernourished girl she'd been. She normally *loved* her body. And Cole had absolutely no problem reminding her how beautiful she was whenever she forgot. But he wasn't with her, and she was having a hard time seeing her own worth. When Lita looked in the mirror, she saw none of the improvements her body had made, only imagining herself as the bruised, sleep-deprived person that begged Alex for a chance to train. Or even, as the haunted, bandaged one that left Maxim's compound with blood on her hands.

She hopelessly cast the dress aside and brushed her hands over her wet hair until it hugged her neck. She needed to calm down. Elise had taught her breathing exercises to control these spirals but sometimes, even that wasn't enough. The bath had been so luxurious she'd hardly noticed anything outside of lavender scented bubbles and her relaxed muscles. What she wouldn't give to go back to when she felt good.

But somewhere in that hot water, she started thinking of her parents and Brian. She started thinking of being back in her home city and how she might run into any of them. *All* of them. How many of the people downstairs knew her? How many had secretly laughed behind her back or called her wolf-less? How many had thought she deserved whatever Brian gave her?

Brian had buddies, she knew that, even though she'd only met them in passing, and never for long enough to talk. Were they Alpha wolves, too? Were they fighters? Would they be downstairs waiting to embarrass her? Her chest grew tight as lightheadedness took over until she was forced from the warm water. The entire time she dried off, her mind whirled. What would they see when they looked at her? How could she show them how much she'd changed?

On some level, Lita knew this was a battle against herself and her own insecurities but it felt real. It felt like the minute she stepped out of the hotel room, everyone would know she had been Brian's punching bag. A downtrodden wolf-less girl who had her life shattered so completely that the pieces still hadn't come back together yet. A dead brother she'd only recently begun to mourn. A biological father she didn't know. A mother she couldn't face, not yet, anyway. Rafi, who hadn't done nearly enough to be forgiven for trying to use her. A wolf that had only been let out of her cage for a few months and still seemed hell bent on biting first, asking questions later.

Not fair, Nyx gruffed, *I don't try to bite people who have good energy. Only the ones that smell rotten.*

Not really much difference from the outside, fluff, Lita shook her head, trying to keep her smile in check.

Don't call me fluff, you hairless human.

That was uncalled for, Lita gasped, *Only you could make the lack of fur sound like an insult. Mine was a cute nickname, yours was meant to be mean you overgrown dog.*

Nyx made a sound somewhere between a chuff and a growl, *If I could bite you...*

I would muzzle you. You no self-control having, drooling...

I'm chewing your shoes the next time I'm free. I'll show you a damn dog.

Lita rolled her eyes and dug through the tightly-packed layers of clothes for the fifth time, searching for something appropriate. She ignored the stream of discarded shirts and jeans leading from the bathroom mirror to the bed. Lita groaned, throwing yet another basic outfit over her shoulder. She had packed based on the tournament they'd attended; the one full of casual, if not underdressed, attendees and good energy. But this place was nothing like that... all this money... she hadn't expected to feel like a small girl left alone at her mother's banquet table again. She hadn't expected to feel the way she had when Brian wooed her.

"I have literally* nothing* to wear to this," she whined. Two quick taps at the hotel door were the only warning before someone came barging in, oblivious to the barely wrapped towel Lita still wore.

"Hey, what the hell," Lita yelped, rushing to tuck away as much as she could.

"Calm down, it's just me," Stace laughed. "And that, as nice as it is—" Stace made a dramatic gesture in the direction of Lita's body then froze on Lita's hand, "Wait a damn minute, is that my dress?"

Quickly tossing the damned thing behind her, Lita arched a confused brow, "Is what your dress?"

"Woow, a Luna who steals," Stace clicked her tongue, hands on her hips, "Nice."

Lita laughed, her frown breaking immediately, "Shut up. It was cute and you don't wear half your clothes, Stacey Ramos. Alex has been demanding you donate more of your stuff, so consider me needy."

There was nothing remotely lady-like about the laugh that burst out of them both, bringing them to tears. Lita coughed, wiping her face, "Trust me when I say, you don't want it back now, anyway. I wore it for date night."

Stace pretended to vomit and shivered, "For the love of the moon goddess will you please keep things like that to yourself?"

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Lita shrugged, turning back to the suitcase of useless clothes. "Like I don't have to hear about every new pack member you test drive?"

"Not the same. He's—I just don't want to visualize my Alpha doing anything, okay? My poor mind can't take it. So, I never want you to remind me of you and Cole again, thank you very much." Lita snorted as Stace walked around to point at the discarded dress. "You can keep it. Or burn it so I never have to think about it ever again."

"My newest decree as Luna is that you are no longer allowed to tease me." Lita faked a serious face and stomped her foot. "And if you're not here to help, kindly get lost so I can figure out my life."

"*Bitch*—" Stace was about to offer her two cents before she looked around the room, "Why does it look like a tornado in here? We've only been here for two hours."

Lita shifted awkwardly and looked at the floor, "Because this place is *really* fancy and I didn't expect—I mean what do I look like as the new Luna in a t-shirt and jeans? Even if it is one of my nice t-shirts?" She managed a disparaging laugh as she held up a shirt that said *Punch him, sis* before tossing it to the floor. She sighed as Stace picked up one of the other shirts Lita had tossed.

"Lita—"

"No, don't say it Stacey, I already know I'm being ridiculous. I know I'm just letting my nerves get the best of me but I used to *live* this life you know? I used to dress up and look like a rich brat but I was miserable. I was, god, I was so broken. And I didn't think coming back would bother me. I don't know, I just want to make a good impression. I want our pack to look successful and... and I want—" Lita took a breath, brushing some of her damp strands out of her face, "—If my parents were there, I'd want them to know that they didn't win. I want to dress the part so they know I'm better than I was with them. I'm happy and successful and a *Luna* all on my own and I didn't need their love or their respect and I—"

Lita could feel her throat closing up, anxiety quickly barreling from mild to full bowl panic. Her fingers curled around the towel hard enough to scratch her chest.

Stace grabbed Lita's shoulders and shook forcefully, "Lita, *LUNA*, I'm going to tell you exactly why you're going to put on one of these fancy t-shirts and your favorite ripped jeans to meet these entitled fuckers downstairs. First, because you don't compromise what makes you happy for anyone. Not even Cole. I still remember the girl running around calling him an asshole to anyone who would listen. Our Alpha. And believe it or not, Alex went to bat for you and so did I. Because you were right. You convinced us all you weren't willing to compromise yourself for your own Alpha and mate. That's major, Lita. You disrupted our whole pack and made it better. Don't take that away from yourself."

"And Second, you're going to wear what makes you happy because you're going to show all those pretentious people that you don't owe them a thing, okay? Not a fancy outfit, not a fake smile. *Nothing*." Stace stared Lita down until she saw a small nod, "Yes, we're here for the showcase to build our pack members and to show our strength. Obviously that's our focus, but we wouldn't even want the types of wolves that would flock to fake behavior. That would look for fancy clothes and wasted money. That's not us."

Lita sniffled, feeling incredibly silly and reassured at the same time.

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Stace playfully shoved her shoulder, "My best friend hasn't needed anyone else's approval in a long ass time and she's not going to start now. Not on my watch. *We* love you. *We* are proud of you as our Luna. You can't embarrass the pack here, it's impossible. We're simple wolves. We like fighting and barbeque chicken, lake parties and brown tequila. We're comfortable in our own skin whether we dress up or not. Nothing would represent our pack better than if you went downstairs being your most authentic self."

"Okay, yea..." Lita said, fighting back the grateful tears that welled in her eyes. "So which one do I wear? *Forget guns, get buns* or *Deadlift this*? Personally, I think the arrow pointed down is the best part of the shirt." Lita and Stace shared a look for all of two seconds before they were crying laughing. Lita could feel real relief working its way down her shoulders and over her back. She took a deeper breath.

"At this point, I'm going to assume Cole's never seen any of these shirts." Stace squealed. "Please let me be there the first time he reads the deadlift shirt."

Lita snorted, "Someone wise once told me that make up sex was worth the fight."

"Whoever told you that was nasty as hell and gives terrible advice."

"You mean, you?" Lita grinned. "And Jaz agreed with your advice."

"Oh, well if I said it, it's golden advice, baby. Just don't tell Cole I gave you the idea," Stace winked, reaching down to scoop up some of Lita's mess. She dropped it on the bed and went back for more. "You're not going to give this any more energy okay? Let's make them grovel at our feet in our t-shirts and jeans. Cole will be issuing challenges all night for you, and then that'll *really* show 'em who's boss."

"Speaking of my mate, where is Cole? I haven't seen him in... hours?" Lita suddenly realized Cole never met her in the bath like he insinuated. And she hadn't even heard his voice through the door. If he had been here to help her... no, she couldn't put her emotional baggage on him. It wasn't his job to coddle her every time she felt badly.

"Uh, last I heard he had some Alpha stuff to handle," Stace shrugged too quickly, looking at the door, "I can go ask Alex if you want?"

Lita quirked a brow, not believing a word of that lie, "Sure. Thanks."

Stacey did an awkward shuffle to the door and slipped back out without a word. Strange. Lita dusted off one of the team shirts that she'd cut into a half tank and a pair of panties. She didn't trust anything Stace would come back to tell her. The woman was good at a lot, but lying wasn't one of those things. She had a twitch under her right eye that gave her away immediately. And her voice went too high. So something was definitely up.

As soon as she finished getting herself together, Lita would take the matters into her own hands and figure out exactly where her mate had gone.