

Lita's Love for the Alpha

Bonus Chapter- Old World Charm

The stairwell, though free of other people, was full of strange, ethereal art that made everything feel closer. It was as if crossing the first threshold transported her back in time. The ambient lighting near the ceiling created a moonlight effect and that, coupled with the depiction of a forest along both walls, made Nyx take notice. She rose from her nap and shook off in Lita's mind, nose sniffing for the scents of small game.

The trees seemed to blur as they walked, giving the illusion that they were running. And within the painted forest, wolves *did* run. Some were howling or jumping into clear stream water. Some were playing with one another or fighting. It was communal and common, like the old landscape painters would have depicted human people in a park.

It felt surreal, seeing the intimate aspects of another culture, another way of life. Nyx made a strange sound, some part of her embracing the imagery.

"What's with the art?" Lita asked, stroking her fingers down the rough concrete as they continued down.

"Good ol' fashioned werewolf pride," Ace snorted, "Just wait until you get downstairs. Whoever designed this place, had a heavy hand. Talk about a traditionalist. If I didn't already know hard some of these elite types ride their own waves, I would almost call it propaganda. But they believe the shit they're selling. One hundred percent. Imagine the most prestigious werewolves on the east coast wanting to surround themselves with the old world like this? Ridiculous. Access to every amenity and what do they do? Revert to the world before there were any amenities."

"What's the point of it, though? I don't see how the forest has anything to do with fighting although Nyx seems to like it."

"Yea, our wolves usually like anything simple," he laughed, "They're not exactly known for their higher thinking, Lita."

I will bite him right now, just give me the green light, Nyx growled, snapping her teeth.

Lita tsked in her mind. *You need to curb that violence. You'll never make any friends like that.*

He's not a friend, Nyx snapped, *He's family and family should know better than to cross their Luna. It'll be a small bite. Just a little nip.*

When they reached the base of the stairs, Ace pushed open the door and held it so Lita could walk inside. He said, "But who knows, it's probably supposed to make us tap into our natural instincts. Maybe they want us to let our baser selves out." At that final sentiment, he gave her a wolfish grin which Lita promptly ignored.

"How do they keep this place away from humans, though? I'm sure a setup like this has to draw someone's eye? And I haven't known the type of people who stay at hotels like this, to take *no* for an answer when told they can't have access to something," Lita said, feeling the old internal wounds begin to throb.

Her darkest days were spent at the mercy of people who couldn't comprehend the word no.

Ace turned to her silently, seeing all the things written on her face. She didn't like being so exposed, so *seen*. "Look at me," he said, his voice hard and unforgiving. She did. "You don't give those people any space to breathe in there." He pointed to her temple, all the playfulness bleeding from his tone.

"You don't let them live rent-free in your head. That's your space. You can take it back whenever you want, Luna."

Lita swallowed, something warm blooming in her chest when he gave her the extra respect of her title. And his words rang true. She straightened her back, unaware that she'd begun to cower on instinct. Lita couldn't let those thoughts in. Not even for a minute. Not here where showing strength meant so much.

She gave him a quick, grateful smile and went back to studying the expansive room. Lita was struck first by the mood lighting. Similar to the ambient lighting of the stairwell, faux torches were strategically placed around the room to create a soft glow. The dim yellow light was enough to see in, especially with wolf senses, but it still maintained enough shadow for the room to feel mysterious. It didn't make sense for a fighting arena, did it? She supposed that had a lot to do with whatever sort of fighting they intended to showcase.

It did set the tone though. Something like *deja vu* tugged at her. What did this medieval sort of luxury remind her of?

"When the showcase starts, the upper doors are locked," Ace answered the question she'd forgotten she asked. "No one in. No one out. There are security exits down here but they only open from the inside. You probably didn't notice but there is security at the upstairs door too. The *wolf* kind of security and they can scent us. Any humans try to sneak in without a wolf present, they're getting the boot. And trust me when I say Alpha Asher doesn't give a shit how much money someone has. No wolf, no entry. That's the main reason we didn't bring Jaz."

Lita nodded, stepping beyond him to get a better look. She was trying to ignore the name, trying to ignore that her whole body went cold at the mention of her father. Ace had no idea the can of worms he'd opened and it was impossible to know if Cole had put the pieces together himself. It was a conversation Lita hadn't managed to have yet. She was still on the fence about whether to confront her father first.

"Alpha Asher's pack runs these showcases?" Lita fought to keep her voice level and unbothered though her gut twisted. She had been fine with coming to the city when she thought the chances of running into anyone was slim. But this didn't feel slim. It felt inevitable.

Ace watched a few people enter and exit the room with a predatory gaze. "Sort of. There's a larger picture when it comes to your family's pack." He meant the parents she grew up with. He meant James. But all Lita heard was *Asher*. Like some nightmare waiting just around the corner.

"They're running the showcase here—anything in New York, really—but they do much more than that. Asher's pack is the head of the entire east coast."

He thankfully elaborated without her having to ask, "He was elected as the east coast council head when we were kids and he's held that title uncontested ever since. And before you ask, the council is basically the top Alphas of the United States. One for each region. And Asher's high standing was why your dad could mobilize all that manpower to come rescue you. All the other east coast packs answer to him and any of his requests." Again, he didn't understand the implication of his words.

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"I didn't realize anyone could have that much power. It's almost like a governor but for an entire region? I admit I didn't interact with him much growing up. I don't even know what he looks like." Lita now realized it was likely because her mother wanted to keep things underwraps. Did she look like him? Would everyone know as soon as they saw them together?

Ace's shoulders went tense as she contemplated all those possibilities. "It's exactly like that," he said. "I mean we would have gone down fighting on our own, but Asher's wolves made things easier. He had access to the transportation vehicles and everything. He even had the clearance to send his force across region lines to meet us in midwest territory. Shit, who runs that, Alpha Rue? Alpha Turk? I can't remember. Either way, without his sign off, we would have had to be discreet or risk ruffling some feathers. Maxim wasn't a friend to the regional head or anything, but still, protocol is protocol."

Suddenly, Lita couldn't stop imagining what would happen when she inevitably ran into her father. Was he here now, lurking around in the shadows somewhere?

She stepped backward, toward the wall and focused back on the room which had grown considerably more crowded. For a split second, her mind flashed to the pits. The concrete floor, the box shape, men sparring around the room, her being trapped below ground level with no easy way out—All of it hit her at once, twisting her gut with the ghost feel of cold water splashing against her thighs, burning her nose. As if sensing where her mind had gone, Ace nudged her gently with his hip, knocking the thoughts away.

"We're safe. I know how it looks, but under all this—" he waved his free hand at the decor, "—are all the modern bells and whistles we need to stay safe, okay? It's just a display. Just some shit to make everyone feel special. Or feral. Maybe both."

He sounded irritated and Lita couldn't easily tell if it was the theatrics or her discomfort that him on edge. Maybe it had been their earlier conversation about those who had money and those who didn't. Those who demanded spectacles and those who performed them.

The open part of the basement was the entire footprint of the large hotel's base with the exception of what she assumed were small preparation rooms off to the side. And the tall ceilings left more than enough headroom for how wild wolf fights could get. Cylindrical pillars around the room supported the weight of the upper levels and though they were likely made of concrete, the pillars had been wrapped in decorative metal swirls.

As Lita looked between the bodies around the room, she saw all the walls were covered in similarly shaped metal plates that mimicked vines. Beautiful, archaic, ethereal and terrifying, all at once. Ancient and primal as if someone had thrown her into the gauntlet of a forgone time. One in which werewolves might have been gladiators.

She inhaled sharply. It reminded her of Maxim's compound. The decadence steeped in legacy and the old world, something so outdated that it belonged in a museum. She expected to see it with Maxim, where the teachings were backwards and the pack was subject to a cruel, grandiose Alpha. But here, in the middle of New York City? She would never have imagined it. Or how much of a bad taste it left in her mouth.

In front of them, countless people clustered. Some were warming up in preparation for the showcase that would start soon, cycling through stretches and submission maneuvers. Some were near the vendor tables that had been lined up along the far wall. Even this place's vendor tables were elegant and unexpected. Cream linens dressed the tables and tented signs were draped in twinkling string lights. It all furthered the feeling of being in another world.

And it was entirely believable.

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Until Lita looked closely at the people, whose clothes varied from athletic to casual to formal. They were the epitome of modern with some women in cropped jeans and t-shirts like Lita while other wore pressed jumpsuits and heels. And as they used their cellphones, it was impossible to mistake what era they truly belonged in. Lita sighed, it was like Ace said, a nod to the past. A theme. Nothing more than people transplanted into a renaissance fair.

Lita returned her focus to the tables, where she could make out a membership area for gyms to promote themselves.

"Do we have a table back there?" she pointed to the far corner.

"Us? Nah, Cole prefers the hands-on approach to drumming up new members. He'll probably work the room all weekend, actually forming connections with the people he talks to. They just had out fliers." Ace rolled his eyes.

"You mean when Cole finally gets here?" Lita snapped, residual irritation rearing its head.

Ace gave her a tired look and continued, "Anyway, those packs have diverse focuses. They split their resources between STEM fields and anything else that brings profit. That's the bottom dollar. Fighting doesn't yield the same profit as other things, so it's not considered a profession."

"What does that mean? What does a professional fighter do if he can't focus on fighting?"

"It means that the fighters in those packs have to also maintain a *worthy* job. Something that will be of service to the pack. Anything from cybersecurity to the pharmaceutical industry."

Lita pondered that quietly, remembering the pills that stripped her of all her power. Wolves had engineered those. Her mother had overseen their production. How many wolves had been hurt because of it? Was anybody making sure someone answered for it?

"Fighting is treated as a recreational activity in most packs. Something they use to show off their pack's power. But it's not the kind of training that gets very far in real competitions. Honestly, most of them don't even compete in the human ones or try for any wolf tournaments. They care about the perceived power that comes from having a large pack, not the integrity of the sport itself. It's why you'll only see them at showcases. A dick measuring contest."

Lita shook her head, "This world is still so strange to me. Sometimes I feel like I'll never fully understand how it works. How could I have spent years of my life around these people and never truly know anything?"

"The politics of this world don't really matter unless you're in that circle, or attempting to join that circle. And like I said before, where Asher is concerned, the wolf is the deciding factor for whether information is shared. You wouldn't have been told. That's just the cold hard truth of it."

Lita scowled. If she did decide to speak to her father, she'd make sure he understood exactly how stupid that was.