Chapter 58

The house has been awfully quiet.

For the past six hours, no one had said anything or even dared to face each other. Maxim wouldn't even let me in his mind, and in all honesty, I locked him from mine too. I didn't want him to feel what I was feeling, and I guess he didn't want me to feel his emotions either.

Nonetheless, I was an awful mate. He just lost his brother, for crying out loud! There's no way he can be okay being alone. I lost Lukas too, and my head throbbed from the pain, and I still haven't slept a wink. But this was harder for Maxim than it was for me. I shouldn't be putting my own feelings over his.

Still, I was only scared that he'd blame me for Lukas's death. If it wasn't for me, he wouldn't have fallen in love with me, and he'd still be here. This was nobody's fault but mine. Mine, mine, mine.

I guess everyone blamed themselves in some way. That was the reason why we couldn't face each other. That was why the house had been so silent since the pack meeting. I blamed my very existence; Leonardo blamed himself, thinking that if he would've forgiven Lukas, he wouldn't have felt too inclined to leave. Fiona felt like being the 'mediator' of the family, she should've done more to have everyone united again. Mr and Mrs Dalton blame themselves for raising him the way they did. If only they knew the spectacular man they raised. My heart broke again at the thought of such a man being robbed from this world.

And Maxim. My poor, heartbroken mate. He blamed himself for everything. He thought that if he hadn't allowed Lukas to go that quickly, he wouldn't have died. He believed that he wouldn't have left if he had forgiven him sooner. And the one I fear the most, I think he wished that he had allowed Lukas to have me. He'd still be alive.

I didn't completely agree with anything, especially that thought. I belonged with Maxim, and even Lukas knew that. I only hoped that Maxim didn't feel wrong for fighting for me.

But I know that grief could do that to you. It makes you question every single thought and decision, and it makes you feel guilty for everything. Maxim didn't have to open his link to me for me to know that this was precisely what he was feeling. I hate that he felt that way.

I hated how everyone felt.

And the pack. Gosh, I couldn't bear the grief. The meeting was only six hours ago . . .

Six hours earlier

Alexander stood by the mic as the rest of us stood at the corner of the makeshift stage at the packhouse. It was evident that everyone could tell that there was something wrong. The way they gathered in mumbles, with worried looks on their face, showed that they knew something was wrong.

I watched as they searched the stage eagerly, and I could almost hear the hushed whispers of fear in the pack mind link when they noticed that Lukas was nowhere to be found.

None of us dared to tell the pack the truth. Not even Maxim. It was crazy how only yesterday morning, we gathered on this very stage when I was inducted in the back. And now, only three hours after Leonardo and Maxim brought Lukas home, we gathered yet again for this horrible news.

Natoya couldn't even leave her house. She refused to come outside, so it was only Fiona,

Leonardo, Maxim and I, along with Alexander, who volunteered to tell the pack on our behalf.

They stayed silent as Alexander cleared his throat, gaining the attention of all.

My eyes sprang water again, and Fiona broke out in a sob as she buried her face in Leonardo's jacket. Maxim and Leonardo were trying to remain strong, but I could tell it was hard.

Anxious eyes flashed between Fiona and I worriedly, wondering what the issue was. I covered my mouth with my hand when I felt my own sobs coming, and Maxim eased my pain a bit as he pulled me to his side and placed a long, soft kiss on my forehead.

"I'm sure it has become quite evident that something is terribly wrong," Alexander finally spoke, but his voice b-broke with each syllable. "I know this will be hard for a lot of you if not all, so I will save you the suspense and worry and just come right out and say it . . . Um. . . Lukas is dead. H-h-h-is brother and our Beta found him a few hours ago, miles away from the pack borders. He seemed to have been hit by a heavy-duty vehicle or suffered a great fall . . . I am sorry to be relaying such horrible news."

Loud shrieks, screams and wails went around the crowd as my knees went weak. The sobs I had been trying to hold in came fully as Maxim held me to his side. His body shook violently, and then there was a drop to my forehead-something warm and even sad.

His tears. My mate was crying for the first time ever since I'd known him, which pained me even more. Soon, I was no longer crying for myself but for my mate. He had gone through so much growing up, and Lukas was his best friend. His partner. His first Alpha.

If anyone was going to feel the loss the most. It was him.

Mates held up one another. Friends and families tried to console each other, and I could literally feel the entire pack's pain, burden, and heartbreak.

I wanted to take it all away for them. I wanted them to feel safe. But I know what losing an Alpha can do to a pack. And I especially know the pressure that will be on Maxim. The pack won't pressure him, but he'll pressure himself into filling Lukas's shoes.

I swore that I'd be by his side through it all, but I also knew that we couldn't do anything until we mourned. So, I allowed him to, and I allowed myself to.

As Alexander's voice grew distant in the background of my mind, trying to calm the crying pack member, more droplets fell on my face, but they were colder and more frequent.

I slowly pulled away from Maxim's embrace, where I saw that it was now raining. Even the sky was crying, which only proved that we truly lost a good one.

Present

I couldn't take it anymore.

I couldn't allow Maxim to grieve alone like this. Even if he did blame me, I knew he needed me. And I needed him.

I hated feeling useless, and I hated feeling alone. For the first time since I came to Primal Pack, I had a familiar feeling of my old life in my old pack. Sadness and loneliness.

I was shaking, and I could barely see through my eyes, but I dragged myself from my room and found my way to my mate. He was in his room, sitting on his bed with a cup of water in his hand, simply staring at the wall.

I closed the door and closed the distance between us. Silently, I sat beside Maxim, and he took me by surprise as he dropped the glass to the ground and wrapped his arms around my waist. For the first two seconds, I thought he was going to squeeze me to death from the rage he felt for taking his brother away from him.

But then I noticed that he was hugging me, and I realised how foolish I had been. Maxim wouldn't blame me for Lukas's death. He'd blame himself, which was precisely what he was doing and exactly what I didn't want him to do.

He buried his nose in my bosom, and I silently ran my fingers through his hair since I knew he liked it. I couldn't cry. Not this time.

I cried at the pack meeting, and he was strong for me. Now, it was my time to be strong for him.

But then he did it. He moved the walls in our minds, and I was instantly flooded with all his thoughts and emotions, and it brought tears to my eyes yet again. I couldn't count or describe the number of things he was feeling. But the biggest thing I picked up on was regret. Not even guilt, but regret.

And I think I know why.

"I was . . . I was happy to see him leave, Melissa." His voice was so low that I could barely hear what he said. "When Lukas left, I was happy because he was right; I didn't trust him. B-b-but if I had only . . . known that . . ." He stopped a while as his shoulders shook in my arms.

I could no longer tame my own tears. I allowed them to fall, but I didn't make a sound.

"I should've hugged him one more time," he cried. "I should've. . . This wasn't supposed to be how this ended. We were supposed to be old with children as old as we are now, and he'd look at me, or I'd look at him, and we'd say, 'We did it, brother. I'll see you in the next life.'"

My heart broke even more if it was even possible. But all I could do was rock him back and forth and massage his scalp, hoping that it provided some sense of comfort somewhere deep within his broken heart.

"I thought I had years to prepare for this, Mel."

"I know," I whispered, kissing his sweaty forehead. "I know, my love."

"I even hoped that I wouldn't have been the one to do it at all. I always thought I'd be the first to . . ." He didn't finish his statement, but I knew what he meant.

Even though I never liked my brother growing up, I still didn't want him to die before me. The thought of seeing him unmoving in the ground as they close the coffin and confine him to the earth forever saddened me to the core. I simply couldn't bear the thought.

So, imagine what it was like for Maxim, who had loved and adored his brother all their lives? Of course, they had their falling outs, and I guess the force marking thing caused the biggest one. But that didn't mean they still didn't love each other.

How could the universe do this to them? They didn't have the chance to make amends or even say goodbye. They took him so horribly.

Gosh, my heart even broke for Leonardo. He grew up just as close with those two. When Leo's parents died when he just started his teenage years, Alexander and Natoya raised him as their own since he was already living in the Alpha house anyhow. And as if they weren't already close as kids, this brought the three together even more, and they really became brothers.

So, though Fiona and I felt the loss, Fiona more than me, it was indeed Leonardo and Maxim who had it worse. If they didn't even hear that howl, they wouldn't have found Lukas, and we would've thought he was in another pack for a whole year.

I squeezed my eyes shut at the sudden throb in my chest.

Perhaps that was one thing to be grateful for. The fact that we actually found him this early in his death while his blood was still warm. He'd get the burial he deserved and the farewell we all need.

I felt Maxim's thoughts drifting away and his body becoming a bit heavier, so I knew he was falling asleep.

I pulled him to the middle of his bed and laid down beside him. He looked so innocent and broken, curled beside me with tear-streaked cheeks and moist eyelashes. I traced the outline of his face with my finger, trying to come up with different ways I could get him out of this misery.

But my mind was blank, and I knew what we both needed was time and acceptance. It was easier said than done.

"Melissa?" he asked softly, keeping his eyes shut.

"Yes?"

"I don't blame you for anything. It hurts even more that you think I would shut you out for what happened . . . For what happened to Maxim. You had nothing to do with it."

To say I was stunned was an understatement. I didn't even notice that I had let that thought slip. But for him to think of me amid his sadness was something else.

I sighed as I gently pecked his lips, at which he opened his eyes.

For the first time since he brought Lukas home this morning, I finally saw him. I saw deep within his soul, and still, all I could see was sadness. Pure, raw sadness.

But I also saw that he needed me more than anything. Just like how he was there for me when I was sick, I'll be here for him every step of the way. Lukas's death might not be something as small as a fever, but it was my time to be the true mate. And though I loved Lukas too and his death affected me greatly, this was the time to guide Maxim through this.

And I was prepared to.

So, instead of protesting, I simply said, "I know, Maxim. I'm sorry I thought like that."

I continued to caress his cheek as I shuffled closer to him so that I was now feeling his body against mine and his breath fanning my face.

"I'm here for you, okay?" I added softly. "You don't have to do this alone."

I have never seen my mate so vulnerable and broken, but I was grateful that he didn't feel like he had to hide this side of him from me.

He nodded slowly as he snaked his arms around my waist. "I know. I love you."

I closed my eyes and snuggled under his chin. "I love you too. Sleep, love. You must be exhausted."

Maxim didn't object. Within a minute, his breathing became level, and his chest rose and fell slowly with the rumbles of his soft snores.

I, too, allowed sleep to swallow me whole, hoping that this terrible day would be over as soon as I woke up from this nightmare.

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