

Chapter 12 – The Miracle

“They say a person needs just three things to be truly happy in this world: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for.” - Tom Bodett

Halima

Three days had passed. Three days of living as a rogue. I survived off fish and river water. Rabbits and squirrels were available to eat, but I couldn't catch them. They were too fast for me. My body was still weak. I couldn't take in too much food. I could barely eat one-half of a fish before vomiting it up. It wasn't because of the taste, although I was sure it played a part. Cooked fish beats raw fish any day. The reason was that I trained my body to survive off little food.

The days were warm, but the nights were chilly. I didn't have a blanket to help keep me warm, but Artemis helped as much as she could by lending some of her heat. Werewolves had warmer bodies than humans, but since I was all skin and bone, I have little means of insulating body fat, to begin with. Sometimes, I slept naked with my dress covering me like a blanket.

Artemis and I moved around a lot. Sometimes, I would take walks throughout the forest, admiring the beauty Mother Nature offered before my eyes. I felt more connected with Artemis from those walks. I felt more grounded and more in tune with the earth, as I was with the moon.

After another failed breakfast, I washed my face at the river before taking a walk through the forest. I knew I was straying far from my cave, but I didn't care. I was taking advantage of the exploration. The gentle breeze was cool, the golden sun was shining, and the many birds chirped their morning songs. Or mating calls, I couldn't tell.

Artemis howled in delight in my mind, happy to be smelling the crisp clean air compared to the foul stench of prison back at our former home. It was a pleasant change to the dreary atmosphere we were accustomed to.

I journeyed farther, deeper into the woodlands, touching the barks of trees as I went. I remembered stories taught in my elementary school classes about how humans liked to go camping. They would bring tents, food, and other items to make their trip memorable. I never found the point of camping since I was a wolf, but now I could appreciate why humans appreciate nature after being deprived of it for so long.

Artemis was happy and so was I.

I was deep in my thoughts when a powerful smell knocked me into the present. It smelled like diesel fuel. Curious, I trotted closer to where the overwhelming scent was coming from. I stopped at the edge of the tree line and found a narrow two-way road with scattered potholes. There were no vehicles in sight, but the lingering smell of the fuel filling my nostrils told me one passed by not too long ago.

I must be farther from wolf territory than I originally thought, and I took it as a good thing. Against my better instinct, I walked onto the road. Curiosity pulled me to the other patch of forest on the other side. I crossed the asphalt in quick strides, disregarding potential dangers until my big toe dipped into a small crater. I fell onto the concrete, scraping my knees.

“Ow...” I whimpered, feeling the blood ooze from the fresh wounds. There was a distant honking blaring at me from down the road, growing louder as it got closer. My head snapped in the direction to see a red car coming towards me at a great speed. I saw too many movies when I was younger to know what happens when someone gets hit by a car. Given how skinny I was, I surely would snap like a twig. I scrambled like a scared kitten to the side of the road, out of the car’s pathway.

To my surprise, the car slowed down before coming to a stop beside me. The smell of diesel slapped me across the face, making me scrunch up my nose. Goddess, it smelled so bad! I heard doors opening and a set of heavy feet landing on the ground.

“Are you crazy?” A loud, gruff male voice rang in my ear. I looked up to see an older man wearing a deep blue buttoned-up shirt and black dress pants approaching me. “I could have hit you! What are you doing out here, anyway?” He had short and wavy black hair brushing the back of his neck, deep amber eyes, his skin a fair fawn-brown, and a five o’clock shadow. I glanced at his right hand to see a golden ring with a large red gemstone settled in the middle. The intricate swirls around the rim of the stone were unfamiliar until they became familiar.

That was the ring of an alpha.

My eyes widened like plates. This man was an alpha!

Memories of Alpha Jonathan and Neron festered in my mind like a disease, each instance of abuse and mistreatment becoming more vivid than the last. What if all alphas were the same? What if this man could hurt me, too? Whimpering, I crawled away from him.

“I’m sorry! Please don’t hurt me!” I begged. My life in the forest had ended. I was a rogue, and by my knowledge, most wolves don’t take kindly to rogues. “Please, let me go.”

“*Mi amor*, you’re scaring her!” I heard a woman say. Her voice was soft and sweet, like liquid sugar. She approached me with great caution, stepping slowly. “What’s a lone pup like you doing out here alone?”

“Lyra.” The man warned. “She’s a rogue! She could be dangerous! Step away, now!”

“I don’t think she’s just any rogue, Nikolai.” The woman, Lyra, retorted. She walked closer, kneeling next to me on the pavement. Up close, I

could see her flawless apricot skin, long caramel brown hair brushing against her back, bright hazel eyes, and downward-turned lips that frowned in worry. “She’s covered with bruises...”

“So, she tripped on a few logs and twigs. And?”

“These bruises didn’t come from nature, Nicky. Someone has hurt her!” Lyra growled, observing my body closer. That seemed to have got his attention. His expression went from malice to one of concern. “Sweetie, where is your pack?”

“I-I don’t have one...” I murmured as my eyes burned with tears. The woman’s voice may be kind, but I knew better than to trust people. If being at Zircon Moon taught me one thing, it was that the gentler the face, the eviler they were once the mask came off.

“Everyone has a pack, dear. Even rogues like yourself were part of one before.” Lyra cautiously placed her palm on my shoulder. “Did your old pack hurt you?”

I couldn’t hold it in anymore. My tears flooded out like raging rivers once again, drowning me in sorrow. I didn’t cry for sympathy; I cried in fear. Artemis tried her best to comfort me, but I cried harder. “I-I don’t want to be a slave anymore! Don’t take me back, please! I don’t want to die!”

“Shh. Shh. It’s okay. I won’t hurt you.” Lyra shed the denim jacket she was wearing and gently placed it over my scarred shoulders. “Neither of us will. Nicky?” She turned to the man lingering by the car door. “We have to do something. We can’t just leave her here alone.”

Nikolai trudged forward, taking great caution to not startle me. He kneeled at my eye level, looking me up and down. His face scrunched up in disgust. “You’re right. This looks all too familiar. She’s been abused.”

Lyra sighed, her eyes fluttering close. She took a minute to compose herself before looking at me again. “Sweetheart. I promise no one would harm you again. Do you want to come with us to our pack?”

My sobs quieted down, but I still sniffled every five seconds. “Y-Your pack?”

“Yes.” She grinned. “I’m Luna Lyra Guerrero, and this is my husband, Alpha Nikolai Guerrero. We run the Garnet Moon Pack. We’re heading back there now, for we just finished our road trip. We won’t force you to come with us but having a warm bed is much better than the cold, dirty ground in a cave somewhere out there. What do you say?”

I looked at Lyra, then to Nikolai. They seem genuine and truthful in their words, like honest people. But I must be sure.

“Artemis, what do you think?”

“I’ve never heard of Garnet Moon, but I don’t feel any dark intentions coming from the Alpha and Luna. I can also sense their wolves. They feel and are safe. Let’s give it a shot.”

I trusted Artemis’s words more than anything. She was a better judge of character than me. Wiping my tears with the back of my hand, I nodded. “O-Okay...”

“Excellent.” Lyra clapped her hands together and did a strange little dance before she helped me on my feet. “When was the last time you’ve had a decent meal?”

“I don’t remember,” I replied, gazing at a pothole in the road. The couple exchanged a look in silence as they led me to their car, opening the back door for me. Slowly and carefully, I crawled inside and curled up in a ball. The interior of the car smelled pleasant, a combination of scents that worked together. Lyra smelled like peaches and mangos, while Nikolai smelled like apple cider and pumpkin. Before long, the car

sped down the road. I watched the trees go by in blurs, pulling the blue denim jacket tighter around me.

I liked Lyra's scent. I could smell it all day.

"You'll be okay, dear," Lyra promised from the passenger's seat. "I almost forgot to ask you, what is your name?"

I remained silent for a minute. The soft, plush seats with the gentle rocking of the car lulled me closer to sleep. Given the fact I spent three days sleeping on a hard floor, this was a delightful change. I felt as though I could finally sleep peacefully, not on a filthy bed, not on the forest floor, but on something soft and clean.

"Halima. My name is Halima."

Not long after, I fell into a dreamless sleep to the comfort of peaches and mangos.