

Chapter 53 - The Stalemate

“Rage was sometimes a useful ally in the heat of a fight, but it was a trickster. It made everything seem possible.” — Jonathan Maberry

Kiya

Punch after punch.

Kick after kick.

The colliding power of an Alpha and a Beta. Divided by a single rank, yet powerful adversaries. Neron didn't yield, and neither did I. A single punch to the face voiced all he needed to know this wasn't a play fight between friends. He was my opponent, my enemy, and I will not hesitate to send his body to the hard ground.

I'm faster, blinding the Alpha with hits to his torso and kicks to his legs. I was smaller and I was used to being underestimated. I bring the heat. However, Neron knows how to use his bigger and taller body to his advantage. The number of times he locked me in a vice grip, pushed me aside, and went unflinching at some of my hits reminds me just how formidable he was.

I hated touching him. Every time we touched; I got the indescribable sensations of those fated sparks. They were faint, like touching yarn pom-poms, but they were still there. Those sparks bounce against our flesh with every contact. The vexatious mate bond is still there, my side jolting weakly with every touch Neron made. His flirting didn't help.

He grabbed my fists and twisted my arms behind my back. Taking advantage of my vulnerability, he buried his nose in the crook of my neck, inhaling deeply. “Goddess, you smell so good.” He growled. I

could hear Onyx howling in pleasure from the scent of his mate, Artemis biting back with growls of her own. Freeing myself from his grip, albeit by ramming my head under his jaw, I fought harder.

The cheers and hollers from the pup trainees boomed through the air, half cheering for me and the other for Neron. Their bated breaths hold anticipation in their pint-sized bodies, eager to see who would appear the champion, the Delta, or their Alpha. Their shouts drew in more onlookers, gathering around to watch us spar.

It amuses them. This pack already knew that Neron and I were mates, so to see their Alpha and former slave fighting must be the spectacle of a lifetime.

With my flurry of blows and kicks, Neron blocked them all. Now that I think about it, he hasn't thrown a single punch or kick to me. As if he was holding back. I growled. I want him to fight me at full strength!

"What's the matter, Neron?" I demanded, panting but unwavering in my stance. "Scared to throw a punch? That never stopped you before!"

Sadness flashed across his face like a lightning strike but dissolved as his eyes narrowed on me again. Without warning, he seized me with the might of a king and pushed me to the ground, pinning my fists above me. His powerful body heat swallowed me, worsened by the heat of this summer day.

"I won't raise my hand against you ever again, even if it is just a sparring match," Neron whispered to me, low enough for only the both of us to hear. His deep voice, this close to me, sent chills down my spine. "You are my heart and I refuse to hurt you under any circumstance."

"Weak." I spat. All the force in my body aided me to kick the fully grown wolf away from me, freeing me from his clutches. His honeyed words touched a singular, weak heartstring. That sensation was quickly

stomped out when my anger sets ablaze the wildfire that burned a hole in the deep trenches of the darkness, forcing the reasons I abhor Neron to spring out from its burial chamber.

He hurt me. In more ways than one. That cannot be forgiven or overlooked. He was acting nice now, but it was only a matter of time before he tosses me back in that nightmare cell. All rationale incinerated into ash, forgoing the reasons why that wouldn't be the case.

I didn't care. I needed to feel this anger. I needed it to scorch deeply in every nerve and synapse from my brain to my toes. I need this reminder to force me to see that my ex-mate was nothing more but an abusive cur I had the unfortunate fate of being bonded with.

My vision blazes red. My powers battered against my defenses. I saw the Alpha as a wolf that needed to be euthanized. The world around me disappeared into black, I didn't see the pup trainees or the spectators. My sharp vision narrowed into the man who single-handedly ruined my life and my ability to love.

As he began to get back to his feet, I bolted, tackling his full six feet five stature to the hot ground before straddling his waist. My fists hit flesh, over and over, and over until red trickled down my hands. But I didn't stop.

I couldn't stop.

Everything I've felt since age nine came bucketing out of my hands as I continuously punched Neron in his face and throat. Thirteen years' worth of sadness, depression, confusion, and mind-numbing rage controlled my every action, forgoing the lactic acid burning in my muscles. I was a marionette, the strings on my limbs controlled by the devil that is fury incarnate.

All I felt was the strings.

All I saw was red.

All I wanted was Neron dead.

My dark desires didn't come to fruition because I was forced off his body by two pairs of arms. No! I wasn't done! Immediately I was right back in the position the Alpha had me in earlier, back to the ground, wrists pinned above my head. I growled and snapped my jaws, struggling against the restraints. The rage muddled the loud voices in my ear—I couldn't hear anything. Nothing was clear, except for the thoughts of Neron's demise.

Suddenly, I was slapped back into the harsh reality. Red disappeared, and the surrounding area cleared back to Zircon Moon territory. The strings were cut, and the devilish puppeteer vanished. My sight cleared to see Jacqueline and Galen holding me down by the arms, shock contorting their faces.

"Babe..." She whispered to me, waving her hand to ease the pain. Jackie was the one who slapped me. "Are you okay?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't. What had happened hadn't hit me yet, so I laid there dazed for a few seconds before my friends helped me up on my feet. Slowly. My breathing was heavy. Sweat rained from my chin, and my fists throbbed with pain. "W-What...what did I..."

"You went ballistic," Galen explained in a gentle whisper. "One minute you're sparring and the next you're pummeling the living shit out of the Alpha."

The pungent stench of blood wafted up to my nose. I look down at my throbbing hands to see red smeared on brown like I cut a vein. But it wasn't my blood. My sight beamed towards Neron who slowly stood on his feet, batting Kwame and Valerian's hands away. Blood dripped from his face and nose like a hose, staining jade-green grass below. For a moment, our eyes met.

And I was *terrified*.

I thought I needed this. I thought I needed to beat the shit out of Neron like he used to do to me. I thought his bloodshed would serve as retribution for the amount I shed on this land. I thought this would make me feel better.

But it didn't! At that moment when I snapped, my anger controlled me. It powered my desire to destroy, to maim, and to murder. Why don't I feel that warmth? Why do I still feel cold? For that moment, I became the monster I always feared.

I became the old Alpha. I became the dark shadows of the pack.

I became a monster.

I couldn't breathe. My heart raced a million miles a minute, blood pressure rising. My mind swam and my throat burned. "J-Jackie. Y-you, take over for the pups." I didn't wait for a reply because I bolted into the packhouse. Neron called out for me, but I ignored him. I needed to be alone. Blazing past everyone, I made it to my room, locking the door behind me. I put blocks up to all my mind-links, even to Artemis. My mind was bathed in silence, while my eyes bathed my cheeks in my hot tears.

My hands were sticky with Neron's blood, its powerful scent choking me. My anger took me to the point of no return, where I became a rabid woman with nothing to lose. I beat him in front of my trainees, my friends, and damn near the entire pack. I became a dangerous woman, with fury enough to injure an Alpha. Grateful for the rapid healing as werewolves, I didn't need to worry about serious damage done to me or him.

But I still took it too far. I opened a latch I was too late to close. It took Jackie slapping me to get me out of that berserker rage. I was uncontrollable, and I knew I wouldn't have stopped with Neron. Anger

is destructive, callous, and relentless, and I have too much of that chaos within me.

Sobs burned my throat as my infinite tears dripped down to my dusty leggings. How did I let myself lose control so easily? With the damn mate sparks, Neron's flirts, and his promise triggered something that even I fear because what I fear is in me.

How long until this happens again? What if my friends couldn't snap me out of it? How long until the deadly string's loop around my limbs, leaving me at the mercy of my rage?

I peeled myself from the floor and dragged my tired body to the bathroom. The stream ran red as I washed my hands in the sink, cleansing them of the sin of harming the Alpha. My head tilted to my reflection in the mirror, brown staring at brown.

I see a woman. Particles of dust and dirt clung onto the coily strands of her hair, sweat and tears stained her skin, scleras puffy and red, and lips slightly red from her biting. She looks tired, worried, scared, but the anger was still there.

Brewing.

Simmering.

Waiting for another opportunity to spring forth to claim more victims.

"How is this me?" I asked myself. Do I still hate Neron? I do. I can't ever forgive what he or anyone else had done to me. But beating him did nothing but leave me colder underneath this temple I call my body. It did not cure my anger or my pain of my past.

But what **do** I need? What the hell would make me feel better?

Several knocks on my door startled me. They were gentle, so soft that I would have missed it if I dwelled deeper in my thoughts. I didn't need to open the door to know who was behind it because their scent seeping through the spaces of the door revealed their identity.

“What do you want, Neron?”

“I want us to talk, Kiya. Please open the door.”

“No. Go away.”

“I won't.” He insisted, his voice firm. “I can't leave you like this. Please, I need to know that you're okay.”

Quickly splashing water on my face, I walk out of the bathroom. “I'm fine. I don't want to see you.”

“Your voice betrays you, Kiya. You sound like you've been crying.” He released a hefty sigh. “Please... I just need to see you. I know you hate me and...” I hear a soft groan. “I-I just need to see your face. And talk about what happened.”

He's genuine. I could hear it in his voice. However, that doesn't mean I trust his words. My heart and head conflict, one wanting to open the door and the other wanting to keep the distance. *'It's just another trap'*, my mind mused, but *'open the door'* my heart demanded.

In the end, I opened the door. Why? Simple curiosity. Neron stood towering over me, his pained expression relaxing. There were faint smudges of blood on his face. But his face was okay. He healed quickly as expected.

“Thank you.” He offered a warm smile. I blinked, offering a curt nod. “I want to apologize.”

“For what?”

“I’m an idiot, Kiya.” Neron chuckled, running his hand through his long hair. “It’s my fault you went ballistic on me. I crossed a line I shouldn’t have. I triggered you and I didn’t mean to hurt you the way I did, and I am so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I muttered, trying to shut the door, but was stopped by his hand.

“Kiya, I wasn’t lying when I said I won’t hurt you under any circumstance.” His eyes went from soft to hard, bearing down into my soul. He was searching for something, desperate to reach something deep within me. “I know you don’t trust me but trust that no harm will come to you, not from me nor anyone else, pack or otherwise. Alpha Anthony left you under my protection for your stay, and I will honor that commitment. And...”

“And what?”

“I care about you.” He admitted. “You are my mate, thus it’s my job to ensure your safety. You felt them too, didn’t you? The sparks of our mate bond?”

I didn’t say a word. I refused to admit to him I felt them. How good they felt in the flurry of battle. It made this all too real, and I was determined to push that reality as far as I could. My eyes left his, looking at his still bare chest. Could it kill him to wear a shirt!

Neron sighed, straightening himself to a full stance. “Okay. Keep your secrets, Kiya. But I won’t go back on my word as an honorable Alpha. I will protect you, no matter what. You are my heart and I won’t not stop until you accept me.”

“Sure.” I replied as I failed for a second time to close the door because of his interference. “What more do you have to say?”

“Our spar.” He shot me a grin. “It’s a stalemate. Neither of us won, so need not worry.” His hand reached out to touch me, but after my recoil, he retracted. “Right. I forgot. You’re untouchable.”

After a second, he pushed himself off my door, walking away. “I’ll see you at dinner, Kiya. Bring your appetite.” His tall, burly figure disappeared into the light of the foyer, leaving me alone in the semi-dark corridor. With a final sigh, I shut my door.

It was a given that Neron would protect me. He promised my brother. There were other underlying reasons like us being mates, but that’s him. The mate bond is affecting him. The reality was that Neron doesn’t care about me. He doesn’t love me. It was all the power of the bond making him like this.

Stripping out of my clothes, I entered the hot shower, desperate to wash the dirt clinging to my skin. I must remember that nothing will ever blossom between us. The rose that was our mate bond is wilted, and it must stay that way.

Chapter 54 - The Threat

“How can you forgive someone when they can’t give a reason why?” — PureDragonWolf

Odessa

“You can’t be serious in allowing that...**thing** to stay here after what it did to you!”

“Kiya is not a thing, Odessa. **She** is a warrior and my mate, and you will treat her with respect.”

I scoffed, following with an eye roll. Neron couldn’t be serious, thinking such a lowly wolf was worthy of any title other than ‘slave’. The commotion today drew in the pack as onlookers, some careless to

gamble on who'd win. The reins to my self-control nearly snapped when I watched that cur slam her fists repeatedly into Neron's face, blood splattering everywhere. What was worse was Neron didn't defend himself. He laid there, refusing to strike the rabid bitch.

It was so disgusting that I almost vomited. To see my love laying as he took the hits caused a riot of fury in me, wanting to rip Halima apart. Neron demanding me to treat someone beneath me with respect was an insult to my power.

"Like hell, I will!" I snapped, slamming my hands on his desk. "I'm your true mate, not some ghost of the past! You can't seriously choose her over me!" My nose flared with my every sharp inhale, claws itching to the surface. What happened to us? Why couldn't Neron see that he and I were meant to be together? We were the perfect power couple, two perfect pieces of the same puzzle. We promised each other to forgo our mates to stay together because we loved each other so deeply that even the gods in heaven couldn't reach us. How can that love be forgotten? Why had he now chosen her over me?

However, Ariel howls for Darien and Sirius. Her lust and love ache for him, desperate for his gentle touch. It was fucking annoying! She wanted the wolf, but I didn't want the man. I've been in love with Neron ever since I could remember. He treats me like a queen, always putting my needs above his. He was the apple of my eye, my red string of fate.

I'll be damned if anyone takes him away from me.

Neron stared, his eyes rigid in a chill. Handsome, yet terrifying. Until now, he has always looked at me with love. With desire. With honesty. Now that's all gone!

"You have a mate, Odessa. A mate that will love you more than I can. Go to him."

"I rejected him."

His eyes went hard, anger boiling like a tea kettle. “You did what?”

“I rejected him.” I repeated. “I told you I don’t want him. I love you and only you. Besides, we promised each other we’ll reject our mates. I did my part!”

“I was a fool back then. Blinded by my selfishness and grief.” He stood and walked to the window, eyes longing. “I still care for you, Odessa.”

“Then why are you throwing me away?”

“I’m not throwing you away.” He looked at me again, his voice somber. “I’m letting you go. Take back your rejection and live happily with your true mate.”

“No!” I yelled, anger bubbling out. “I’m not giving you up, Neron! That bitch will never love you as much as I do.”

My hand went to my cheek, rubbing the faint throbbing pain that cur left on me. “Can’t you see it? You’re pining for a woman that wants nothing to do with you. Why try for her when you already have one who already loves you? I have more than what she could ever give you, and yet, you want her.”

He went silent, his eyes back at the window. I knew he was looking at her as she trained the pups. Anyone with brain cells could see how he was smitten with her. The love in his eyes is for her. He pursuits, although she never gives him the time of day. Why try? Why choose the hard way when he could have the easy way?

Neron and I have history and we knew each other well. She was just a slave who gained some meat on her bones. She is nothing special and will never amount to be a Luna.

I love Neron. So much. He was my first everything, first kiss, first date, and the only person I’ve slept with. I bore my fears and my vulnerability

to him, and my heart beats only for him. He was the holder of my heart and I couldn't imagine my life without him.

Why settle for a Delta when I have a powerful Alpha who could command anyone to their knees?

When Neron rejected that dumb dog for me, I was so happy. The entire pack knew that their Alpha defied the mate bond and willingly made the choice to mate with me. He proved to me that the love between us was true. The mate bond meant nothing since we loved each other so profoundly. He hurt for me, killed for me, and protected me.

And now Halima had returned, going by a different name, and suddenly, I was a shadow. I couldn't find it in myself to be angry at Neron, my heart won't let me. I concentrate all my rage on that...thing! She waltzes in here with half of the unmated men groveling for her attention. Her presence alone enchanted Neron.

My Neron!

I don't care if she is Raina's little sister. Halima will pay for enthralling my Alpha. Mate bond be damned! She was a sorceress, her evil spells hypnotizing men to look at her! Deep down, I knew she wanted him. But she doesn't deserve love!

"You will get hurt, Neron." Backing towards the door, my eyes remained locked on his beautiful face. "You only love her because of the bond. You don't love Halima, truly. How could you when you know nothing about her? You chose me—no one will ever forget that. But I'm not giving up on you. You are my only one, the first and the last."

After no response, I walked out of his office. The desire to get rid of someone had never been so powerful. It rolled through my body, delightful tingles tickling my nerves. It made me feel happy and powerful. Getting rid of her requires some planning, but a minor sacrifice would be worth it.

“The love from our mate will make you realize your mistake,” Ariel growled. She hasn’t been happy since the rejection. **“Are you willing to go down this road to get a man who never belonged to you?”**

“Neron belongs to me, always and forever. And if you won’t help me make that dream come true, stop bitching and screw off!”

“You’re going down a dark path, Odessa. The darkness will swallow you whole and you will be the one hurt in the end.”

I slammed down a mind-block, silencing my mind. I was sick of Ariel’s insipid protests. I don’t care if I was heading down a dark path—it all would be worth it once I get what I want. I was still Zircon Moon’s Luna. Halima and Neron may be mates, but their bond is weak.

And I will use that to my advantage.

Beware, Halima. Because I will destroy you.

No one takes what’s mine.

Kiya – Two Days Later

“I don’t understand how humans could make so many cute baby clothes!” Lyria exclaimed, holding up her new findings to the camera for me to see. *“I’ve been convincing Dimitri to buy everything on the market, but he complains that the baby has enough!”*

“Well, you’ve shown me the baby’s closet...I have to side with Dimitri on this one.”

“You’re my sister! You’re supposed to be on my side, Kiya!”

“Lyria! I think Alexi has enough clothes, diapers, and supplies to last until when he has kids!”

“*No, it’s never enough!*”

I cackled as I ogled at my laptop screen. I was on a video call with Lyria, who’s eight months pregnant. She was glowing in her pregnancy and I blame the hormones for her erratic emotions over baby clothes. If I were to go in the baby’s closet at her pack, I would meet with a crushing avalanche of baby powder, diapers, and tiny blue clothing. Lyria spent more on the baby than I do in a semester’s tuition.

“Goodness, I miss you so much, big sis.” I smiled. “I wish I could be there for Alexi’s birth. I’d give anything to hold my nephew.”

“*Dimitri promises to send pictures.*”

“Keep them PG, please!”

“*Fiiine.*” She rolled her eyes playfully. “*How are things with you?*” *Tony told me you’re stationed with your old pack until the end of the summer.*”

I sighed. I knew she would ask this, eventually. “It’s...interesting. I’m doing my best with the situation.” The incidents between Neron and I were intense, but I neglected to tell Lyria that. It was too much to process. “But I have Jackie and the others with me, so it’s all good.”

“*That’s good. Having friends makes everything worthwhile. How are you feeling seeing old faces again?*”

“Well, everyone wants my forgiveness, which will happen once the seven circles of hell freeze over. I much rather be back home, but these next few months will fly by.”

Lyria's expression fell into worry the longer she looked at me. She wanted to say something but decided against it. "Sis, I'm fine." I insisted, "Things are rough around the edges, but it can be smoothened."

"I know, I know. I should know better than to underestimate your tenacity. Remember that I'm here to talk. At this point, I won't be sleeping anyway since Alexi likes to kick my bladder like a soccer ball."

"Ah, he will be a handful."

"I know, that's why Dimitri is will be on diaper duty."

We both shared more laughs before Lyria had to return to Luna business. Bidding her farewell, I shut my computer, resting it on the table. A sense of tranquility lulled me to relax after speaking with my big sister. I was so happy for her, she was living her best life with her husband, her pack of Thunder Moon, and is carrying the next Alpha. I still remember the lovely chaos at her wedding where she announced she is pregnant.

Mom slumped to the ground so quickly that Dad thought she had a heart attack.

I close my eyes as I reflected on my experience with my adopted family. My brother and sister were blessed with wonderful families, keeping up the legacy of Alphas. And then there was me, the anomaly.

It was uncommon for a female wolf to remain unmated for this long. Many have children by the time they're my age. It was only a matter of time before Sapphire finds her mate and Galen finds his. My heart throbbed in pain.

My smile fell into a frown. I never realized how lonely it was to be around wolves who have mated. First, it was my siblings, then Jackie. Not wanting to damper the parade of happiness, I never voiced my feelings. Love is a flower that should blossom on its own, with care and patience. I'm mateless by choice and I refuse to love anyone unless they

genuinely love me for me, which was why this mate bond I have with Neron was so problematic.

Does he love me for me? I doubt it. I don't know him as much as he doesn't know me. We're two different people on different paths of life, and at no point do we cross. I was not the same beta wolf who needed protection from the darkness, I must protect myself from it. That's all I could do.

My heart is in a cage, and it will stay there. I couldn't give it out so freely.

Speaking of family, there's an itch I needed to get rid of. "I know you're around the corner, Raina. What do you want?"

I hear a tiny, frightened squeak before mild shuffling. The Beta Female emerged from the wall, anxiety rolling out from her in waves. "How did you know?"

"I know your scent. Why were you eavesdropping on my call?"

Raina shuffles, brown eyes darting to the side like she was avoiding my gaze. "I wanted to talk to you, but you seemed busy. I heard...you call that woman your sister."

"Her name is Lyria." I corrected her. "And I called her my sister because she is."

"N-no, I am." She insisted, stepping into the common room. "We share blood, Kiya. We came from the same parents, so I'm your family. Not her."

"Funny you say that now when you sang a different tune five years ago."

"Kiya, I made a mistake."

“One too many.” I stood up on my heels, walking towards the woman. If people look at us, they’d think we’re twins. Same eyes, same hair, same skin, and the same face. “Family doesn’t toss each other in a tub of scalding water, kick them when they are down, or laugh when their parents stripped their bedroom bare. Exactly what have you done to prove that you’re my family, Raina? You erased me out of your life the moment Alpha Jonathan threw me into the dungeons.”

The woman in front of me groaned, holding her cheeks in exasperation. “Kiya, when are you going to let that go? I’m trying to extend an olive branch here so we could repair what we’ve lost!”

“Let it go?” I pointed a finger at her. “You have the audacity to tell me to let anything go because you weren’t the one with scars and bruises that would never fucking heal! Who are you to tell me what to do?”

“I’m not telling you what to do!” Raina snapped back. “I want us to be a family again! You are my little sister and I love you and miss you. Mom and Dad want you back, and I want you to be a part of my son’s life!”

“Strange. They haven't shown their faces since I got here." I narrowed my eyes, piercing deep into hers. "So, I’m supposed to forget the last thirteen years where everyone treated me like dirt? Turned me into a punching bag? You do not understand how much I cried for you and your parents. Do you know how hard it was to walk around here, trying not to get angry? Exactly what have you lost in the past five years, huh?”

“I...” Raina heaved a heavy sigh, eyes exhausted. “I don’t want to argue with you, Kiya. You can’t hold this over our heads forever.”

I rolled up the pajama pants I was wearing, showing off the big, diagonal scar on my right thigh. “Remember this? You cut me with silver when I was sixteen when I forgot to clean your dress for your date with Valerian. You asked a guard for a blade and you cut me, right at this

very spot. I begged for you not to hurt me, but you never listened. Do you recall what you said to me?"

She looked away, unable to bare the physical memory of her actions. A sob rested at the base of her throat, her fists clenching. "It was a long time ago..."

"*You're lucky I didn't cut your throat.*" I rolled down the sleeve. "Raina, I have an elephant's memory. Not just in my head, but on my body. You may not remember what you've said or did, but I do. Unfortunately, I remembered everything. That's the thing with trauma; it never lets you forget."

I was inches from her, glaring up at her face given our height differences. "Now, answer my damn question. What exactly have you lost these past years? Because, from what I can see, your mother and father still love you. You have a perfect mate and husband and a beautiful son. You're the Beta Female. You are loved and respected."

"I lost nothing..." Raina pathetically answered.

"Exactly." I crossed my arms under my chest. "Does Adonis know who I am or that I'm his aunt?"

"He knows he *had* an aunt, but like the rest of us at the time, he believes you're dead."

"Hmm." I tapped my cheek. "It should stay that way. I will leave at the end of the summer, and you'll never see me again."

"No!" She growled. "You're not leaving me again! You will be in his life!"

"I don't want to. We may share blood, but we aren't family. You are not my sister and would never be my sister, so put that stupid fantasy of yours to rest! I hate you, Raina!"

Before either of us could say anything else, a potent scent of decay and rot permeated into our noses, making us choke. The loud volume of a horn boomed through the air, swallowing the entire territory whole. Intensity and anxiety, with dozens of origins, rolled into the air, thick as smoke. Raina's face switched from pain to horror when she realized what was going on.

“Rogues.” She trembled. “We’re under attack!”

Shit.

Chapter 55 - The Attack

"Learn to dance in the rain - steady hand, steady aim. Knock 'em dead or Redfield ain't my name" - "Far from Alive" Resident Evil 2 Rap by JT Music feat. Andrea Storm Kaden

Kiya

The boom of thunder.

The scent of falling rain.

The aura of chaos.

Together, they shaped the melting pot for battle. It caked the atmosphere of Zircon Moon, frenzied and remorseless. In my peripherals, bodies scramble in and out of the main house in preparation to combat the evil that dared to soil the day. Rain battered against the windows like acoustic drums, broadcasting their presence to all wolves. Trained combatants suited up, faces obscured with determination and ferocity, the exact emotions needed in warfare.

Jumbled chatter mixed with whines of fear twirled in the air as mothers, unmated wolves, children, the elderly, and the sick trekked hurriedly to the underground, impenetrable safety room. Built across from the

dungeons, accessibility to the room was only through the packhouse to ensure the maximum level of safety to the most vulnerable. The pup trainees were amongst those in the safety room because they're unfit for battle.

The stench of decay was enough to make me sick, but I did not have time to dwell on my nausea. It was time to buckle up and take my place on the battlefield. The itch for battle tickled my every nerve, exciting my synapses. Adrenaline immersed me like a tsunami. This was my chance to protect the children, reinforcing the reasons I was rightfully a Delta.

I scowled at Raina for the final time before turning my back. No use to waste time on this fruitless conversation. And I didn't want to waste any more of my breath on her.

"You're going out there?" Raina asked. Her worry was as thick as smoke.

"Yes. We're under attack, as you said. Deltas don't run and I have every intention to fight."

"But you'll get hurt—"

"Comes with the job, Raina." I retorted, cracking my knuckles. "Either you join me or stay the hell out of my way."

"Mommy!" I turn to see little Adonis running towards his mother from the staircase, tears blurring his eyes. He was picked up by his mother, clinging onto her neck for dear life. With his face buried in the crook of her neck, his small body quaked in fear. A sting of pain punctured my heart to see the little boy so frightened.

"It's okay, my treasure. It will be okay." She whispered in his ear, rubbing circles on his back. I see it now. To Raina, Adonis comes first. It was a mother's instinct to protect their children from the ills of the

world, even if it kills them. Raina was not acting like a Beta Female; she is and always will be a mother first.

I'm not a mother, but I understand the need to protect those I love.

"Raina!" Valerian shouted, running to his family. His hands went on his wife and child, one running through Adonis' curls. His jade eyes relaxed as he looked at his son, "This insanity has to end."

"It will, my love." They shared a brief kiss. "Come back to me in one piece."

"You know I will." He smiled. Raina ushered off to the safety room. Adonis peered at me, and for a moment, I could feel the terror emanating from him. That look alone strengthened my resolve.

No one deserves to live in fear.

With a soft growl, snubbing the fact I was still in my pajamas, I left the packhouse into the heavy rain. Quickly, I was drenched, my clothes clinging like a second skin. As pack members filed out, I walked towards my team gathering the weapons of warfare. Briefly, I see Jackie's face twisting in worry as Abigail clasp on her chest plate.

"She has the blessing of Selene. Abigail will survive." I reassured my friend. Abigail is a human, twice as vulnerable as us werewolves. Since I am the avatar of Selene, I could physically grant her protection through a special mark. With Selene's divine will, her vulnerability is radically reduced, physically on par with us werewolves.

I traced an image of a crescent moon on her shoulder with my finger, the magic seeped into her deep brown skin.

Swiftly dressing in my gear, I walk towards the front lines with Galen, Darien, and Jacqueline at my sides. Sapphire and Abigail were several feet behind us, ready for the onslaught. The smell of death grew stronger

as the fighters spread across the territory. Some as humans, but many as fully grown wolves.

It wasn't long until the three ranked wolves of Zircon joined the frontline, their mates safely tucked away in the safety room. Sparks flared on my arm, which I promptly jerked away in anger as I glared in ocean blue.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I accused.

"I don't want you out here," Neron explained. "I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if something were to happen to you in this fight. You should be in the safety room."

"I appreciate the concern, but that won't happen. I'm a Delta, and I need to be out here."

"Kiya—"

"There's no time for this, Neron. I'm staying, whether or not you like it."

Neron snarled softly, shutting his eyes as he inhaled deeply. The rain made his wet hair stick to his flesh, beautifying his god-like features. His clothing soaked up the rain, revealing the outlines of his best assets, including some I didn't need to name.

After a second, he opened his eyes, conveying a silent message into my own. "Fine. Be careful." He muttered.

I said nothing after that. Soon, all the warriors including guards and border patrols stood, armed and ready for an attack. Neron conveyed a message to his entire pack via links, judging by the glassy look in his eyes.

“Don’t hesitate and don’t hold back,” Jacqueline spoke to us. *“Put these bitches in the dirt!”*

The vengeful miasma of death made my eyes tear up and inhumane growls reverberated into the air, causing us all to bristle. This was it. Our enemies made their appearance from the darkness of the woodlands. The rain did nothing to disguise the horror of these wolves, whose jaws oozed bright-green drool.

The rogues don’t look normal. Their horrified emergence was enough to still my heart in unrelenting fear. Each deadly rogue looked as if different pieces of wolves were meshed to form their reanimated bodies like patches sewn on damaged toys. Different ears, eyes, tails, snouts, and so much more shaped their disproportioned bodies. Their eyes were void of life, soulless.

Both sides waited precariously, seeing who would buckle and attack first. We as fighters learn to not fear the bark, but the bite of rogues. Fury and resolve were our best assets, ready to aid us to the top of the hill to claim victory. Pushing aside my hate, I knew we could weather this infestation with minimal casualties. The vulnerable population was counting on our success, many waiting for their mates to return to their arms.

Thunder roared. Lightning flashed. The battle had begun. The reanimated rogues roared and rushed at us at blinding speed, and the pack countered with the ferocity of the gods. The fighters beat and tore at the rogues. Various injuries painted our flesh, but our resolve continued to burn bright as a star. The territory became slippery and muddy, but it didn’t deter us.

Everywhere I turned was the scourge of the dead. If one dies, two more appear from the darkness of the trees, carrying the stink of failed decomposition. I fought off many, but some nicked my arm and my leg.

I didn't yell. I didn't scream. I fought for my survival. I fought for the children hiding, scared for their lives

Two wolves charged at me in unison, bashing me rearward into the soupy mud. Brown blurred my vision as I struggled against their snapping, frothing jaws. Before either took the chance to bite my throat, a large red wolf body-slammed them into the mud, jaws tearing their decaying flesh apart. A brown wolf came into my view, using its snout to help me on my feet.

I growled, batting that wolf away. I knew who it was, and I didn't need them acting like they care when we're in the middle of a fucking war.

Wiping the mud from my forehead, I witnessed Neron tearing apart five wolves at once as Onyx, efficiently showing why he was the king of the pack. Some cowered away, but many foolishly launched themselves at the Alpha, determined to take him down. To his side, Valerian fought valiantly as a brown wolf, despite the deep claw wound at his side. Kwame, as a spotted black and grey wolf, tore down his enemies with ease. Their dominance in the battle was to be admired.

Abigail sliced and diced like an expert swordswoman while Jacqueline, as Rosaline, protected her mate's back. Sapphire blazed through the land, dragging a rogue by the neck, and tossing it to the side with her claws. Galen and Darien, still in their human forms, shot arrows and javelins, impaling many through the hearts.

As more decomposing wolves appeared from the woods, I knew it was time to end this for good. With a roar, I shifted into Artemis, white fur sprouting from my flesh as I landed on all fours. Sharing one mind, Artemis and I worked in unison to destroy the army of the undead.

Dead eyes landed on me, swimming in the only emotion I saw in their eyes for the first time, fear. I tore apart the nearest rogues in front of me while many retreated. An interesting development if I might say.

Suddenly, there is a distant, disembodied howl that rang through the air, halting all undead rogues in their tracks.

In a flash, all the rogues disappeared into the woods, although some got pulled back into the field to be killed. In less than a minute, the victor of battle is decided. Zircon Moon stood triumphant on their land, wolves howling in the war's end. Panting, I sat on my rear end, allowing the rain to wash the dirt off my snowy fur while the howls of victory echoed through the storm.

It's over. We won. But something told me it won't be the last time we'll see of those rotting rogues.

"Hold still and let me use this antiseptic on your wound, Kiya!"

"I can help myself, Sapphire!"

She continued to shake the can and spray the claw mark on my calf, ignoring my protests. I sat on a rock in baggy shorts and a large t-shirt as the aftermath of the battle settled in. Warriors and border patrols dragged the rotting bodies of the rogues away, slime-like green staining the grass in their wake. The injuries we sustained are, oddly, taking more time to heal than usual, so the pack doctors and paramedics had to pitch in with the treatment.

My wound was healing, albeit slowly, but the antiseptic made it feel cleaner. Exhaling a breath, I didn't know I was holding, I relaxed. The stench of death disappeared, leaving behind the clean air of earth Mother Nature graced us with. It was needed after a lengthy battle.

"There you go." My blond friend handed me a single roll of gauze with a smile. "I know if I tried to bandage you, you'd just might bite me. So, I'll leave you to it, girl."

Smirking, I took the gauze from her hands. Suddenly, Sapphire's blue eyes flashed black, nostrils flaring. A deep growl rumbled in her chest and before I knew it, the woman took off faster than a space rocket.

"Huh. What's gotten into her?"

"Uh oh." Jackie sang, eyebrows bouncing. "Looks like the little pup has found her mate."

My jaw dropped. Seriously? Who knew that Sapphire would find her mate in this backwater pack? My heart swelled in happiness at the thought of my friend achieving the love she deserves. After being mateless for so long, my blond friend deserved something like this.

"How long do you think it will be before she gets knocked up?"

"Jackie!" I pushed her shoulder. "Where's Darien and Galen?"

"Darien is helping to transport some warriors to the pack hospital who sustained non-life-threatening injuries. As for Galen, I haven't seen him in a hot minute." On cue, the both of us saw Galen walking across the field hand-in-hand with a handsome man with a bandaged forearm. From where we're sitting at, the twinkle in Galen's eyes shone as bright as a star and his grin stretched on for miles. I've never seen him like that before! That could only mean one thing...

"Oh! It looks like Galen found his as well!" Jackie laughed, clapping once. My jaw dropped. What are the odds that both Sapphire and Galen's mates were here? "It is a good thing we came along for this mission, isn't it, Little Bit?"

"...I guess." I muttered, toying with the hem of my shirt. As Abigail finishes bandaging up her arm, Jackie drew her in her arms and kissed her forehead. Abigail emerged unharmed from the battle, only covered in grime and mud. The relief on the Beta's face is more than enough to calm her heart.

No matter what, Jackie would always worry about Abigail's safety. They were mates and deeply in love, and with love comes worry.

That's probably why Neron jogged up to me, ready to draw me into his arms. I quickly shot up from the rock, keeping a three foot distance from him. "Don't even think about it."

Realizing what he was about to do, Neron softened and nodded. "I'm sorry. I needed to see that you were okay."

"As you can see, I'm fine." I sat back down on the rock, dressing my leg wound. "How many casualties today?"

"For once, none." He sighed in relief. I could tell that he didn't want to face more losses from his pack. Zircon Moon couldn't take another hit like before. "You've trained my warriors well in such a short time. For that, I thank you."

"Just doing my job."

"Here." Neron knelt on the wet grass near my calf. "Let me help with that. I have gauze tape."

I didn't want him to touch me. I didn't want to feel those fucking sparks. "Just give me the tape. I can handle it myself."

"Kiya," His blue eyes were pleading. "I know you can handle it, but please let me have this and I'll give you space. Onyx is worried and won't stop howling."

My eyes narrowed, glaring daggers. "You swear you'll give me space?"

He shot me an irritating smirk. "For today, at least."

I rolled my eyes, resisting the urge to smack that smile. "Make it quick."

His blue eyes lit up like a child on Christmas Day. Pulling out the gauze tape from his pocket, he got to work. His fingers, gentle and cautious, readjusted my gauze. Firm, but not tight. The tips of his fingertips brushed against the brown skin, sparks erupting underneath. I hated the feeling, but it was over just as it had started. Neron finished taping the bandage before smiling. “There. How do you feel?”

“Fine.” I shot to my feet and walked away, leaving him near the rock. As much as I appreciated the help, that’s as far as I was willing to let him touch me. Anything beyond that would blur lines, and I couldn’t afford that.

As I walked towards the packhouse, the red and brown wolves that took the rabid rogues off me trotted toward me. Their gold and amber eyes looked at me with saddened expressions, their tails between their legs. One red wolf tried to rub its snout on my leg, but I backed away. Crossing my arms underneath my chest, I glared at them.

“My gratitude for you both does not extend off the battlefield. If you have something to say, say it now because I won’t give you that chance later.”

The two wolves went behind one statue at the front stairs. Emerging clothed were two people I wished I’d never see again. Two people I hoped were dead and buried before I arrived. Two people who, unfortunately, each gave half of their genetic makeup to me.

Steven and Ashley Lane.

My biological parents.

“Halima, my baby girl...” Ashley squeaked with watering eyes, walking toward me.

I stepped back as if I was avoiding a fire. “Kiya is my name, and I’m not your fucking baby girl.”

Steven took a step next to his wife, grasping her hand. "She is your mother, Kiya."

"She sure didn't act like it before." I rolled my eyes, tilting my hip to the side. "So, what have you come to beg me for? Forgiveness? Because I'm not here to accept any olive branches."

"Baby girl, please, you can't reject us like this," Ashley begged. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes again. "You have no idea how much I suffered when you died. I thought you were gone forever. I missed you so much and prayed for the day we'd meet again. I-I didn't expect to see you alive after so long. It was a miracle from the Moon Goddess."

"For me, not for you, Ashley." My remark lanced her through the heart because she looked at me with an expression full of misery.

"We shouldn't be surprised at the way you are now," Steven bowed his head as his voice quaked. "We failed you as parents. We failed you in so many ways." His voice cracked. "I should have been a father...an actual father to you. I should have never treated you the way I did. We should have been at your side to give you what you deserve. Please Kiya, find it in your heart to forgive us and your sister."

"I love you so much. I still do and always will." Ashley added, hands clasped together like she was praying. "I don't want you to be angry at me. I want my baby girl back. I want our family to be the way it should have been before all this madness happened. I'm so sorry, Honeybee. Your father is sorry, and Raina is sorry. Please..."

My heart clenched at the old nickname. Honeybee. Because I liked to wear yellow and I was always found near the flower bushes in the woods back then. That name was lost in the wind and no longer stirs any warmth in me. It was dead, like my love for these people. They weren't my parents. I have my real ones back home.

And I liked the nickname Moonbeam better.

“I know you hate us...” Steven muttered.

“I don’t hate you,” I tell him. “I can’t hate people I don’t care about. Or maybe I do hate you both? But I do know that I hold no love for either of you.”

Tears fell freely from Ashley’s eyes as she sobbed into her trembling palms. Something should stir in me, like a feeling of remorse. I couldn’t change who gave birth to me, but I sure as hell can choose my parents.

“This conversation is over. You both don’t deserve the title of parents. It wasn’t like anyone forced you to be cruel to me. You’re grown people capable of making choices and you chose to not only be cruel but to abuse me. You both were the reason I became a slave, and now you want me to forgive you? Some things cannot be forgiven, and it isn’t starting today.”

With that, I went into the house as Ashley wailed behind me.