

Lita's Love for the Alpha

The New Normal

The world was still dark when Lita snapped awake. Her eyes immediately took a tour of the room, assuring herself that she was home. Sweat slipped down her throat, hair plastered to her back and shoulders. She couldn't breathe... she couldn't... Lita wheezed, clutching her chest. *Fuck.* The nightmares still hadn't gone away. She wiped away the sweat on her brow and pushed up in bed. Cole's hand squeezed her hip once before he rolled over to go back to sleep. A silent gesture he'd started when she insisted she didn't want him waking up with her. He was hardheaded about it for the first week after they got back home. But now, he let her have her space. She wanted to be alone when she woke like this, struggling with what was real and what was fake. And as hard as it must have been for him, Cole let her.

She didn't have the nerve to tell him she couldn't always tell if he was real. This way was better until she could re-center herself. Throwing her legs over the edge of the bed, Lita forced herself to focus on what was real. The hardwood floor Cole finally finished two days ago. The new bed she'd picked out last week. It still had that new-bed squeak on his side. The dresser with the dent where she'd bumped the door moving it in. She ran her finger over the paint lines and blew a breath. It was an exercise her new therapist had recommended. A way to make her mind differentiate between dreams and the real world. Predictable. Mundane.

The nightmare tonight wasn't a new one. It was much the same as the other variations her mind concocted. She'd started out in Cole's arms, happy and safe. He kissed her deeply and they made love until she fell asleep. Then she was thrust awake by the cold bark of water over her face as she went under. Hands pressed her into the cracked concrete of the pit floor. She thrashed and tried to kick but nothing helped. The hands were impossibly strong, her body impossibly weak. Water found its way into her lungs. Then the dream morphed and she was hacking up a lung onshore, dirt and swamp wet clinging to her. She desperately crawled up the embankment towards the totaled car. Smoke and her teary eyes turned the world hazy. Her brother's bloodied body was barely visible through the smashed windshield, nothing more than a dark outline. She couldn't even scream, her throat too full of water.

And now she was here, safe in the real world of her bathroom, staring at her bloodshot eyes in the mirror. Lita swore. Her therapist said trauma would take time but she was exhausted. How much longer would she torture herself? Running her hands under the cool water, she washed her face and brushed her teeth.

Then, fishing out a set of workout clothes, Lita dressed and tugged on her sneakers. Grabbing her phone and headphones, she checked the time. Just after three in the morning. She sighed as she opted for the stairs instead of the fancy elevators Cole had installed in their home. Spending Maxim's filthy money on their creature comforts felt oddly satisfying. She hoped he had a great view from hell.

Snagging a quick drink of water and a few bites of a protein bar, Lita stretched her aching muscles for a few minutes. Tugging on a fleece-lined jacket, Lita headed out into the bitter cold of the early morning dark. April, and the long-awaited spring, had arrived overnight it seemed. Long nights and dim days gave way to the gentle warmth. The nights and early mornings were still wintery though, much to her displeasure. Bitter frost and the familiar sting as she drew cold air into her lungs greeted her as she took her first jogging steps.

Lita jogged through the new areas of the packgrounds to see the progress on the new housing units. She smiled at all the work the men had been putting in. They had the beginnings of a family center, converted from one of the larger industrial buildings. The old packhouse was being renovated to make it three times larger. And most of the smaller new homes were almost done. They didn't have enough industrial buildings left over to convert for housing for the new additions they assimilated so they'd built them from scratch using standard materials.

Something about the sight of moving boxes and building materials made her feel happy. It was reassuring to see the pack getting settled in. As if knowing her heart was starting to feel good, her mind switched tracks. She thought back to the day they assimilated Maxim's pack and shuddered. It had already been two weeks but the memory still stung.

Fifty people. Lita couldn't stop thinking about the fact that fifty people decided they couldn't stomach her as their new Luna. Fifty single individuals looked at her and chose a rogue life. What had they thought when they looked at her?

It was a small number compared to the two hundred and thirty that swore loyalty and joined their pack but, be it pride or her twisted sense of self-deprecation, Lita couldn't stop wondering about the people who said *no*. Logically she knew their refusal said more about them than it did about her. She knew it. And yet... her brain was hell-bent on torturing her.

It was a quiet kind of torture. One that interlaced with images of her time in maxim's pack. One that remembered the screams and the pain. Then remixed through all the traumatic moments of her childhood with her dismissive parents. Of course, Brian made a cameo or two as he took what little self-esteem she had. And then there was James, and the colossal crater he left behind. And the nightmares were a symptom of those traumas, her therapist said. A totally normal result of her unresolved pain.

Lita stopped jogging at the gym and leaned against the building. Everything hurt. Her lungs, her muscles, her heart. She was out of shape and sleep-deprived. It felt like she'd reverted back to the broken girl who first came here last summer looking for a new life. She wasn't sure whether that made her feel better or worse.

Pulling the back door to the gym open, Lita expected to find it dark and empty but instead, she saw a handful of women shoving their hands in boxing gloves and talking quietly.

"Oh—L-Luna, sorry, do you need to be in the gym alone?" one woman asked, her face unsure and scared. They were new pack members, some that had assimilated from Maxim's pack, but she'd never seen them at the daily mass training. Of course, training wasn't a requirement. Pack members could find other ways to be useful outside of competitive fighting for purse money but it had bothered her that more of the women didn't want to join. Especially the ones who had been treated like slaves. Wouldn't they want to learn to defend herself as Lita had after Brian? She tried not to judge but it bothered her.

Yet here she found them, at three in the morning, looking as guilty as if they'd broken into the pack safe. She had never considered they didn't feel comfortable training with the others. What would it have been like Lita wondered, to grow up in captivity like that? Being told every day that life would be a certain way. And then being thrust into a pack where life wasn't like that at all. It had to feel like a trick... it had to feel like a set-up. That as soon as they showed any interest, they would be punished. Lita wanted to hit her head against the wall. *Of course, they wouldn't want to train!*

She should have seen that coming. A good Luna would have anticipated the needs of her pack and known that the women would be terrified of being punished. She herself was dealing with the aftermath of her time in captivity. She could only guess what kinds of mental and physical scars they were hiding. But she was too focused on herself to notice.

"N-no, I don't need the gym to myself," she forced herself to say, her throat roughened by the cold air, "Can I ask what techniques you plan to practice?" She kept her tone conversational, gently setting her phone and headphones down on a stack of mats near the door. Lita had a distinct impression that if she moved too fast, they would scatter and she'd lose the opportunity.

"Um, we..." another woman started to say but her voice fell away. They all looked sheepishly between one another and none of them would meet her eyes.

"It's cool, you don't have to tell me," she smiled softly, "I came to get a little time in before the men hog all the equipment." Lita took slow, even steps over to the boxing gloves, rolling her shoulders in anticipation. She wasn't really ready to begin bag work but neither were these women and she figured trying to direct them to a different activity, would blow up in her face. Lita wanted them to trust her. So she had to meet them where they were.

Strapping on the gloves, she pretended not to see the women watching her as she stretched out her arms and shoulders. She saw them begin to copy her movements. Stretching out their arms behind their backs and rotating around to the front.

Lita did some small practice movements in front of the punching bag. She put herself in and out of the proper foot position, moving slowly so they could see. She practiced a few jabs, more of them than what was necessary for warming up, but she knew they were trying to learn without asking. Again, she acted as if she didn't see them spread out to their own bags, mimicking her movements.

She struck the bag once, not hard enough to move it, just hard enough to connect and demonstrate the proper strike. Like an echo, she heard their bags smack in quick succession. She didn't fight the proud smile that burst out of her. Then she silently went back to training, knowing this would become her new normal.