

Chapter 12 - Burned Field of Innocence

"Where has my heart gone? An uneven trade for the real world. I want to go back to believing in everything and knowing nothing at all." - 'Field of Innocence' by Evanescence

(Content Warning: Mentions of child abuse. Reader discretion is advised.)

Neron

"I don't know how you did it, man. Lorelai's hormones are sucking me dry."

"In a good way or a bad way?"

"As much as I love making love to her, I need some energy to—I don't know—function throughout the day."

"Ah, I feel that. When Raina was pregnant with Adonis, instead of running to her, I ended up running away from her because the obsessive need for my dick was killing me."

Kwame and Valerian's chatter poked the green

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monster within me. I haven't spent time with my best friends lately, so while the pup trainees had their gargantuan pizza party upstairs, we came to the gym for the treadmills. My body sweated, my heart pumped, but the green haze in my mind grows thick as I continued to hear their conversation regarding their mates and families.

Am I jealous? Yes. I'm so goddamn jealous of the blessings it graced my Beta and Gamma with. Don't get me wrong; they deserve it. They're good men. I love my nephew Adonis to death. And I'll be the first one to induct Kwame's child into the pack officially once they're born. But, sometimes, I wish to have a smidgen of their happiness.

Deep in the night, I'd dream about what my life would have been if Kiya accepted me as her mate. I'd dream about our mating, which doesn't hesitate to get me and Onyx riled up. I'd dream about proposing to her and slipping the biggest diamond ring on her finger while we kiss as an engaged couple. I'd dream about our wedding with her adorned in the purest of white, making our sacred vows as husband and wife. Lifting her short stature in my arms and kissing her as my life depended on it. I'd dream about her belly swelling with my child and holding the bundle of joy in my arms as they take their first breath in this world.

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Dreams. That's all they were. Fleeting wishes of another future where pain and torment didn't exist. Another future where I hadn't rejected my mate and took her into my arms where she belonged.

And it angered me because I fucked up a good thing.

"Yeah, you kind of did..."

"Onyx, you aren't helping."

"Hey, you think you're the only one who's suffering? I'd cut off my tail for a moment with Artemis! I want our mate as much as you do. I see your dreams, remember? How do you think I feel?"

"Right...I forgot about that. I know you're hurting too, and I'm the reason. I want our mate so bad, but I can't take her hating me again."

"It's better for us to love her from afar than to keep her close and have her hate every moment spent with us. I wish there was another way to fix this; to keep her with us."

"You and I both know that's not possible. Kiya isn't a

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n object to keep on a pedestal."

"I know that, dummy! I know there's no other solution, but her happiness matters. But, how long will we hurt, Neron? Will we ever get a break?"

Alphas shouldn't cry. They do not need tears. But my body betrays me as tears sting my eyes. I've only cried over three people: Mom, Nuria, and Kiya. Yet, Kiya can cut into my emotions with a knife, letting them spill through the barrier I formed around myself. Mates give the wolf so much strength and resilience.

Yet, they're also our Achilles' Heel.

"Hey, Neron." I felt a poke on my bicep. Turning my head, I met the stares of my men. "We've been calling your name for a minute now. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?" I say without hesitation. Quickly blinking back the tears that threatened to fall, I gradually decreased my speed on the treadmill. "What did you want to ask me?"

"We were asking how things are with you and Kiya," Kwame spoke up as he maintained a steady

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pace on his machine. "Has things gotten better?"

"Things are still the same, I think."

"So, she still hates you?" Valerian asked.

"I...I don't know. It's not as prominent as it was before, but things are slowly getting better between us. I call it a win she doesn't feel repulsed by my presence anymore." Deep down, however, I know she detests me.

"Well, it's progress." My Beta smiled warmly. "I think it's the same with Raina. She's slowly getting used to her big sister again. Seeing my wife smile is all worth it."

"I wouldn't throw confetti just yet," Kwame added. "There's still a lot for her to process before she thinks about letting anyone from this pack in her heart again. I don't think it'll be solved with the little time she has left here."

Right. She's leaving in August and I'll never see her again.

"She'll be happier when she gets back home," I say, grabbing my towel to wipe the sweat off my forehead. "That's all that matters."

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"Does it?" Kwame cocked his head to the side.

"You keep saying that letting her go is the best option to make everyone happy, but what about you, Neron? Your feelings are valid too."

"I forfeited that the moment I beat her all those years ago."

"You can't continue to hold on to the past like that," Valerian added sympathetically. "We all made stupid decisions back then, and it cost us. The only thing we can do is redeem ourselves and move on."

"Neither of you get it! Do you think she had that choice? I helped hurt Kiya when she was a fucking kid and you're telling me to move on from the fact that I was a monster?" The memory of Kwame slamming me to the ground after I marked Kiya as a betrayer resurfaced in the most brutal of ways. Sensations and chaos, I felt that night rushed faster than a violent hurricane.

I hated her. So much. I wanted her dead, and I was more than ready to make her suffer for taking my mother and sister away. I developed plans and fantasized about how I would spill her blood in retribution for the spilled blood and tears of my family. We considered Kiya a bane of existence that I had the responsibility of ridding.

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The monster I've become. The monster I was cultivated to be. All the teachings and connections made that forced my mate into culpability reaffirmed my desire to hurt her because of the pain. Waking up without my mother's kisses and Nuria pranking me with a feather to the nose and whipped cream to my face tore my soul apart.

And I had to take it out on someone. All arrows pointed toward Kiya.

Now, I understand why I didn't feel the mate bond between us until the night of the ceremony. It was the first time I haven't touched her out of hate. I was drowning in hatred and grief. No matter the number of smiles I made, the laughter I shared—even in my relationship with Odessa; underneath it all, I was still hurting. Still writhing, screaming for Mom and Nuria while Dad sunk in darkened pools of alcohol that only grew with every bottle he smashed against the walls. And his unforgiving slaps to my face.

There's no escaping the truth. I was a monster. I, probably, still am a monster. How can I love Kiya with the same hands that were once smeared in her blood?

"She took your mother and sister away! She deserves no mercy!"

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"If the pack falls without your mother's guidance, it's because of Satan's spawn sobbing in her cell."

"How can you ask for me to stop hurting her when she killed your little sister? That thing deserves nothing but pain!"

"If you ask for that bitch's mercy, you're saying that you're happy for the death of your family, you ungrateful brat!"

I believed it all. Kiya's survival felt like an unfair trade for their lives. The pity I felt for her shattered as the hatred for the child bombarded my ears enough for it to twist my mind in agreement. That's the day the veritable beast was born, and it solidified its existence the moment I broke Kiya's nose for the first time.

There's no forgiving what I've done. I've destroyed her. I set fire to her field of innocence, dancing in the ashes of her brokenness. The world got colder that day. No matter how many times I say I love her, no matter how much I show that I'm changing; it will not erase the darkness that I've created.

The fear I put into her.

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The hatred born out of torment.

Kiya can't be my Luna. We can't ever truly mate! She deserves someone better than me! Goddamnit, Moon Goddess! What is your reason for pairing us together? Why didn't you do the right thing and removed the bond between us for good?!

I can't...I can't forgive myself for the harm I've brought upon her.

I deserve to be without a mate. Without a true love. Because I'll fuck it up like the first time around.

"Neron...I—"

"Leave me alone, Onyx!"

A wall slammed down between us. I don't need or deserve words of sympathy. None of that matters. I'm the perpetrator; not the victim—so why, the fuck, do I need someone telling me I deserve happiness?

"FUCK!" Slamming my fist on the handles of the treadmill, I stomped towards the gym bleachers, gluing my pathetic ass to it. "I want her, guys. I want Kiya so much. I need her more than I need

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air, but I don't deserve her. I have no right to want her the way I do."

I heard shuffling before two additional weights sat on either side of me. Kwame and Valerian sat in silence, unsure of what else to say. They know how I'm feeling; we share that bond as brothers-in-arms. They've watched me as I fucked up, over and over, like an immature child—but not even they could stop the monster back then.

I ordered them not to.

"Try talking to her," Kwame suggested in a whisper. "Put it all out there. Forget about the mate bond; talk like how people should. You can't hold on to this guilt forever, Neron. It hurts to see you like this."

"We care about you, bro. We want you to be happy too." Valerian added with a touch to the shoulder.

Everything suddenly became constricting. In the gym and in my chest. "I need some air." I bolted out of the gym like a fire is licking my heels, gasping softly. Once outside the pack house where no one can see me, steadying my breathing became a challenge. My gasps got louder, and my chest continues to tighten as my hand pressed

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against the bricks. Everything spun. I became so lightheaded that I swore I'd fall.

But I didn't.

Because the softness rubbing against the crook of my neck swiftly put an end to what could have been a panic attack. My breathing slowed and stabilized, and the world stilled before my eyes.

"Hoo..."

Diana's small stature sat on my bare shoulder, inviting a calming scent of fresh earth. This owl seems to appear whenever I needed it the most, despite belonging to Kiya. With a sigh, I pushed myself off the wall and rubbed her forehead with my finger.

"Thank you, Diana." I cooed. I've known her for less than four days, and I love this little cotton ball already. With a sweet nuzzle of her beak to my nose, Diana flew away to her home in the trees.

Goddess, I need a nap.

As I walked inside the pack house, muffled laughter from the kitchen bombarded my ears.

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Kiya's in there with her friends, judging by their scents. My mind yells at me to leave her alone because I don't deserve her, but my heart is pulling me for just a peek.

One small peek.

And I'll leave.

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