

Chapter 3 - Lost Memories

*"Memory loss is one way of coping with damage." —
Jeanette Winterson*

Kiya

It's nearly noon when I woke up. Guess I needed that sleep. But everything feels weird. Here I am, sitting at the foot of Neron's bed, staring at my reflection in his vanity. Can I attribute my restful sleep to Neron's scent? Or the fact I'm in his room? Hard to say, especially since I'm covered in it.

And I can't say it's a bad thing. He smells nice.

But there's one thing that bothered me. The sparks. They aren't as powerful as they used to be. Back at the couch, when his fingers brushed against my arm, I felt them but, they're weak. When he tucked me in the bed and touched my face, the sparks weakened that I barely noticed them. I'm used to the weakness in the sparks of our mate bond, but this time, everything felt foreign. Abnormal.

A dull pain throbbed on the side of my neck. It made itself noticeable through the panging underneath my epidermis. It's also the same area where Osiris bit and drank from me those weeks ago. A profound

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effect of the bite still exists long after his death.
Vampires are more skilled than I originally thought.

He's dead. He's gone.

And yet, he continues to fester in my mind. Why?

"Ugh..." Scratching my head, I hopped on my bare feet and took in the Alpha's room once more. Neron has everything in his room than an adult male ever dreams of and then some. The color scheme of blue, black, and red fits him in strange ways. This is the first time I've ever been in his room and I felt out of place. Like I shouldn't be here.

But my feet remained rooted against the soft carpet. Because of my damn curiosity. As the humans say, curiosity killed the cat, and satisfaction brought it back.

Good thing I'm not a cat!

Rubbing my arms, I noticed picture frames settling on top of his drawers and hanging shelves. Some of them are him and his father. Some are him with Valerian and Kwame. Some are from what I assume are special occasions, like parties and his birthday. One, however, captured my attention the most. It's a picture, the frame in pristine silver with no

blemishes or flaws, standing prominently from them all. It's a frame that Neron took care of the most; dust accumulated on the others, but not this one.

It's a beautiful picture of Luna Essie and Nuria. Nuria is settled on her mother's lap. Both show off their biggest and brightest of all their smiles; cheerfulness compartmentalized in their matching sapphires. A happy picture meant to invoke joy invoked pain in me. Pulsating to the rapid thumping of my heart. My fingers, trembling, brushed on top of Nuria's photo.

My first best friend.

A memory I thought was long forgotten rises from the depths of my mind. In a flash, I'm plunged into a powerful episodic memory where I can smell Nuria's scent of pomegranate, feel the soft lushness of her coal-black hair, and see her smile.

Oh, that beautiful innocent smile.

The smile that improved my days.

Flashback - Third Person POV

Two nine-year-old girls poked their tiny heads from the corner leading into the pack house kitchen. The smell of

freshly baked brownies and cookies wafted into the air, beckoning the children to eat them without a care in the world. Nuria's crystal blue eyes trained right on its target; the plateful of treats resting on the island behind Lead Omega Cassandra, who's cleaning the dishes.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Halima asked her friend. "We can get in trouble with our parents."

"Not if we give them our smiles and puppy eyes!" Nuria exclaimed proudly. "And if we run away into the woods after. Besides, Miss Cassandra makes the best brownies in the world! One bite and you don't have to worry about that one kid breaking your honeybee necklace."

Halima grumbled softly. "I would have hit them, but Daddy always says never to hit people without a reason. Only hit if they try to hurt you."

"...But you had a reason." Nuria retorted with a shrug.

"Yeah, but I didn't want to get in trouble." Shaking her head with bouncing curls, the young Beta pointed to the plate. "What's the plan?"

"I'll distract Miss Cassandra." The young Alpha explained. "You sneak from behind and quietly take the plate and run for your life. It's simple!"

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"But what about milk?" The other girl asked. "You can't eat cookies and brownies without milk. It's like eating spaghetti without cheese!"

"Ugh, always thinking of other things we got to do." Nuria groaned, pondering in thought for a few seconds. In the end, she threw caution to the wind. "Forget about the milk. We'll get it another time. We have a mission to complete, Hali! Operation Cookie Snatcher is in full effect!"

Halima gave Nuria a face of unease and incredulously. "Really? You made up that name just now, did you?"

"Yep. Now, let's go!"

Their sneaky plan begun. Nuria hobbled in with her short stature and grabbed Lead Omega Cassandra's attention. As the Alpha's daughter had her distracted, Halima, barefooted, snuck inside. The island is too high for her to reach, so she had to use the chair available near it. Luckily, the Beta's daughter didn't have to move it. With quick haste, she climbed the chair, grabbed the plate in silence, hopped off, and escaped out the kitchen. Once Nuria saw their mission was a success, she quickly ended the conversation and scurried out of the kitchen.

The girls met up in the hallway, admiring their handy work. Nuria patted Halima on the back, showing off her

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million-dollar smile. "You see? Nothing but quick work. Miss Cassandra won't know what hit her."

"What are you two doing?"

Halima and Nuria froze at the sound of the voice. Slowly turning around, they saw Neron standing with his arms crossed. Quirked an eyebrow, he pointed to the obvious plate of surgery treats in Halima's hands. "What's that?"

"What's what?" Both girls asked in unison.

"That."

Shuffling the plate behind them, the children feigned innocence. "We don't know what you're talking about!"

"Hmm." Chuckling, the thirteen-year-old future Alpha leaned against the wall. "Tell you what. Give me a brownie or two and I'll keep quiet about this crime. Mom and Dad will never know you two spoiled your dinner."

"No way! Finders Keepers!" Nuria exclaimed, pursing her lips at her big brother. "You want a brownie? ...Give me a dollar and we have a deal."

Halima giggled as she watched Neron's face contort in

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distaste. Sure, Nuria and she never hung out around their older siblings because of the age differences, but it was fun to have him around sometimes. "I'm not paying my little sister a dollar for brownies when I can ask Cassandra some for free!"

"Suit yourself." Nuria shrugged. In a flash, she unraveled her ponytail, took out the elastic band, aimed, and shot it directly at Neron's nose. Once he was distracted, the nine-year-olds made a run for it. They dodged other pack members and their parents through their daring escape into the woods. In a gaggle of laughter, they ended up near their pond. The pond they called their secret fun place. Colorful birds bathe themselves in the clean water, only to promptly fly away from the ripples the girls made when their feet sunk into it. With the plate of treats between them, they ate.

"How long do you think until we get our wolves, Nuri?" Halima asked curiously as her fingers became sticky with chocolate.

"I don't know. Mom says it will be awhile before we can shift." She explained. "I wonder what they'll look like. Maybe mine will be black like Dad's or grey like Mom's."

"Hmm. Mine might be red. Mommy's wolf is beautiful." Halima smiled in wonder, eyes twinkling under the light

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f the sun. "Our wolves will be best friends, right? Like us?"

"Yeah, they will be!" Nuria playfully pushed her friend on the shoulder. "Hali, we're friends for life. Our wolves will be too. You are my ride-or-die! We're stuck with each other!"

"...What does ride-or-die mean? What are we riding?"

"I don't know. I heard Nero say it a lot. I thought it sounded cool."

The girls laughed under the warmth of their friendship and the sugary high of their stolen treats. It didn't take long for Luna Essie and Beta Ashley to find them and the empty plate of evidence of their misdealing. Unfortunately for the best friends, they got double punishments; stomachaches and a grounding.

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