

Chapter 5 - Face Full of Fluff

"I used to know you the best and now I don't even remember your name." — Mya Waechtler

Kiya

Well, it's back to business! Nothing like a mental breakdown to kick my ass back into gear, right? Yet, there's another dilemma that I need to decipher. And it involved my best guy friend.

Darien has been distant with me. Cold. Cold as the frozen tundra.

Ever since yesterday afternoon, he's acknowledged my presence. He stares at me emotionlessly, like I'm a stranger. We never talk, and he finds any excuse to avoid me. Last night at dinner, when he greeted everyone, he skipped me and went about his evening. Fear festered in my heart at this drastic change. How did we go from close friends to strangers in twenty-four hours?

Something isn't right. I've been noticing him hanging out with Odessa more than usual, and their PDA is becoming almost excessive. Speaking of Odessa, her surrounding air changed. The way she carries herself changed. It's almost like she got

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a power boost out of nowhere. She walks like she owns the world and can crush it with her palms. I'm all for female empowerment and I'm curious about her change, too. And Darien treats her like his queen. She relishes in the attention he gives her because it's given to her with a simple flick of the finger.

I get it. They're mates. It's normal for mates to be affectionate with each other, but that's not the problem. My problem is one of my best friends is ignoring me and treating me like I'm unworthy of his time when he treats the rest of our group normally.

Did I do something wrong? Am I on the verge of losing my friendship with Darien?

"Gah..." I growled internally, shaking my head from this disastrous all-or-nothing thinking. It only leads to trouble and heightened anxiety. After all, I have bigger things I need to focus on.

Like this obstacle course the pack is building for the pup trainees!

Walking to the back of the pack house, I hear the echoing symphony of the hammer against wood and plastic, chainsaws, and drills. Clouds of

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sawdust dusted the air and landed on my unfortunate self. After my mental breakdown, the ranked wolves and Garnet Moon warriors convened in Neron's office to discuss ways to test the pups after two months of training.

Valerian suggested an obstacle course, and we thought it was a good idea. The ideas spurred from human television programs where the contestants compete in front of a crowd battling through different obstacles. As they progress, so does the difficulty in passing through before reaching the end. Time matters too if they want to advance into the next round.

It's interesting.

I'm excited! Wolves of all shapes, sizes, colors, and sexes worked swimmingly together to make the obstacle course happen. Neron and Kwame imported supplies needed for construction from wood to rubber tarps and plastic. Spotting Jackie, Sapphire, and Abigail carrying gymnastic mats, I trotted over as the three women dropped them. Dust and dirt picked up in the air, invoking coughing and spitting.

"Hey, Little Bit!" Jackie announced with her award-winning smile. She pulled me into a tight hug. "Finally coming to help us, eh?"

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"Yeah, there's no way I'm going to miss this." I nodded. "Do you guys need help with anything?"

"Nope. We got it handled." Abigail replied, stretching her right arm out. During the whole kidnapping madness with that brute Cerberus, she broke it. Now, it's almost healed. Dr. Jackson said she must wear an arm sling for another week so the fracture can fully heal. "I heard Kwame and the others need help with the climbing wall."

"Cool! I'll go check it out." Bidding my friends farewell, I walked to where the ranked wolves of Zircon Moon are, and immediately, I'm met with shirtless men and women glistening under the blistering sun from sweat. Whoever is in charge of the sun made it a show to glitter their colorful flesh with their primal beauty.

And Goddess, my heart is weak. Being attracted to both sexes is a pain in the ass because I have the communication skills of an over-baked potato.

And it's made worse when Neron jogs up to me. Goddamnit, would it kill him to put on a shirt?!

"I kind of like it," Artemis says with a smile in her voice. "**Neron is a very handsome man.**"

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"Dude, you aren't helping! We're supposed to hate his guts, remember?"

"We can hate him and admire his beauty at the same time. No rule against that."

"Good grief."

"Hi, Kiya." Neron smiled down at me, casting a shade over me. The sun is a dastardly star, for its light cast a halo around the Alpha's exquisite form. Sometimes, I wish I were taller because I, unfortunately, have a face full of chiseled chest, glistening with sweat with an aroma powerful enough to make me lightheaded. The fact that I need to tilt my head back just to be face-to-face with this Alpha is an insult to all short people everywhere.

And I'm not even short by human standards! Just werewolf standards!

"Hi," I grumbled. "Can you put on a shirt?"

"Under this summer heat? Working on building this course for the pups? Nope." He chuckled, brushing his black hair back. "Let me guess: I'm distracting you?"

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"Yes."

"Maybe that's a good thing. You find me attractive."

Heat rises to my cheeks. "Don't flatter yourself. I don't."

"Yes, you do. Your squeaky voice says otherwise."

"Shut up!" Ending our banter of whether I find him attractive, which I do, but his ego needs to deflate a bit, I walk around him to get a better look at the construction. "What do you need help with? Jackie said you need help with the climbing wall."

"We just need someone to finish drilling in the climbing holds near the top. Some wolves are taking a break, but we aim to have this course done before tomorrow evening."

"I'll do it then." Spotting the bag full of colorful climbing holds, I grabbed it and a power drill. Before I could climb the ladder, Neron stopped me with a hand on my wrist. "What?"

"Be careful." He warned, knitting his eyebrows. "You can slip off and fall. I don't want you to get

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hurt.”

“It’s only two stories, and the paneling has enough space for me to walk. If I can move around, so can the pups.”

“I know that, Kiya. But even so, be careful.”

“I’m not fragile, Neron. I’ll be fine.” With that, I climbed to the top of the paneling. Drilling in the remaining pieces was easy. Dots marked the placements on the grey plywood. As I was busy drilling, owl sounds echoed near me. I jerked my head to the side to spot Diana watching me work, gold eyes watching with curiosity. Smiling, I waved at her and resumed until I finished.

“There.” I stood erect, not just over the wall, but over the construction. A beautiful sight of a combined effort to make something for the next generation of warriors warmed my heart. It warmed me to know that I’ve taken part in this journey to help wolves reach their full potential.

I cannot wait to see what they’re made of once the obstacle course is ready.

That should’ve been the end, right? Wrong. Because when I turned around, I met with a face

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full of white feathers and chortling hooting. This fucking bird and her personality! It caught me so off guard that I stumbled backward over the edge with a scream as gravity pulled me fast to the hard ground.

Great. This is how I die. By an owl to the face and a head to the dirt.

I expected pain. I expected a fractured skull. I expected something to let me know that I've fallen and might not get up, but it didn't come. Because I didn't land on the ground. I landed in the brawny arms of the Alpha.

How did I know? The warmth is unmistakable. And his pleasant smell. I'm losing my mind.

"I told you to be careful!" Neron reprimanded as I moved Diana off my face, sputtering from feather strands that got in my mouth. "So much for space, huh?"

"It wasn't my fault!" I shot back. "It was Diana!"

"Who's Diana?"

"Hoo!" Both of us looked to my chest to see Diana ruffling her white feathers back as she retracted

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her wings. Her head tilted and twisted as she looked at my disapproving face and Neron's confused expression. In an attempt of remorse, she hobbled on top of my bosom and nuzzled her small head into the crook of my neck.

Damnit. My one weakness with this nocturnal chicken.

"Neron, meet Diana. My pet owl." I introduced, smoothing the feathers on her back. "Also the cause of my near-death."

"Diana..." He muttered softly. "I've seen her around, perched on various trees around the territory. Hmm. She's kind of cute up-close."

"Yeah, I said the same when we first met." Diana hooted again, this time craning her neck to look up at the Alpha. I watched Neron's face contort from confusion into more confusion.

"She's familiar." The owl flew on Neron's shoulder with what I think is a smile on its beak before nuzzling into his cheek. At first, he's apprehensive; an owl is nuzzling into the cheek of its natural predator. But after a minute, I see a smile crack on the Alpha's face as Diana's cuteness sunk into his heart. "Okay, she's very

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cute up-close."

"I know." Reaching up, my fingers gently graze Diana's colorless feathers, earning a hoot and other sounds in happiness and pleasure. This scene of Neron and I sharing a moment with this snow owl...I like it.

Is it bad that I want more memories of these moments? These sweet moments where we just pet owls and pretend the world doesn't exist around us? Unaware that I'm still in Neron's arms with my body pressed up to his chest?

"...Are we interrupting something?"

Until reality made it painfully aware that this shouldn't be happening. In the middle of petting my owl friend, my head turned to see my friends smirking at me and my compromising position. Jackie's smirking like she suspects something's going on, Abigail looks like she's witnessing a monumental moment between couples, Sapphire is rubbing her chin in deep thought, and Galen is probably mapping out the timeline of when Neron and I accept each other and give him nieces and nephews. Which will never happen! Goddess, didn't this four hate this man two months ago?

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The only person looking at me with a look other than excitement or amusement is Darien. His sharp glares of disgust impaled me constantly in the heart with each second. Pure, heated hatred from his blue eyes made me want to shrivel in the corner and hide. What is this? Why does he hate me?

"Neron put me down," I demanded suddenly, watching my best male friend depart from our group. Disgust permeated with every step he took. "Now."

"What if I don't want to?"

"Neron!"

"Alright, alright." Neron relents, placing me gently on my feet. Dusting the imaginary dust off my clothes, I ran after Darien. Maybe I'm being too clingy. Maybe I'm overreacting. But I have to know what's going on. What changed with Darien to look at me with such nastiness?

No one has ever looked at me like that since...my days as a slave. Oh, Goddess...

"Darien, wait!" He walked into the pack house with me tailing some distance behind him.

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Answers are needed and I must have them before my mind falls under the infinite possibilities of what could or could not have been. "Darien, please. Talk to me!"

He stopped as soon as we got into the foyer, his back muscles working tight underneath his shirt. Fists clenched as tight as knots, he turned to me with anger as powerful as the seven circles of hell.

"What—!"

"Fuck off, Kiya." He snarled. "I want nothing to do with you. You're a stain in my existence and unless you want me to take care of it, you'll stay out of my way."

My mind couldn't comprehend what he just said to me. Did he threaten to hurt me? Darien? One of my best friends who's stuck with me through thick and thin? From the first day, we met when I wanted to train to become a warrior to now. He's the only person I can thank for making me as strong as I am today and now...now...

"Why?" I whispered, my voice breaking like shards of glass. Tears swelled in my eyes, stray ones falling down my cheeks. It did nothing to soften my friend. It hardened his expression more. "What

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did I do? D-Darien, what did I do?"

"Exist."

He walked away, leaving me alone in a sea of misery. One tear. Two. Three. Infinite. My mind is numb. My heart pounds to the beat of sorrow. Blood flows silently under the noise of a shattered friendship. I didn't know when I started walking, only to find myself in my room again with the door locked behind me.

I just... I lost my best friend. I lost my confidant. Everything we went through together...it meant nothing? Is my existence that much of an insult to him? Was this what he truly thought of me? What did I do to make him hate me? Heavy sobs escaped the trenches of my throat, echoing through the silent air of my room.

This couldn't be happening. This can't happen!

"Oh, but it did, my Little Moon. On a scale of 1-10, how deep does the betrayal of a friend burn?"

Little Moon? What—

Oh.

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My.

God.

The surrounding atmosphere dimmed rapidly into a dark, desolate one with no chance of sunlight penetrating through. It wrapped around me, choking me in the announcement of its presence. I never thought I'd hear the nickname 'Little Moon' again.

There's only one person who ever called me that.

And he should be dead!

I turned around to see a mass of smoke hovering over my bed like a ghost and within it; I saw a pair of glowing, vermillion eyes staring deep inside the pit of my breaking soul.

"Osiris...?"

"Surprise, my dear! I bet you thought you'd seen the last of me."