

Chapter 9 - Let Me Help You

"Helping those in need is not charity, it's humanity."

— *Abhijit Naskar*

Neron

"You want to split the trainees into teams?"

"Yes. Let them fight it out in a battle royale on the course."

Kiya and I are discussing the obstacle course test for the pup trainees in my office. Separated by my desk, I watch my mate work her mind as her fingers flip through the progress reports of our newly shifted wolves. A concentrated look on her face told me the tale of her focus and critical thinking. She's serious and calculated in her thoughts of my proposal, humming to herself.

"Wolves do like competition..." She muttered. As their chief trainer, it's only fitting to run proposals and plans by her first before implementing them. Before my eyes, I've seen the young pups blossom extraordinarily from their early days of wolfhood. Many train together after hours with Kiya's enthusiasm, pushing them to do their best. Strict, but fair. Serious, but compassionate. I've received

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comments and applause from the parents and families of the trainees remarking how strong their child or children have become under Kiya's tutelage.

They shouldn't direct their words of praise to me. It belongs to her. I could tell that she feels uncomfortable by the admiration, often glossing it over as her duty as a Delta. It'll only be a matter of time before the pups receive a new trainer after Kiya's departure, and I can only hope he or she will keep up the same streak as my mate.

There are glitters of hope shimmering in the eyes of my pack members as they spare glances at Kiya whenever she walks by. Sometimes, I can't help but stare at her too. She's beautiful as she's fearsome. Many have asked me when she'll be ceremonially inducted as Zircon Moon's Luna.

And it hurts to see those glitters fade as I reveal that she won't be Luna. I understand their disappointment; my mate has the makings to be a mighty Luna wielding her hand on the side of justice. As my destined partner, that automatically makes her destiny to my Luna. The heart of the Alpha. She's strong, determined, stubborn to a fault, and fantastic with children.

But that's not the path she wants. Despite

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possessing all the markers of a fine leader, she chooses not to pursue it. I cannot ignore the dark past buried underneath the foundation of my land. Who, in their right mind, would want to rule over a pack that's brutalized them for years? It's not Kiya's job to heal Zircon Moon when we, once, didn't give a damn about her healing.

Goddamnit. It doesn't make my dreams any less real. In a perfect world, we'd rule side by side. We're married. We'd have pups. But that's all it is. A wishful utopia. One that no one can force on her. We, as a pack, can continue to dream and hope for our future Luna, but we must face the facts sooner than later that it will not happen.

And I don't know what that means for future heirs. Yet, none of that takes precedence. I don't care about that.

"Let's do it." Kiya perked up. "I like the competition route. It'll make it more fun for the pups and the pack can witness the spectacle."

I care about **her**.

"Perfect." A smile made its way to my face. "We split the pups into two teams, and we'll lead them."

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"We?" She arched an eyebrow. "You're getting involved?"

"Yes. It's part of my job to oversee potential candidates advance from pup trainee to a full trainee." I shrugged my shoulders. "And it'll give them more motivation to do better if their Alpha is in their presence."

"Ah." Kiya nodded. "Fine. I'll let this slide. You don't want them to slack off. I guess with you around, it'll make the competition that much meaningful." She leans back in her chair and crosses her arms underneath her chest. My mind zipped to a forbidden place when my eyes caught the slight jiggle of her mounds.

"I bet they're soft like pillows!"

"Fucking hell, Onyx!" Ignoring his boisterous laughter, I slammed down walls both for him and other stray sinful thoughts that threaten to show me soft porn.

"However..." Her voice pulled me back into reality. "The trainees are impressionable. They want to impress their leader. They'll fight to be on your team if it gets them noticed by you."

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"What can I say?" I chuckle amusingly. "What do you propose?"

"Randomization. Instead of picking which team they want to be on, they'll draw from a hat. Thirty trainees divided by both of us will yield fifteen members on each team. And since this is a competition, there should be a prize."

"Bragging rights?" I suggested.

"That's an automatic reward." My mate chuckled. "I'd pay any amount of money to hear that laugh for the rest of my life. "I'll think of something before tomorrow. Any ideas for team names?"

"Creative names aren't my forte." It's true. Coming up with names is just as bad as learning how to bake. It gets messy. I never came up with names for my past drawings for this exact reason.

"Fine. Let's keep it simple: Team Alpha versus Team Delta."

I liked it! This will, for sure, get those kiddos excited for what is coming. After the talk, Kiya craned her neck from side to side to rid stress knots, but I didn't miss the faraway look in her eyes. Something's occupying her mind and it's

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bothering her. From the tired expel of breath to the heavy exhaustion written on her cheeks. Her hand rubs the side of her neck absentmindedly, but I didn't miss the redness encircled around the junction where her neck and shoulder met.

"Kiya?" I asked. At first, she didn't answer me. Silent as a mouse with that distant look. I know she isn't talking to Artemis; I'd see her eyes glazed over. I called her name out again and met no response.

So what did I do? The most annoying thing a person can do. I poked her arm. And that brought her back from her brief trance, glaring at me with daggers.

"What?"

"Are you okay? You seemed...preoccupied."

The glare instantly softened as she expelled a sigh.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's nothing to worry about."

"Have you been sleeping?"

"Sort of."

"Have your friends checked your room?"

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"Yep. They found nothing."

"I could have you moved to another room if that'll help you sleep better."

"No, don't trouble yourself with that. I'm fine."

"Have you been eating?"

"Are you my mother?"

I blinked. I admit this line of questioning sounds like what a mother would do. Always checking in and fussing over their child. That's not my goal at all; I'm simply a man worried about their mate.

"No, I'm not. I just want to know how you're doing and if you're okay. You know I'm here if you need to talk." Her eyes averted away from me nervously, her hand continuously rubbing that one spot on her neck for a ridiculously long time. There's something on her mind. There's something she wants to tell me but can't. "How did you get that bruise on your neck?"

"Huh? What bruise?"

Fishing through my bottom drawer, I pulled out a compact mirror. Gold with diamonds encrusted

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around the rim. It belonged to my mother, and I've kept it ever since. I never pulled it out until this day, but I know it's safe in Kiya's hands. Handing it to her, she opened it and checked her neck until she spotted the aforementioned bruising.

Emotions danced across her face in rapid succession. Confusion. Sadness. Anger. Worry. Her nimble fingers delicately touched the red bruise like its tender, but Kiya doesn't express pain. Either there is none, or she's good at hiding it. Bruises don't last on werewolf flesh; they heal within minutes. That redness has been ever-so-present since the beginning of our meeting.

Sighing heavily, she shut the compact mirror delicately and handed it back. "I'm...not sure. I didn't know it was there."

"May I check it?" The apprehension on her face is palpable. She didn't want me to touch her and judging by the glazed look in her eyes, she's speaking with Artemis. Or Artemis is convincing her. After a minute, she expelled a defeated sigh and nodded.

"Fine."

Rising from my desk, I walked over to her and

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gently tilted her head to the side for a better look at the bruise. Electricity propelled through me like rockets from my fingers touching her skin from our mate bond. Kiya didn't even flinch. Does she no longer feel the destined sparks? My heart jumped in fear at the thought because I don't know what her side of the mate bond is like. I only know mine.

The bruise is rather small, but red enough to show through her brown skin. It resembled a splotch of color, like when a painter flings their brush against their canvas. I gently pressed a finger against it, only to retract it within seconds because of the heat.

It practically burned me! I do not know the anatomy of the human body, but I know for damn sure bruises don't burn other people.

"Kiya, is there something else going on with you?" I asked worryingly as she faced me again. "You know you can tell me, right?"

Her deep pools of brown stared deep into my own, waves of emotion crashing against the shore of her lens as she enters an internal battle. To tell or not to tell. The thought of Kiya carrying a secret burden hurt. She deserves to be free, not tormented by a secret. Even as her eyes glazed

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over in communication with her wolf, I still look into them. So beautiful.

And I feel that indescribable, magnetic pull.

Unconsciously, my hand cradled her cheek. And happiness burst forward as she nuzzled into my warmth with a gentle hum. Onyx yips and jumps within my mind, excited at our mate's response to our touch. An uncontained smile sprung forth on my face while my thumb caresses her cheek.

"There's..." She sighed heavily. "There's something you need to know. Something has been bothering me and I know what it is."

"Tell me," I whispered, kneeling on one knee to appear less intimidating. "Tell me so I can help you."

"Okay..." The thudding of her rapid heart echoes in the space between us, slowing down with every breath she takes. My hand hadn't left her cheek, and Kiya has yet to reject my touch. It's a small step, but no words can express just how happy I am. "The thing that's been bothering me is—!"

The doors to my office abruptly swung open and the person who entered forced the temperature to

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plunge several degrees. He's also the same person who turned the soft moment between my mate and me into a sour one. Because Kiya planted her feet firmly onto the ground and pushed her chair away from me.

The sweetness in her eyes burned to ash under the flames of hatred.

"Ah, I'm interrupting something." My father chuckled as if it was the funniest thing in the world, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. I have never wanted to commit patricide more at this moment.

"I was just leaving," Kiya growled darkly. She stood erect from her chair and walked out of the room, only to be blocked by my father.

"Dear, you need not leave. Do stay."

"Kiss my ass." I bit my tongue to prevent a laugh from exiting my mouth. My mate ducked under his arm and marched out of my office with detestation permeating with every step. The office got colder with her absence and it made me angrier.

Dad better have a damn good reason for his interruption.