

## Chapter Twenty: Decisions! Decisions!

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Phera POV:

I stood there, my gaze shifting between Axel, Damon, and Zane. The air in the room felt thick with tension, almost as if it were a tangible thing I could touch. The atmosphere was suffused with a sense of urgency, a need for resolution that seemed to pulsate from the walls of the ADZ Corp office. The solemnity in their eyes made my stomach churn, each set of gray eyes looking at me as if I held the keys to a future we were all uncertain about.

Memories surged, pulling me into the depths of introspection. There I was, a little girl frolicking under the vast skies of the Red Moon Pack's territory. Then, a young woman burying herself in books, trying to escape the raw reality of unexplained abandonment. The late-night conversations with Betty and Reese filled with laughter and sometimes tears. The milestones I'd celebrated alone, the failures I'd kept to myself, and every tiny victory that felt monumental. So much had happened, yet it all seemed to converge to this single point in time. I felt like the epicenter of a complex web, woven with threads of my past choices, their decisions, and our intertwined destinities.

Axel's lips parted, his words teetering on the brink of utterance, ready to offer me the luxury of time to decide what I wanted. But I couldn't let him.

"Don't," I said softly, the word tinged with a sadness that seemed to fill the room. "Don't offer me time like it's a

luxury I can afford."

Confusion and concern drew Damon's dark brows together.

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean that any semblance of agency you think you're offering me is an illusion," I clarified, every word deliberate, weighed down by the truth I'd been carrying. "My wolf, my inner being, yearns for her mates. That's instinctual, an urge I can't simply turn off. And the mate bond?" I paused, looking each of them in the eyes. "It's a force of nature, a pull so strong that even if I wanted to, resisting it would be akin to holding back the ocean's tides. So, tell me, where does that leave me with choices?"

For a moment, the room was silent, save for the muted sounds of the city filtering through the office's glass walls. I could see my words sinking in, their expressions changing as the weight of what I was saying hit them. Zane finally spoke, his voice tinged with a regret I'd never heard from him before.

"We never wanted to trap you, Phera."

"And yet, here I am," I continued, unable to keep the sorrow out of my voice. "Feeling trapped not by ropes or walls, but by circumstances, by biology, by a destiny I never got to choose."

I could see the conflict in their faces, the battle between wanting to assure me and understanding that assurances were not what I needed. They were frozen, perhaps for the first time contemplating the extent of the power dynamics that had always been at play, that would always be at play, between us.



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"I've been through a lot," I concluded, my voice almost a whisper now. "I've been alone, I've been with people, I've laughed, and I've cried. And through all of that, the one thing I thought I had, at the very least, was the power to choose my own path. But you've managed to make me question even that. So forgive me if I don't jump for joy at the prospect of going back to a life where my agency is a theoretical concept at best."

My words seemed to hang in the air long after I'd finished speaking, creating a tapestry of hurt, realization, and complexities that none of us had the answers to. The silence was almost unbearable. I looked at each of their faces—one by one—and knew that whatever came next was not just up to them, but also to the fates that had been pulling our strings all along. For better or worse. 1

Drawing a measured breath deep into my lungs, I let it out slowly, easing the tension in my shoulders as my chin lifted high. The room was thick with a potent, silent energy, as though the walls themselves leaned in, listening intently to the words I was about to utter. The atmosphere felt almost sacred, a silence so profound it seemed like the cosmos itself had halted its ceaseless spin, awaiting my decree.

"I'll go back to the Red Moon Pack," I finally declared. 2

Each syllable distinct and calculated, landing in the space between us like heavy raindrops on parched earth. Axel, Damon, and Zane sprang to life at my words. Eyes that had been dull with worry brightened, their posture changed—shoulders relaxed, heads lifted. It was as though my words had breathed life back into them, filling their lungs with a fresh gulp of air after being submerged for too long.

"But wait," I cautioned, raising a single finger. The small gesture sucked the rising hope from the room as if I'd popped a balloon.

"Before you get carried away, there are conditions you won't particularly enjoy."

"Conditions?" Axel echoed, a quizzical furrow creasing his brow, his lips pulling into a perplexed half-smile as if he'd misheard me.

"Exactly," I affirmed, meeting each of their gazes with a gravity that anchored them to the moment.

"First off, no marking or mating until you've earned my trust and my forgiveness. This isn't a debate or a point of negotiation. It's non-negotiable."

Their eyes turned sharp, almost piercing. Their jaws clenched, teeth grinding subtly against each other. The very air between us grew dense, heavy with a cocktail of disbelief, frustration, and repressed longing.

"Phera, sunflower, we're your mates, the bond—," Damon interjected, but I snapped him off mid-sentence.

"I know what the mate bond is," I shot back, "But a real bond, a lasting one, is founded on mutual trust and understanding, not just biological imperatives." 1

A heavy silence enveloped us. I could see them grappling with my words, dissecting each sentence as they exchanged loaded glances, each look a tacit conversation happening beneath the surface.

"Second," I continued, steamrolling through the palpable tension, "I will have an active role in the financial

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oversight of the pack. I'm not a decorative piece; I have skills and expertise you can't afford to ignore."

Zane was the first to break, exhaling deeply.

"Alright, fine. What's the third condition?"

"I'll also be leading the female warrior training in the pack," I announced, my voice unwavering.

The atmosphere turned precarious, as if a single word could shatter the fragile understanding we were inching towards. They looked like they wanted to argue, but held back—perhaps finally acknowledging that I was immovable on these terms.

"What about the marking and mating? It's not just tradition; it's an integral part of who we are," Axel asserted, his eyes searching mine for some sign of flexibility. 2

"And what's integral to me is having agency, having a say in the trajectory of my own life," I fired back. "I didn't get to choose many pivotal events in my life, especially concerning you three. Now, I'm reclaiming that agency." 1

A laden pause settled among us. Their eyes met mine, reflecting a complex tapestry of emotions—understanding, disappointment, but also a dawning respect.

"Very well," Axel said, his voice imbued with the solemnity of a truce. "We'll abide by your conditions."

They didn't really have a choice, but acknowledging it out loud felt like a seismic shift in our complicated relationship—a shift towards mutual respect.



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"So be it," I replied, feeling the weight of my words in the silence that followed.

I had laid down my terms, set the boundaries, and finally reclaimed my space in a world that had so often sought to define me without my consent. As their nods of acquiescence echoed softly in the room, I understood that this was either a new beginning or an extended prelude to an ending. But either way, it was a chapter in my story that I had penned myself.

Holding their collective gaze, I sensed a subtle transformation ripple through the room. The air seemed to clear, as if acknowledging the new dynamics we'd just laid down, the newly negotiated territories in our tangled relationship. It was as though we'd crossed some invisible threshold and were standing on the edge of a new realm—one laden with uncertainties, but also endless possibilities.

"Is there anything else you'd like to add, love?" Axel asked.

His voice a subdued mixture of acceptance and yearning, the authority of an Alpha tinged with the vulnerability of a man facing the gravity of his own shortcomings.

"No," I stated simply, drawing my words taut, each syllable soaked in a blend of resolve and finality. "I believe that's all for now. But understand this: if these terms are violated, if my agency is disrespected again, there will be no second chances. I'll sever this bond, regardless of the consequences."

The finality of my declaration felt like drawing a line in the sand with a stick made of iron. Axel, Damon, and Zane locked eyes with me, seeing, perhaps for the first time, the

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unyielding pillar of strength I had become. This was no longer the girl they'd left behind—the girl they'd made choices for. I was a woman fully in command of her destiny, unwilling to be sidelined or subjugated.

There was a shared, almost sacred silence as we each considered the magnitude of the covenant we were entering. It was as if an unspoken understanding passed between us: that while the road ahead was uncertain and fraught with challenges, it was a path we'd walk as equals or not at all. Damon cleared his throat, breaking the silence.

"I guess we should get you set up in the financial department then, and maybe introduce you to our female warriors?"


"I'd appreciate that," I said, my voice softer but not a decibel less firm.

Zane took a few steps towards me, and for a moment, I felt the age-old pull of our bond. But it was tempered now, held at bay by the new boundaries we'd just established. He stopped before me, respecting the invisible line I'd drawn.

"We'll honour your conditions, Luna. You have our word," he spoke solemnly.

"See that you do," I warned, looking each of them in the eye, "because my word, once given, is unbreakable. And my word now is that I will accept nothing less than full respect for the terms I've laid out."

There were no grand declarations of love, no sweeping gestures to conclude this chapter of our intertwined lives. Instead, there was a quiet understanding, a mutual


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respect that felt like the most honest form of love—unfiltered, uncompromising, and built on a foundation of equal say. 1

For the first time, I felt a sense of completion, a loop closed. Though the mate bond between us still hummed in the background, a soft but unrelenting pulse, it was eclipsed by something far more powerful: a sense of self that no biological imperative could override. 1

And so, as I followed them out of the office, the setting sun casting long shadows across the room we left behind, I felt the indescribable weight of a chapter closing. I had reclaimed my agency, asserted my terms, and stepped into a future of my own making. And if that's not the hallmark of a strong woman, I don't know what is.

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