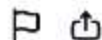




Chapter 33



POV: Lysander

The kids crash by nine-thirty, which is basically unheard of. Phoenix drools on her pillow with one arm flung over her face. Luna's curled like a fox, stuffed rabbit tucked under her chin. Orion sleeps with a half-connected circuit board on his chest because of course he does.

I adjust the board so it won't electrocute him in his sleep. Small mercies.

The balcony air hits cold when I step outside, sharp enough to feel real. Colorado nights do that—cut through the bullshit, remind you you're alive whether you want to be or not.

My phone buzzes before I can decide if freezing counts as feeling better.

Kieran.

I answer quietly. "Everything okay back home?"

"Just checking in." His voice is tired but warm, the tone he uses when he's had a long day being Alpha and just wants to be Dad for five minutes. "The kids got there safe?"

"They're asleep already. Long day." I lean against the railing, watch my breath fog in the dark. "Planetarium wore them out."

There's a pause—comfortable at first, the kind brothers fall into when they've run out of safe topics. But something's tugging at me. Something the kids whispered over pizza, eyes too serious, voices too careful.

Something I haven't been able to let go.

"Kieran." I close my eyes. "The kids told me something today."

His voice sharpens instantly, that Alpha edge cutting through the exhaustion. "What happened?"

"They've been getting bullied." The words taste wrong coming out. "Pack kids. Calling them freaks. That kind of shit."

Silence on the other end. The dangerous kind.

Then: "Why the hell didn't they tell me?" His voice drops to that controlled fury that means he's three seconds from shifting. "Or Thalia? Why would they hide that from us?"

I exhale slowly, watching the fog disappear. "Because they don't want you two to worry. And they asked me to keep it between us."

"Fuck that." He swears hard enough I can practically hear him pacing. "They're nine years old, Lysander. Nine. And they're already protecting us? That's not how this should work."

"No," I agree softly. "But you know how they are. They're your kids."

The words hang there. Your kids. Not ours. Never ours.

"My kids," Kieran repeats, and something in his voice cracks. "And somehow they trust you with something this important before they trust their own parents."

I didn't mean to hurt him. But truth sometimes bruises anyway.

His voice shifts—quieter now, edged with something wounded. "Why do they come to you first? Why do they tell you things they won't tell me?"

I sit down slowly, suddenly too tired to stand. The metal chair is freezing through my jeans. "Because I listen the way they need." I stop, searching for words that don't sound pathetic. "Because I know what it feels like to

be on the outside."

And then the truth just spills out before I can stop it, before I can remember all the reasons I've spent two years not saying this out loud.

"You've always gotten everything you wanted." My voice stays level but something underneath it cracks. "The title. The power. The attention. The respect." I swallow hard. "Even the mate."

Silence.

"I was always the second choice," I continue, because apparently we're doing this now. "Even when I didn't realize I was competing."

The pause stretches so long I think he might've hung up. Then he exhales shakily, and I can picture him—hand running through his hair, jaw tight, standing in that way he does when he's trying not to break something.

"Lysander..." His voice is barely above a whisper. "I never asked to take anything from you."

"I know." And I do. That's the fucked up part—none of this was malicious, wasn't calculated or cruel. "But that didn't stop it from happening."

Another silence. Heavier this time. More personal.

I can hear him breathing on the other end, can feel the weight of everything we're not saying pressing down through hundreds of miles of distance. Two years of therapy taught me to name my feelings. Didn't teach me how to fix what's broken.

"I don't want us to keep hurting each other," Kieran says finally.

I look through the glass door at three kids sleeping in my guest room, at the life I get to borrow but never keep. "Neither do I."

"But you think I have everything." Not defensive. Just stating facts. "You think my life is perfect."

"Isn't it?" The question comes out sharper than I mean it to.

"You want to know what keeps me up at night?" His voice goes raw. "The fact that my kids feel safer telling their uncle about bullying than telling me. That they're protecting me from their pain because they think I can't handle it." He pauses. "That my brother moved three states away because staying near me hurt too much."

Fuck.

"Don't lie to make me feel better. You're in Colorado because being in Seattle meant watching me live the life you wanted. With the woman and the kids you have wanted."

I press my palm against the cold railing, let the bite of it ground me.

"The bond chose you."

"I know." His voice cracks. "But that doesn't mean I don't see what it cost you. What it's still costing you."

Phoenix whimpers from inside. High-pitched, the sound she makes when nightmares find her.

"I have to go," I say quietly.

"Brother—"

"We'll talk later." I'm already moving toward the door. "The kids need me."

I hang up before he can respond, before either of us can say something we can't take back.

Phoenix is sitting up when I get there, eyes wide and glassy with half-

sleep. "Uncle?"

"Right here, firecracker." I sit on the edge of her bed, smooth her hair back. "Bad dream?"

She nods, already curling back into her pillow. "The kids were calling us monsters. And Mom was crying. And Dad was so mad his eyes went black and—"

"Hey." I keep my voice soft. "That's not real. You're safe. Your parents love you. And anyone who calls you a monster is an idiot who doesn't deserve your attention."

She mumbles something that might be agreement, already drifting back under.

I stay there longer than necessary, watching her breathe, feeling the weight of secrets I'm keeping and truths I just confessed.

Kieran has everything—the woman, the kids, the pack, the power. Built the life I imagined having back when I thought biology might choose differently.

And I'm here. Three states away. Building a career that matters, dating a woman I can't fully commit to, loving kids who call me uncle while their father gets to be Dad.

The ache in my chest that two years hasn't touched, that distance hasn't healed, that success hasn't filled.

No matter how hard I try, no matter how much therapy or time or space I put between us, I don't know if I'll ever stop feeling like the shadow of the brother who has everything I want but cannot have.

Phoenix's breathing evens out. Luna shifts in her sleep. Orion mutters something about quantum mechanics.

something about quantum mechanics.

I sit there in the dark with three kids who aren't mine, in a life that looks successful from every angle except the one that matters.

And wonder if this is all I'm ever going to get.

End *of* *The* **Chapter**

Chapter 33



Comments

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Gifts

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