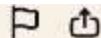




Chapter 14



Sunday morning, there's a knock at my apartment door at 8am. I open it to find Lysander holding a tray of coffee and a bag that smells like fresh bagels, grinning like showing up uninvited at the crack of dawn is completely normal behavior.

"Thought you could use backup with the morning chaos." He holds up the coffee like a peace offering.

I should tell him this is crossing boundaries. Should remind him that unannounced visits aren't part of our agreement. Instead I step aside and let him in because I'm a pushover and also because those bagels smell amazing.

The kids love him instantly.

Phoenix launches herself at him before he's fully through the door, demanding he see her latest wolf drawing. Luna materializes from the kitchen asking if he brought the kind with cream cheese. Orion's already pulling out his math homework, the problems he's been stuck on since Friday.

"Can you help me with fractions?" Orion's got that serious expression he wears when he's frustrated. "Mom tried but she's bad at math."

"I'm not bad at math," I protest. "I'm just rusty."

"You said fractions are the devil's work."

"They are. Doesn't mean I can't do them."

Lysander's already sitting at the kitchen table, looking at Orion's homework. "Okay, so you're adding fractions with different

denominators..."

He launches into an explanation that actually makes sense, breaking it down in ways I never could. Orion's face lights up with understanding and I'm standing in my kitchen doorway watching an Alpha heir teach my kid math at eight in the morning.

It's domestic in a way that should feel invasive. Should make me uncomfortable having him in my space, disrupting our routine.

It doesn't.

He moves through my apartment like he belongs here. Loads the dishwasher while I pack lunches, reminds Phoenix to brush her teeth when she tries to skip it, helps Luna find her library book that's somehow ended up under the couch.

There's no intensity, no burning need. Just soft presence that fills spaces I didn't know were empty.

"Tell me the joke about the skeleton again," Luna demands while eating her cereal.

"Why didn't the skeleton go to the ball?" Lysander asks with perfect comedic timing.

"I don't know, why?"

"Because he had no body to go with!"

Luna dissolves into giggles. Phoenix groans. "That's so bad."

"It's terrible," I agree. "Tell us another one."

He does. Multiple terrible jokes that make the kids laugh while they eat breakfast, that turn our usual chaotic morning into something almost

peaceful.

After I drop them at school—running late because Phoenix couldn't find her shoes and Orion had a last-minute science project crisis—I come home to find Lysander still there.

He's cleaned up breakfast. Started laundry. The kitchen looks better than it has in weeks.

"You don't have to—" I start, but he cuts me off.

"I know." He hands me a fresh cup of coffee, somehow remembering I take it with one sugar. "I want to."

We sit on my worn couch with our coffee and he doesn't push for more. Doesn't demand answers about Kieran, doesn't ask when I'm choosing, doesn't bring up the impossible situation we're all tangled in.

Just exists next to me. Comfortable silence that lets me breathe for the first time in days.

"This is nice," he says eventually. Voice quiet, genuine. "Just being here. No expectations."

And it is nice. Safe. Easy in ways nothing in my life has been for eight years.

"Kieran told you about last night," I say. Not a question.

"He mentioned you talked." Lysander's gaze stays on his coffee. "Said you needed time to figure things out."

"That's a diplomatic way of putting it."

"He also said you cried." His eyes meet mine now. "That he made you cry."

"He didn't make me—" I stop. "It's complicated."

"It doesn't have to be." He sets his coffee down, turns to face me fully.
"I'm not asking for forever, Thalia. Not asking you to choose right now."

His hand finds mine, thumb stroking across my knuckles. "I'm just
asking you to let me be here. Let me show you what this could be."

When he stands to leave an hour later, I walk him to the door. Basic
courtesy, nothing more.

He pauses in the doorway, turns back to me. "Thalia—"

Before I can respond, he's kissing me.

Not the desperate intensity Kieran brings—not that consuming fire that
threatens to burn me alive. This is something different. Slow, deliberate,
taking his time.

His hand cups my face, thumb stroking my cheekbone as his mouth
moves against mine with careful attention. It's the kind of kiss that
builds gradually, that makes me melt into him instead of burning up
from the inside.

I find myself kissing back. My hands slide up his chest to his shoulders,
feeling solid muscle under soft cotton.

He deepens it slightly, his other hand settling at my waist. Pulling me
closer but still gentle, still giving me space to pull away if I want.

I don't want.

When we break apart, both breathing harder, he rests his forehead
against mine. Close enough I can feel every word against my lips.

"I know you feel something for Kieran." His voice is rough, honest. "That

intensity, that fire."

He kisses me again, softer. "But this—this is real too. Different doesn't mean less."

He pulls back just enough to study my face. Eyes searching mine for something I'm not sure I can give him.

"I'm not asking you to choose right now." His thumb traces my jaw.
"Just don't write me off because I'm not burning you alive."

His voice drops lower. "Sometimes the steady flame lasts longer than the wildfire."

Then he's gone. Walking down the hallway to the elevator, not looking back.

I close the door and lean against it. My fingers come up to touch my lips, still tingling from his kiss.

I realize something standing there in my entryway.

I can breathe around him, yes. But there was heat in that kiss—want that built slowly instead of exploding. Not the desperate need that terrifies me with Kieran, but something real nonetheless.

If it was just comfortable affection, I could dismiss it. File Lysander under "safe option" and make the choice easy.

But that kiss wasn't comfortable.

It was tempting in entirely different ways. Promising gentle mornings and terrible jokes and someone who helps with homework without being asked.

Promising a life where I don't have to constantly brace for impact.

Promising a life where I don't have to constantly brace for impact.
Where I could rest instead of burning.

This? This complicates everything.

Because choosing between consuming fire and steady warmth was one thing. But choosing between two different kinds of real want—between burning alive and learning to breathe?

That's something else entirely.

End of *The* Chapter

Chapter 14



Comments

13



Gifts

43