



Chapter 16



Saturday afternoon finds me juggling three kids and an overflowing shopping cart in the produce section of Portland's busiest grocery store. Phoenix is lobbying hard for candy, Orion's reading nutrition labels like they're fascinating literature, and Luna just spotted the organic strawberries that cost twice as much as regular ones.

"Fancy meeting you here."

I spin around and nearly knock over a pyramid of apples. Lysander leans against the citrus display, grinning like this is completely coincidental. That smile says he absolutely planned this.

"What are you doing in Portland?" The question comes out sharper than I mean it to.

"Shopping." He holds up an empty basket. "Same as you."

"You live in Seattle."

"And yet here I am." His grin widens. "Amazing how that works."

Before I can respond, the kids notice him. Phoenix abandons the candy campaign and launches herself at his legs. "Lysander! Are you buying groceries too? Mama never lets us get the good cereal."

"The good cereal has seventeen grams of sugar per serving," Orion informs him seriously. "That's excessive."

Luna just holds up the strawberries she picked, quiet pride on her face.

Lysander crouches to their level, examines the strawberries with appropriate gravity. "Excellent choice, Luna. Organic is always better."

He looks at Orion. "Though seventeen grams does seem high. What's your recommended daily sugar intake?"

And just like that, he's pulled into their orbit. Orion launches into an explanation about glycemic index that's probably above his grade level. Phoenix demands Lysander push the cart because "you're taller and can reach better." Luna shows him each item she's carefully selected, seeking his approval.

He slides into the family dynamic like he's always been there. Helps bag produce, makes them laugh with terrible puns about vegetables, doesn't flinch when Phoenix nearly tips the cart racing around a corner. Easy in a way that doesn't demand anything from me.

"Your kids are great," he says quietly while the triplets debate cereal options three aisles over. "Smart, funny, kind. You did an incredible job raising them alone."

The compliment catches me off guard. "I didn't have much choice."

"You had every choice." His voice goes serious. "You could have given up, let the world break you. Instead you built this." He gestures toward the kids. "Built them. That takes strength most people don't have."

I'm trying to figure out how to respond when a familiar scent hits me. Wolf. Pack wolf.

My spine goes rigid. I scan the store, trying to locate the source without being obvious. There—next aisle over, two women I vaguely recognize from pack gatherings. Mid-thirties, well-dressed, the kind who thrive on gossip and social hierarchy. One of them used to sit with Lia at pack functions, laughing at whatever cruel joke was being told at someone else's expense.

The other was there the night I served drinks at Kieran's engagement announcement. I remember her pitying look, the way she'd whispered to her companion about "that poor wolfless girl."

They've spotted us. I watch their eyes track from me to Lysander to the three children who are unmistakably powerful despite their age. The way they carry themselves, the unconscious authority in their movements, the bone structure that screams Alpha bloodline.

Recognition flashes across both faces. I can practically hear their thoughts racing, connecting dots they shouldn't be able to connect. The wolfless shame who disappeared eight years ago. Now back with three cubs who radiate Alpha power and the younger Fenris heir playing father in a Portland grocery store on a Saturday afternoon.

One of them pulls out her phone. Not even subtle about it.

I know exactly what conclusions they're drawing. What rumors will spread through the pack by nightfall.

Lysander fathered Thalia's children. The younger Alpha heir has been hiding his bastards for years. The wolfless girl trapped him with a pregnancy and fled before he could reject her properly.

My hands clench on the shopping cart. This is it—the exposure I've been dreading, the moment everything unravels.

Lysander notices my tension, follows my gaze. He spots the pack wolves and I brace for him to react territorially, to stake some claim or make a scene that confirms their suspicions.

He doesn't.

Just keeps helping Phoenix reach the cereal on the top shelf like this is the most natural thing in the world. Makes it look domestic, established,

like we've been doing this for years.

"The one with the marshmallows," Phoenix insists, pointing at a box covered in cartoon characters.

"The one with whole grains," Orion counters. "Marshmallows aren't breakfast."

"Compromise." Lysander grabs both boxes. "Whole grains on weekdays, marshmallows on weekends. Democracy in action."

Phoenix cheers. Orion looks skeptical but doesn't argue. Luna just watches Lysander with that unsettling perception, like she's cataloging everything he does and filing it away for later analysis.

The pack wolves are still watching. I see them whispering, phones already out. By tonight, every ranked member will know. By tomorrow, it'll be the only thing anyone talks about. The younger Fenris heir with secret children. The scandal of it. The questions about bloodline and legitimacy and why he never claimed them properly.

And underneath all that speculation, the real question no one will ask out loud: which brother actually fathered them?

Because both Kieran and Lysander were at that dinner party eight years ago. Both were there the night I went into heat. The pack remembers, even if they don't know the full story. They'll do the math. They'll wonder.

The thought makes my skin crawl.

We finish shopping in relative peace. Lysander charms the checkout clerk, makes the kids laugh loading bags, acts like this is routine instead of the calculated performance I know it is.

The parking lot is cold, Portland rain threatening overhead. I load groceries while Lysander helps buckle the kids into their car seats. He's good at it—knows which buckle goes where, doesn't get frustrated when Phoenix fights him.

"That was nice," he says once the kids are secured and the doors closed. He leans against my car, close enough I catch his scent—pine and rain, familiar in ways that make my chest tight. "We should do it again."

"Lysander—"

"Next Saturday. I'll bring better jokes." His grin is easy but his eyes are serious. "They deserve this, Thalia. You all do. Normal family stuff. Grocery shopping, bad puns, arguing about cereal. Let me give you that."

Then he's gone before I can process, walking to his car parked three rows over.

I drive home with the kids chattering about Lysander's visit, about how he promised to teach Orion about engine mechanics and take Phoenix to a climbing gym and help Luna with her reading project. They're already weaving him into their lives, already depending on his presence.

That night, after dinner and homework and the chaos of bedtime, there's a knock on my door.

I open it to find Kieran standing there. His expression is controlled but his eyes are dark, dangerous.

"Heard Lysander was playing family at the grocery store today." His voice is deceptively calm. "Pack's buzzing about it. The younger Fenris heir and his secret children, shopping like suburbanites."

My stomach drops. "Kieran—"

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"My turn." He pushes past me into the apartment, voice dropping to something possessive and dark. "If he gets to play house with my children, I get equal time."

He says it with absolute certainty. My children. Not "the children" or "your children." Mine.

The possessiveness in his voice should irritate me. Should remind me that I spent eight years keeping them safe specifically so no one could claim ownership of them. But something in my chest responds to the raw need in his eyes, the way he's looking at me like Lysander's domestic performance was a direct threat.

The door closes behind him with a quiet click that sounds like a challenge.

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End of

The Chapter

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Comments

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Gifts

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