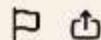




## Chapter 21



Lysander's hand stays warm on my shoulder in the quiet hallway, grounding me while my senses riot. Every sound from the gathering hall amplifies—crystal clinking, conversations bleeding together, my own heartbeat too loud in my ears.

"You okay?" His voice is gentle, concerned.

I'm not okay. Everything's too much. Kieran's lethal protection still echoes in my mind—*she's mine, I will end you*—making me feel consumed and terrified and safe all at once. The contradiction is suffocating.

"I need to leave." The words shake out of me. "Need to get out of here before I—"

I can't finish. Don't know what happens if I stay—if I shatter, if my wolf tries to emerge in front of two hundred pack members, if Kieran's intensity burns me alive.

Lysander reads my panic immediately. "Come on. My car's closer."

He guides me through a side exit, away from the pack, away from Kieran who's still dealing with Lia's aftermath. His hand stays steady at my lower back—not possessive like Kieran's, just present, grounding.

The night air hits my hypersensitive skin like ice water. I gasp, stumbling.

"Easy." Lysander catches me, steadies me. "Just breathe."

He gets me into his car—sleek, expensive, smells like pine and leather and him. Pulls out of the Fenris estate while I press my forehead against

the cool window, trying to breathe through the sensory assault.

He doesn't ask where we're going. Just drives, putting distance between me and the overwhelming stimuli with each mile.

We end up at his apartment. I remember it from before—warm, lived-in, comfortable in ways that invite you to stay. He unlocks the door and I collapse onto his couch the second we're inside, trying to breathe through everything crashing over me.

The dimmed lights help. The quiet helps. But my skin still feels wrong, my senses still too sharp.

Lysander brings water, sits beside me but doesn't crowd my space. Just steady, grounding presence while I shake apart.

"Your wolf might be trying to wake up," he says quietly after a while. "Sometimes it happens gradually. Symptoms build before the shift—heightened senses, hypersensitivity, feeling like your skin doesn't fit right."

The explanation should comfort me. Instead it makes everything more real, more terrifying.

"He scares me sometimes." The confession slips out. "Kieran. The way he—"

"Burns everything down?" Lysander finishes, voice soft. "Yeah. That's Kieran. Always has been. When he wants something, he'll destroy anyone who gets in his way. Including himself."

I turn to look at him. "And you don't."

"No." His eyes meet mine, honest. "I'm not capable of that kind of single-minded devotion. Never have been. I see shades of gray where Kieran only sees what he wants." He pauses. "Does that disappoint you?"

"It makes me feel like I can breathe."

Something shifts in his expression—vulnerability, want, careful hope. "Is that what you need right now? To breathe?"

I nod, not trusting my voice.

He leans in slowly, giving me time to pull away. When his lips brush mine it's gentle, asking permission instead of taking. Soft where Kieran is demanding, tender where Kieran is consuming.

I kiss him back, needing this, needing him, needing something that doesn't feel like drowning in fire.

His hand cups my face, thumb stroking my cheekbone as he deepens the kiss gradually. No rush, no desperation. Just slow building heat that warms instead of burns.

"Tell me to stop," he murmurs against my mouth. "Any time, just tell me."

"Don't stop." My hands slide up his chest, feel his heart racing beneath expensive fabric. "Please don't stop."

He kisses me again, longer this time, his other hand settling at my waist. When he pulls back, his breathing is uneven but his control remains.

"Let me take care of you," he whispers. "Let me make everything quiet for a while."

His hands are careful as they find the zipper of my emerald dress. He slides it down with aching slowness, pressing kisses to each new inch of exposed skin. My shoulders, my spine, the curve of my lower back.

The dress pools at my waist and his breath catches. "You're so beautiful." Not performative flattery—genuine awe. "I've wanted this for

The dress pools at my waist and his breath catches. "You're so beautiful." Not performative flattery—genuine awe. "I've wanted this for so long."

He eases me back against the couch cushions, reverent as he removes the rest of my dress. His eyes track over me like I'm something precious, something to be savored instead of claimed.

When he kisses down my throat, my collarbone, lower, it's with deliberate attention. Learning what makes me gasp, what makes my back arch, what makes my hands fist in his hair.

"Tell me what you need," he breathes against my skin.

"You. Just you." My voice shakes. "Gentle. Make me forget everything else."

He takes his time removing his own clothes between kisses. No urgency, no desperation—just building anticipation that coils low in my belly.

When he settles over me, the weight of him is grounding. His forearms bracket my head, his eyes searching mine.

"You're sure?" One last check.

"Yes."

He kisses me as he enters, slow and careful, letting me feel every inch. The stretch is exquisite, the fullness exactly what I need. He stills once he's seated deep, forehead pressed to mine, giving me time to adjust.

"Okay?" His voice is strained.

"More than okay." I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper.

He moves with careful rhythm, building pleasure gradually. Not the

volcanic intensity Kieran promises, but waves that crest and recede, each one stronger than the last.

His mouth finds my throat, kissing where my pulse hammers. "So perfect," he murmurs. "So damn perfect."

I lose myself in sensation—his body moving against mine, his hands gentle and sure, his breath hot against my skin. Everything else fades. The pack event, the sensory overload, the impossible choice between brothers.

Just this. Just him. Just the steady tide building between us.

When he shifts angle, hits something inside that makes me gasp, he groans. "There?"

"Yes. God, yes."

He maintains that angle, that rhythm, building me higher with patient precision. No rush, no demand—just giving until I'm trembling beneath him.

"Let go," he whispers. "I've got you."

The orgasm rolls through me in waves, gentle but overwhelming. I come apart with his name on my lips, his forehead pressed to mine, feeling safe and seen and cherished.

He follows moments later, burying his face in my neck as he shudders. The intimacy of it—the vulnerability—makes my chest tight.

Afterward, he doesn't pull away immediately. Just stays there, weight reassuring, breath evening out against my shoulder.

"You okay?" he asks eventually.

"More than okay." I trace patterns on his back. "That was..."

"Different from what you expected?"

"Different from what Kieran offers." The comparison slips out before I can stop it.

He lifts his head, meets my eyes. Something complicated crosses his face—acceptance, resignation, understanding. "I know I'm not him. Can't offer that world-burning devotion, that consuming need." His thumb traces my lower lip. "But maybe that's not what you need every moment. Maybe sometimes you need this—someone who lets you breathe."

The words settle in my chest, true and painful.

He pulls out carefully, finds a blanket to drape over us both. Gathers me against his side on the couch, my head on his chest, his heartbeat steady beneath my ear.

"Stay tonight," he whispers into my hair. "Just rest. No expectations, no pressure. Just stay."

The symptoms have quieted. My senses no longer riot. In Lysander's arms, everything feels manageable, possible, safe.

I let my eyes close, let exhaustion pull me under. His fingers trace lazy patterns on my shoulder, soothing and constant.

But even as I drift toward sleep, wrapped in his warmth and gentleness, I can't stop thinking about Kieran. About the way he threatened death for anyone who touched me. About the consuming fire that terrifies and thrills me.

About the impossible choice I still have to make.

Lysander's breathing evens out beneath me, already asleep. I stay awake

About the impossible choice I still have to make.

Lysander's breathing evens out beneath me, already asleep. I stay awake longer, caught between the man holding me and the man who would burn the world for me.

One offers breathing space. The other offers everything.

And I still don't know which one I need more.

## End *of* *The* Chapter

Chapter 21



Comments

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Gifts

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