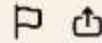




## Chapter 29



Lysander's POV

The office is too quiet. Boxes stacked against walls I've been avoiding for two weeks, furniture still wrapped in plastic, the kind of fresh start that feels more like running away.

Colorado. Three states between me and Seattle. Between me and watching Kieran and Thalia build the life I wanted.

The Fenris Group expansion needed someone to lead it—Dad's words, though we both knew what he really meant. I need distance before I do something stupid. Before watching my brother's happiness destroys what's left of my composure.

I tell myself it's for the best as I unpack law books and arrange them on empty shelves. The mate bond chose Kieran. Ancient, absolute, undeniable. The DNA confirmed he fathered all three kids—Orion, Luna, Phoenix, the children I loved like my own but never were.

Biology, destiny, whatever you want to call it. All of it pointed to my brother, not me.

I'm the uncle now. The friend. The one who almost had her but wasn't meant to.

My hands still on a framed photo I'd packed without thinking—the five of us at the park two months ago, before the bond completed. Phoenix on my shoulders, Orion showing me something on his tablet, Luna holding Thalia's hand. We look like a family in this picture.

We weren't. We never were.

That first month after the bond completed was torture. Watching them together at pack functions, seeing the way Kieran's hand never left her lower back, the way she leaned into him like he was gravity. Feeling the pull between them that I'd never share, that singular connection that excludes everyone else.

Loving those kids—Orion with his endless questions about how things work, Luna with her empathy that saw straight through my smiles to the pain underneath, Phoenix with her chaos and laughter that made everything better—knowing they weren't mine. Would never be mine.

Seeing Thalia look at Kieran with that bone-deep recognition. Mate. The word that changed everything and nothing at once.

I know I did this to myself. Was too weak in high school to defend her when Lia turned everyone against her. Too cowardly to stand up to my brother when he made her life hell. Too afraid of losing my comfortable position to risk everything for her.

During her heat, I had my chance. Could have claimed her properly, marked her, made it clear she was mine. Instead I played it safe, shared her with Kieran because I was too weak to demand she choose.

And when it mattered most—when the bond was forming, when she was deciding between us—I was too soft to fight for her the way Kieran did. Too comfortable being the gentle option, the safe choice.

Kieran's always been the ruthless one. Takes what he wants and destroys anyone in his way. I'm the playboy, the easy one, the brother who makes everyone comfortable because he never demands too much.

Turns out that's not enough when it comes to mates.

My phone buzzes against the desk. Video call. The kids.

My chest tightens as I answer. Three faces fill the screen—Phoenix in the middle, Orion and Luna flanking her, all of them clearly in Kieran and Thalia's living room.

"Uncle Lysander!" Phoenix shouts, waving so enthusiastically the phone shakes. "Guess what! I broke a training dummy today! Like completely broke it! Dad said I need to control my strength better but Mom said it's progress!"

Dad. She says it so naturally now, like Kieran's always been Dad instead of the man who didn't know they existed six months ago.

"That's great, firecracker," I manage. "Proud of you."

Orion leans closer to the screen, serious face more pronounced than usual. "How's the new office? Did you set up the server infrastructure yet? What about cybersecurity protocols for client data?"

"Working on it. Want to help me design the system remotely?"

His face lights up. "Really?"

"Really. I'll send you the specs tomorrow."

Luna hasn't spoken yet. Just watching me with those too-knowing eyes, feeling everything I'm not saying. When she finally talks, her voice is quiet. "I miss you."

The words crack something in my chest. "Miss you too, sweetheart. All of you."

"When are you coming back?" Phoenix demands.

"Soon. I promise. But your mom and dad need family time right now. They're building something important and I—" I stop, can't finish that sentence. I'm the outsider now. The uncle who visits sometimes but

doesn't belong in the daily chaos of their lives.

"We love you," Luna says, and somehow that makes it worse.

"Love you too. So much. Now go do your homework before your mom yells at me for keeping you on the phone."

They chorus goodbyes and disconnect, leaving me staring at my reflection in the black screen.

The pain is real, sharp, undeniable. I love them. Still love her. Probably always will. But that world-burning devotion Kieran has? The willingness to destroy everything for one person? The obsessive need that drove him to search for eight years?

I don't have that in me. Never did.

I loved Thalia gently, safely, with the kind of affection that keeps everyone comfortable. Kieran loved her with consuming fire that would burn down kingdoms.

Turns out the mate bond chooses fire.

I want gentle mornings and easy laughter. Want someone who chooses me first not because biology demands it but because they genuinely want to. Want a relationship that doesn't feel like competing with my brother for scraps of attention.

There's a knock on my office door. "Mr. Fenris?"

The new associate I hired last week—Claire, human, absolutely brilliant mind for contract law. She's holding a file folder and looking mildly annoyed.

"The Harrison case has a jurisdictional issue I need your input on. Do you have a minute?"



I gesture her in. She's completely unimpressed by the Fenris name, by my title, by the fact that I'm technically her boss. Treats me like a colleague instead of Alpha heir, which is refreshing.

We spend twenty minutes dissecting the case. She challenges my interpretation, makes excellent points, concedes when I'm right without ego. When she smiles at the solution we find, it's uncomplicated—no history, no heartbreak, no mate bonds or pack politics attached.

Just two people working well together.

"Thanks," she says, standing. "I'll draft the motion and send it for your review."

"Sounds good. And Claire? Good catch on that jurisdictional issue. I almost missed it."

She grins. "That's what you pay me for."

After she leaves, I stare at the blank wall where photos should go, boxes I should unpack, a life I should start building.

Maybe there's a path forward after all. One where I'm not second choice or almost-enough or the brother who lost. Just myself, building something new in a place where no one knows I'm the Fenris heir who couldn't claim his mate.

The kids will always be mine in the ways that matter—Uncle Lysander who teaches them things and spoils them and loves them fiercely. Thalia will always matter, will always be someone I cared about deeply even if she was never meant to be mine.

But maybe it's time to find my own story instead of living in the shadow of theirs.

My phone buzzes again. Text from Kieran: *Thanks for taking the kids this weekend. Means a lot.*

I stare at the message. He's thanking me for giving him alone time with his mate, his family, his life. The one I wanted but was never meant to have.

I type back: *Anytime. They're great kids.*

*They are. Because of her.*

*Yeah. She did good.*

A pause, then: *You okay out there?*

The question surprises me. Kieran asking if I'm okay, like he actually cares about the brother he beat.

*Getting there. Colorado's good. Clean start.*

*Good. You deserve that.*

I almost laugh. Deserve. Like I earned this consolation prize of distance and starting over.

But maybe I did. Maybe choosing safety over risk, comfort over claiming, always comes with this price.

*Take care of them, I type. All of them. Or I'll come back and kick your ass.*

*I will. Promise.*

I set down the phone and look at my empty office. Time to start unpacking. Time to build a life that's mine instead of almost-theirs.

The kids will always love me. Thalia will always matter. But they were never mine to keep.

*I will. Promise.*

I set down the phone and look at my empty office. Time to start unpacking. Time to build a life that's mine instead of almost-theirs.

The kids will always love me. Thalia will always matter. But they were never mine to keep.

And somehow, finally, I'm starting to make peace with that.

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

Chapter 29



Comments

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Gifts

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