

Fated To Not Just One, But Three #Chapter 631: Back - Read Fated To Not Just One, But Three Chapter 631: Back

Chapter 631: Back

Lennox's POV

"Guess who is here?" Levi said, the moment he stepped into my room.

I lifted my eyes from the document in my hand and frowned at him.

"Who?" I asked.

He didn't answer.

He only said, "You have to come and see for yourself."

That alone made my chest tighten.

I stood up immediately and followed him out of the room. Levi didn't speak as we went down the stairs, but from his mood, I could tell he was furious.

The moment I entered the living room, I froze.

Aurora.

She was sitting on the couch.

Her face was swollen. One eye was bruised. Her lips were cracked. There were marks on her arms she hadn't even tried to hide.

For a second, I couldn't breathe.

"Aurora..." My voice came out rough.

She lifted her head when she saw me, and her eyes filled with tears.

Anger exploded inside my chest.

"Who did this?" I demanded, my voice shaking with rage.

She tried to speak, but her lips trembled. Then she broke down crying and stood up, throwing herself into my arms.

"It's Austin," she sobbed. "My husband."

That name made my blood boil.

"That bastard," I growled. "I warned you. I warned you not to marry him."

I remembered it clearly.

Five years ago.

Her wedding.

I had stood against it with everything in me.

Austin was nothing. A pauper. Living off borrowed pride. And from the first moment I met him, something about him felt wrong.

I held her tighter as she cried.

"He changed," she whispered. "Because I can't give him children... he started hitting me. I built him. I gave him everything. My money. My name. My connections. And now he uses his fists on me."

My hands clenched into fists.

"He eats from your wealth," I said through my teeth, "and still has the guts to touch you?"

Levi stepped closer, his face dark with fury.

"I'll make him pay," he said coldly.

"Yes," I replied without hesitation. "He will pay."

Aurora pulled back slightly and looked at me with red, swollen eyes.

"Lennox," she whispered, ashamed. "Can I... can I stay here for a while? I can't go back to my parents like this. I don't want them to see me broken."

My heart clenched.

"Of course," I said immediately. "This is your home. You're safe here."

She broke down again, and I held her like I used to when we were kids.

After a few moments, Aurora's sobs slowly eased.

Her shoulders were still shaking, but her breathing began to calm.

I gently pulled back and cupped her face, careful not to touch the bruises.

"You're safe now," I told her firmly. "No one will ever touch you like that again."

I turned sharply toward the guards.

"Get the healer," I ordered. "Now."

They bowed and rushed out immediately.

Levi moved closer to Aurora, his voice softer but still tight with anger.

"The maids are preparing a room for you," he said. "You'll be comfortable. You won't have to worry about anything."

Aurora nodded slowly, wiping her tears.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Both of you."

She looked around the living room as if noticing the space properly for the first time.

"Where are the boys?" she asked suddenly. "I thought I'd hear them running around."

"They're still at school," I replied. "They'll be back later."

She smiled faintly at that, then hesitated.

"And Olivia?" she asked carefully.

I felt the shift immediately.

"She doesn't live here anymore," I said.

Aurora frowned.

"What do you mean?"

I exhaled slowly.

"It's a long story," I said. "One we'll talk about later."

Her eyes searched my face.

She didn't push, but I could tell she knew something was wrong.

Just then, footsteps echoed down the hallway.

The healer entered, carrying her satchel, her expression turning serious the moment she saw Aurora's injuries.

"Let me take a look at you, my dear," the healer said gently.

Aurora nodded and allowed herself to be guided toward the couch again.

As the healer began her work, applying herbs and murmuring softly, my jaw tightened.

Austin was still breathing.

And that was about to change.

The healer's hands glowed softly as she worked, her face growing more serious with every second.

"There is internal bleeding," she said quietly. "That man was a beast. Why didn't you run sooner, child?"

Aurora's eyes filled again.

"I thought he would change," she whispered. "I kept telling myself it was just anger... just stress. I believed him when he said he was sorry."

My hands clenched into fists.

The healer shook her head. "Love should never hurt like this."

She finished the healing spell slowly, carefully, then straightened.

"She will recover," she said. "But her body and her heart need rest."

I frowned deeply.

That bastard wasn't even her mate.

The thought made my chest burn with rage and guilt.

Aurora's father had been my mentor. He trained me. He trusted me.

And this was his daughter.

I was supposed to protect her.

I failed.

I turned to Aurora and forced my voice to stay steady.

"You'll rest now," I said gently. "You're not leaving this house until you're fully healed."

She nodded weakly.

The maids stepped in and helped her to her feet, guiding her carefully toward the prepared room.

Not long after, Louis walked in, his face dark with anger.

"I heard," he said. "Levi told me."

"I'm killing that man," I said coldly.

Louis didn't argue.

Levi crossed his arms. "You won't even need to find him," he said. "I'll bring Austin here myself."

I nodded once. "Good."

That night, we gathered for dinner.

Aurora was seated with the boys. She smiled gently as she listened to them talk, laughing softly at their stories. She was good with them. Natural.

My chest tightened.

It was cruel fate that she never had children of her own.

Then again... maybe it was a blessing she never had that bastard's child.

Suddenly, the air shifted.

Olivia teleported into the room.

The boys lit up instantly.

"Mom!" Leon shouted, jumping from his seat.

They rushed to her, hugging her tightly. She kissed their heads one by one before sitting down.

She took the seat across from Aurora.

For a moment, they stared at each other.

Then recognition dawned.

"Aurora?" Olivia asked softly.

Aurora smiled. "Olivia. It's been a long time."

They exchanged polite words, but I noticed it.

Olivia noticed everything.

She noticed the faint bruises.

She noticed the way I kept glancing at Aurora.

She noticed the way I reached for the serving plate.

Without a word, I filled Aurora's plate with food. More than usual.

"Eat," I said gently. "You need strength."

Olivia's eyes moved from Aurora's face to the plate I had just filled.

Then she looked back at her.

"Will you be staying here?" Olivia asked calmly.

The question sounded simple, but I felt the tension underneath it.

Aurora hesitated for a second, then nodded.

"Yes," she said softly. "Just for a while."

Olivia nodded once. "I see."

Aurora lowered her gaze to her food, then added quietly, "I'm filing for a divorce. I won't be going back to my husband."

The table went silent.

Olivia's fingers tightened around her fork.

"I'm sorry you went through that," she said after a moment. Her voice was polite. Too polite. "No one deserves that."

Aurora smiled faintly. "Thank you."

I reached for the jug of juice and poured some into Aurora's glass.

"You should drink," I said. "It'll help."

That was when I felt it.

The sharp shift in the air.

The air felt tight.

Heavy.

Before anyone could speak again, the door at the side of the dining hall opened.

The boys' nanny stepped in and bowed slightly.

"My Alphas," she said gently, "it's time for the boys to get ready for bed."

Leon groaned. "Already?"

Olivia smiled at them. "Come on. Bedtime."

The boys stood up, hugging her quickly before turning to us.

"Good night, Daddy," Liam said, wrapping his arms around my waist.

"Good night," I replied softly, kissing his head.

They said their good nights to Levi and Louis too, then followed the nanny out of the room, their voices fading down the hallway.

As soon as they were gone, the silence became unbearable.

Then Olivia spoke.

"I believe you know," she said calmly, looking straight at Aurora, "that I don't live here anymore."

I frowned.

"What?" I said sharply.

She didn't look at me. She kept her eyes on Aurora.

"We're on a break," Olivia continued evenly. "Lennox and I. All of us, actually."

Aurora looked confused. Uncomfortable.

I felt my chest tighten.

"Olivia," I said lowly, "you're not supposed to be saying this."

She finally turned to me.

"What?" she asked. "It's the truth."

Her voice was calm, but it cut deep.

"I'm just letting her know," she went on. "So in case she wants to..." Olivia paused, her lips pressing together for half a second before she finished quietly, "...you know."

Aurora frowned.

"Excuse me?"

Chapter 632: Not Your Enemy

Olivia's POV

I didn't even know what had gotten into me.

The moment the words left my mouth, I felt it.

That sharp twist in my chest.

That old, ugly feeling I thought I had buried years ago.

Aurora.

I knew her.

Everyone did.

She wasn't just any woman.

She was more like a sister to the triplets. Especially to Lennox.

And that was the problem.

I stayed quiet at the table, my eyes lowering to my plate, but my mind was racing. I could feel Lennox's anger burning across from me, but I couldn't stop myself. The jealousy was already there, crawling through my veins like it used to when we were younger.

Back then, whenever Aurora visited, everything changed.

She would stay for weeks sometimes.

And those weeks were always the worst for me.

Because suddenly, I wasn't the center of their world anymore.

They laughed with her more.

Listened to her more.

Protected her like she was fragile glass.

Especially Lennox.

I remembered it so clearly it hurt.

I had been younger. Angry. Insecure.

One night, I couldn't take it anymore.

I had looked straight at Lennox and asked,

"You seem to like Aurora a lot. Are you going to marry her?"

He had laughed. Not angrily. Just surprised.

"What?" he said. "No. Never. Aurora is my sister."

He had pulled me close and kissed my forehead like it was the most ridiculous question in the world.

But even then...

I hadn't been reassured.

Because words were easy.

But feelings were louder.

And now, years later, sitting across from Aurora again, watching Lennox fill her plate, watching the way his voice softened when he spoke to her...

That same fear came rushing back.

Only this time, it hurt more.

Because we were already broken.

Already on a break.

Already falling apart.

And suddenly, I wasn't just scared of losing attention.

I was scared of losing them.

I lifted my eyes slowly and met Aurora's confused gaze.

I hated myself for it.

Hated that jealousy still had this much power over me.

But I couldn't take the words back.

Lennox spoke sharply.

"Ignore her. She's just joking."

I didn't answer.

But I felt it.

Aurora's eyes on me.

Then she spoke softly, "Olivia... can we talk for a minute?"

Lennox reacted instantly.

"No."

His voice was firm. Protective. Almost angry.

"Please," Aurora said, turning to him. "We need to talk."

Then she looked back at me.

I hesitated. Every part of me wanted to refuse. To stay right there and pretend I hadn't just made everything worse.

But I stood up anyway.

"Fine," I said quietly.

We walked out of the dining hall together. I could feel Lennox's stare burning into my back, but neither of us stopped.

The garden was quiet. Moonlight spilled over the flowers and stone paths. The night air was cool against my skin.

Aurora stopped walking.

Then she slowly turned to face me.

She didn't look angry.

She didn't look defensive.

She looked... tired.

Like someone who had carried too much for too long.

"I know you never liked me," she said gently.

The words landed softly, but they still hit hard.

My chest tightened. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

"I understand why," she continued calmly. "You always thought I would take the triplets from you. That I would steal their attention. Their love."

I looked away, my fingers curling into my palms.

She gave a small, sad smile. "You don't have to deny it. I knew even back then."

My heart dropped into my stomach.

"I saw the little things," Aurora went on quietly. "The way you would suddenly feel sick when I arrived. The way you'd act weak or tired so they would rush to you first."

I closed my eyes.

"The way you'd pull Lennox aside," she continued, her voice steady, "or Levi... or Louis. Just so you wouldn't have to share them. Just so you could remind yourself you were still the center."

Shame burned through me.

"I knew all of it," she said softly. "Every trick. Every move."

I swallowed hard, my throat aching.

"I just didn't care."

I snapped my head up, staring at her in shock.

She placed a hand over her chest, her voice turning even gentler.

"Because to me," she said, "they were never men I wanted."

She looked past me for a moment, toward the pack house.

"They were my brothers," she finished. "Always."

Her words sank deep.

"I never competed with you," Aurora added quietly. "Not when we were young. Not now. I never saw them the way you feared I did."

She met my eyes again, steady and honest.

"I loved them," she said, "but not like that. I protected them. I worried about them. I cared for them the way family does."

My chest felt tight, like something was slowly cracking open.

"You were never being replaced, Olivia," she said softly. "You just didn't believe you were enough on your own."

Silence fell between us.

"Please stop assuming things in your head," she said gently. "I'm not here to take your men. I never was."

She stepped closer, her voice lowering.

"And as their sister," she added, "I'm begging you... please stop hurting them."

My throat burned.

"They love you," Aurora said. "Deeply. All three of them. And watching you push them away, watching them break because they don't know how to reach you anymore... it hurts them more than you realize."

Tears stung my eyes.

"I don't want to replace you," she finished quietly. "I just want peace in this house. And I want the people I love to stop bleeding."

I stood there, frozen.

Silence fell between us.

Then she took a slow breath.

"And when I get back on my feet," Aurora added quietly, "I'll leave."

I frowned, startled.

"I won't stay longer than I have to," she continued. "I never planned to. This is just a place to heal. Not to settle. Not to interfere."

Her voice was firm now, like she was passing an important message to me.

"I won't stand between you and them," she said. "I never have. I never will."

She looked at me one last time.

"All I ask," she said softly, "is that you stop fighting ghosts that were never real. I am not your enemy or your competitor, so please stop making me one."

Then she turned and walked back toward the house, leaving me standing there, feeling foolish.

Chapter 633: Happy Without Me

Olivia's POV

The next morning, I teleported straight into Alpha Adrian's living room.

He was already there, standing near the window like he had been waiting for a while.

The moment he saw me, a big, bright smile spread across his face. He didn't even try to hide it.

"Welcome," he said, getting to his feet.

"Good morning, Alpha Adrian," I replied politely. I didn't waste time. "Where is Elara?" I asked, going straight to the reason I was there.

Today was Saturday.

I wanted to spend as much time as possible with my sons.

"She's upstairs, in her room," he said quickly. "She's been asking if you'd come."

My heart softened.

"Alright," I said. "Let's go."

He led me upstairs but stopped at the door. "I'll stay out here," he said gently. "Take your time."

I nodded and knocked softly.

"Come..." a small voice answered.

I stepped inside.

Elara was sitting on her bed with her iPad beside her. The moment she saw me, her face lit up.

"Hi," she said softly.

The word wasn't perfect.

But it was clear.

My smile came easily. "Hi, Elara."

She smiled wider, proud of herself.

She picked up her iPad and typed carefully, then turned the screen toward me.

Welcome.

"That's very good," I said, sitting beside her. "You're doing amazing."

She nodded shyly.

We talked for a little while. Slowly. Calmly.

Sometimes she used the iPad.

Sometimes she tried with her voice.

I didn't rush her.

"Did you sleep well?" I asked gently.

She paused, then whispered, "Yes."

I smiled. "Good."

I pointed at the drawings on her table. "Did you draw these today?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"They're beautiful," I said honestly. "You're very talented."

Her shoulders lifted, proud.

I tried again, carefully. "Can you say... blue?"

She frowned a little, thinking hard.

"B... blue," she said, softly but clearly.

My heart skipped.

"That's perfect," I said, keeping my voice calm so I wouldn't scare her. "Very perfect."

She grinned.

We tried a few more simple words.

"Yes.

No.

Okay."

Each one came slowly. Carefully.

But they came.

After a while, she looked at me and asked quietly, "You... stay?"

I checked the time, then met her eyes.

"I can stay a little longer," I said. "But I have to go see my sons later."

She nodded, understanding more than people gave her credit for.

"Okay," she whispered.

We talked a little more after that.

I asked her about her favorite color again.

"Blue," she said, faster this time.

I asked what she liked to draw most.

"Flowers," she whispered, then smiled like she was proud she said it without help.

When I finally stood up, she looked at me with those wide eyes again.

"You... come back?" she asked softly.

"Yes," I promised. "Very soon."

She nodded, then surprised me by leaning forward and hugging me. It was gentle. Careful. Like she was afraid I might disappear.

"I'll see you soon, Elara," I whispered.

"Bye," she said. Clear this time.

My chest tightened.

I stepped out of the room and closed the door quietly behind me.

Adrian was waiting in the hallway.

"She's improving," I told him honestly. "A lot."

His face lit up with hope. "Thank you," he said. "Would you... stay for lunch?"

I shook my head. "I can't. I need to see my boys."

He nodded, hiding his disappointment well. "I understand. I hope... maybe one day I'll meet them."

I gave a small smile. "Maybe."

I didn't wait for him to say anything else.

I teleported.

The moment I appeared in the Luciano mansion, laughter hit me like a wave.

It was loud.

Wild.

Pure.

My boys.

A smile pulled at my lips without me meaning to, and I rushed upstairs toward the sound, my heart already lighter.

When I reached their room, I slowed.

The door was open.

I stopped.

Inside, chaos ruled.

Pillows flew through the air, feathers drifting down like snow.

Leon screamed with laughter as he jumped off the bed, landing clumsily and rolling on the floor.

Liam tackled Levi with a pillow nearly as big as himself, growling dramatically like a tiny warrior.

Louis was laughing so hard he had to brace himself against the wall, tears in his eyes.

And then I saw her.

Aurora.

She was in the middle of it all, laughing—really laughing. The kind of laughter that came from deep inside, free and unguarded. It was the first time I'd seen her like that since she arrived.

Levi suddenly grabbed her by the waist and lifted her with ease, tossing her gently onto the bed. She squealed in surprise, grabbing a pillow to defend herself.

"Hey!" Liam shouted, clearly choosing sides as he rushed to her defense and punched Levi in the arm.

Everyone burst into louder laughter.

The room was full of noise.

Of warmth.

Of life.

They were so caught up in it—so happy—that they didn't notice me standing there.

I didn't step in.

I just watched.

My boys.

My mates.

Her.

All together.

All laughing.

All looking like one big, messy, happy family.

Without me.

Something sharp twisted in my chest, sudden and painful. I pressed my fingers lightly against the doorframe, grounding myself.

I told myself I shouldn't feel this way.

That it was childish.

That Aurora had already said everything clearly.

That she wasn't my enemy.

But standing there, unseen, watching them play like nothing was broken... like nothing was missing...

My heart sank.

Lennox was the first to notice me.

He froze mid-laugh, a pillow still in his hand. His eyes lifted to the doorway and locked on me.

"Olivia," he said softly. "You're here."

The word carried through the room like a stone dropped into water.

One by one, everyone turned.

Levi's smile slipped from his face.

Louis straightened, the laughter dying in his throat.

Aurora stopped moving, the pillow falling loosely onto the bed.

Even the boys went quiet, their smiles fading.

The room changed instantly.

Just seconds ago, it had been loud and warm and full of life.

Now it felt tight. Awkward. Like an intruder had just walked in.

Chapter 634: Feel Left Out

Olivia's POV

Leon slid off the bed and took a small step toward me. "Mom?" he called uncertainly.

I forced a smile. "Hey, baby."

Liam frowned, confused, his eyes moving between me and the others. "Why did everyone stop?"

No one answered him.

Lennox took a step forward, then stopped, like he wasn't sure if he was allowed to cross the space between us.

"We were just—" he started, then fell silent.

I nodded slowly. "I can see that."

My voice sounded calm. Too calm.

Aurora shifted uncomfortably. Levi cleared his throat. Louis looked away.

It hit me then—harder than I expected.

They had already formed a circle.

And I was standing outside it.

The boys sensed it too. Leon moved back toward Levi, instinctively. Liam climbed onto the bed beside Aurora without thinking. Louis reached out and ruffled Leo's hair, trying to bring the moment back.

But it was gone.

The laughter didn't return.

I stood there in the doorway, suddenly feeling like a guest in a place that used to be my home.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," I said quietly.

"You're not interrupting," Lennox said quickly.

But the way he said it—careful, unsure—made it worse.

I nodded again. "I just wanted to see the boys."

Leon ran to me then, wrapping his arms around my legs. "We were playing," he explained softly, like he was afraid I'd be upset.

"I know," I said, stroking his hair. "It looks fun."

Behind him, I could feel it.

The distance.

The shift.

I kissed Leon's head and straightened slowly, meeting Lennox's eyes once before looking away.

"Finish playing," I said softly to the boys. "I'll see you later."

Leon tightened his hold on me. "You're leaving?"

"No... I'll be in the kitchen making your favorite cupcakes," I said, forcing a smile. "Once I'm done, I'll bring them to you guys."

I kissed his forehead, then Liam's. Leo barely met my eyes.

I straightened and turned toward the door.

"Olivia," Lennox called after me.

I paused.

Just for a second.

Then I shook my head. "It's okay," I said quietly. "Don't stop having fun because of me. I'll be in the kitchen."

Then I walked out of the room without looking back, my heart breaking.

I could hear the muffled sound of voices starting up again, but the rhythm was different now—hesitant, like a song that had lost its beat.

I reached the kitchen and gripped the edge of the marble countertop. The maids rushed to me, but I signaled them to leave. I wanted to be alone so I could think clearly.

I took a deep, shaky breath, trying to push back the stinging behind my eyes. Cupcakes, I told myself. Focus on the cupcakes.

I started moving on autopilot. I pulled the flour from the pantry and the butter from the fridge. The routine should have been comforting, but the kitchen felt too big, too cold.

For years, I was the center of their world. I was the one who fixed scraped knees, the one who tucked them in, the one who knew exactly how they liked their snacks. Now, seeing them huddled around Aurora, it felt like the world had kept spinning while I was standing still.

I wasn't just losing my place in the house; I was losing my place in their hearts.

The sound of the mixer drowned out my thoughts for a few minutes, but as soon as I clicked it off, I felt a presence. I didn't have to look up to know who it was. The scent of cedar and expensive aftershave gave him away.

"Olivia." Lennox's voice was low, devoid of the forced cheer he'd used in front of the boys.

I didn't turn around. I kept my back to him, meticulously scraping the sides of the bowl with a spatula. "I told you to stay with them, Lennox. The cupcakes will be ready in forty minutes."

"I don't want cupcakes," he said, his footsteps slow and deliberate as he moved into the room. "I want to know why you're acting like a stranger in your own house."

I let out a sharp, breathless laugh. "My house? It didn't feel like my house five minutes ago. It felt like I walked into a movie I wasn't cast in."

I finally turned, the spatula still in my hand. He was standing by the island, his expression a mix of guilt and frustration.

"Your kids love you," he said firmly. "No one is taking them from you."

"They stared at me like an unwanted guest," I snapped, my voice finally cracking. "And the way you all looked at me when I walked in... like I was an intruder. Like I was the 'unfun' parent coming to ruin the party."

"That's not what it was," he said, stepping closer, reaching out as if to touch my arm, but I stepped back, bumping into the oven.

"Then what was it?" I whispered. "Because from where I was standing, the circle was closed. And there wasn't a gap for me."

The timer on the oven dinged, a shrill, cheerful sound that felt like a mockery of the tension thick enough to choke on.

"You're being dramatic, Olivia," Lennox said, his voice hardening, losing that soft edge of guilt. He stepped closer, his presence looming and suffocating. "No one drove you out of that room. No one closed that circle. You did."

I stared at him, my jaw dropping slightly. "I did?"

"Yes," he countered, his eyes flashing with a sudden, sharp frustration. "You're the one who initiated this 'break.' You're the one who decided we needed space. You walked away from us first, Olivia. Did you think the world would just pause? Did you think the boys would sit in silence, waiting for you to decide you were ready to be part of the family again?"

His words felt like physical blows. I opened my mouth to defend myself, but he kept going, the resentment he'd been hiding finally spilling over.

"Our children need us. They need stability. They found a rhythm while you were busy being distant, and now you're upset because they actually managed to be happy for five minutes? You didn't think about how this 'break' would affect them when you asked for it. You only thought about yourself."

"So it's my fault?" I whispered, my voice trembling. "Everything is my fault because I needed to breathe? Because I was drowning and I asked for help?"

"I'm saying you can't leave the room and then get mad when the door closes behind you!" he snapped.

The heat from the preheated oven behind me was beginning to sear through my clothes. My head was spinning, my eyes blurred with hot, angry tears. I turned away from him blindly, reaching for the heavy metal tray of cupcake tins to shove them into the oven—anything to stop looking at his accusing face.

In my haste and my shaking grief, I forgot the oven mitts.

"Ah!" I let out a sharp, strangled cry as my bare fingers clamped onto the scorching hot metal. The tray clattered onto the rack, and I yanked my hand back, the pain immediate and white-hot.

"Olivia!"

Lennox was there in a heartbeat. The anger vanished from his face, replaced by pure, frantic instinct. Before I could even cradle my hand to my chest, he grabbed my wrist.

"Let me see," he commanded, his voice rough.

He didn't wait. He lifted my hand, his eyes scanning the angry red welts forming on my fingertips. Without a second thought—driven by an old, primal habit from when we were younger and didn't have a million walls between us—he pulled my burned fingers to his lips and sucked on them, the coolness of his mouth trying to draw out the stinging heat of the burn.

I froze. The world went silent. The only thing I could feel was the thrum of my heart in my fingertips and the warmth of his breath against my skin. For a split second, the break, the boys upstairs, and Aurora were all gone.

It was just us.

Chapter 635: Spark

Olivia's POV

He pulled back just an inch, his gaze dropping to mine, his thumb still stroking the underside of my wrist. His eyes were dark, searching, and for the first time in weeks, the distance between us felt like it might actually be bridgeable—or like it was about to swallow us both whole.

"Olivia," he murmured against my skin, his voice thick.

The air in the kitchen shifted, the physical pain of the burn drowned out by a sudden, electric tension that had been building for weeks. My breath hitched as Lennox looked up from my hand, his eyes dark with a hunger that mirrored my own.

He didn't say another word. He stepped into my space, his large hands gripping my waist and hoisting me up onto the marble counter. I didn't fight him; I pulled him closer, my legs instinctively wrapping around his hips. When his lips crashed against mine, it wasn't soft or apologetic—it was a collision of all the words we hadn't said, all the resentment, and all the desperate longing.

We kissed with a raw frustration, our tongues tangling as we tried to reclaim something we both feared was lost. My hands flew to his chest, my fingers fumbling with the buttons of his shirt, popping a few in my haste to feel his skin against mine. I needed to know he was still mine, even if the world felt like it was crumbling.

Lennox groaned into my mouth, his hands sliding under my top. With a practiced, frantic motion, he pushed my bra down, his eyes widening as he saw me. He didn't hesitate, leaning down to take one hardened nipple into his mouth.

"God, Olivia," he growled against my skin.

I threw my head back, my fingers clawing at his shoulders. I moaned loudly, the sound echoing off the cold tiles, but I didn't care. I didn't care if the maids came back, or if they heard us. I had missed this—the heat, the claim, the feeling of being wanted by him so badly that nothing else mattered. He sucked harder, his hand gripping my thigh, and for a moment, the "break" didn't exist.

Then, a sharp, acrid scent pierced through the haze of lust.

I stiffened, my nose wrinkling. "Lennox..."

"Ignore it," he muttered, his lips moving to my neck.

"No, Lennox—the cupcakes!"

The smell of char filled the air. I scrambled off the counter, nearly tripping over my own feet as I fumbled for the oven mitts I should have used in the first place. I yanked open the oven door, and a cloud of dark smoke billowed out.

The cupcakes were ruined. The edges were black, and the tops had cratered into charcoal discs.

I stared at the tray for a beat, my hair disheveled, my shirt half-open, and my heart still hammering against my ribs. Then, a bubble of hysterical laughter escaped my throat. I laughed in pure disbelief, leaning against the counter as the absurdity of the situation hit me. We were falling apart, then falling into bed, and now I couldn't even manage a simple snack for my kids.

Lennox stood there, his shirt hanging open and his chest still heaving. He looked at the burnt tray, then at me, a slow, lopsided smirk forming on his face—the first real smile I'd seen in weeks.

"Well," he said, reaching out to tuck a stray hair behind my ear, his voice still husky. "It seems we have to prepare another batch. Together this time."

I pulled my shirt back together, my fingers trembling as I fixed my bra and adjusted my clothes. The heat of the moment was cooling rapidly, replaced by the stinging reminder of our reality. I looked at the charred remains of the cupcakes and then at him, my expression hardening into a frown.

"I don't need your help, Lennox," I said, my voice sharper than I intended. "I can handle a second batch on my own. You should go back upstairs. Aurora and the boys are waiting for you."

Lennox didn't move. He didn't even flinch at the mention of Aurora. Instead, he reached out and plucked the burnt tray from my hands, setting it in the sink with a loud clatter.

"Too bad," he said, his voice steady and infuriatingly calm. "I'm not leaving. You're hurt, the kitchen is a mess, and clearly, you're distracted. We're doing this together."

"Lennox—"

"Get the flour, Olivia," he interrupted, already rolling up his sleeves, his eyes challenging me.

I wanted to keep arguing, to push him away and reclaim my solitude, but my body felt heavy and my heart felt even heavier. With a huff of frustration, I turned to the pantry.

The next hour passed in a strange, domestic blur. We moved around each other in the kitchen, a dance we had performed a thousand times before. He measured the sugar while I cracked the eggs. He whisked the batter when my burnt fingers throbbed, his hand occasionally brushing against mine.

I found myself watching him out of the corner of my eye. I watched the way he focused on the task, the way the light caught the sharp line of his jaw, and the way he looked—truly looked—at me when he thought I wasn't noticing.

Despite the "break," despite the circle I felt excluded from, and despite the hurt that still lived in my chest, I felt that familiar, dangerous pull. I was falling in love with him all over again, right there over a bowl of vanilla batter.

I wondered, with a pang of hope that scared me, if we could ever really be one big family again. Could we bridge the gap? Could the circle open up wide enough to let me back in, or were we just playing house in the middle of a wreckage?

As we slid the new tray into the oven, Lennox leaned against the counter next to me. He didn't touch me, but I could feel his warmth.

"They're going to love these," he murmured, looking not at the oven, but at me. "Because you made them."

Chapter 636: What She Wants

Lennox's POV

The smell of vanilla filled the kitchen long before the timer went off.

When it finally did, Olivia jumped a little, like she'd forgotten the cupcakes were even there. I caught her wrist gently before she reached for the oven again.

"Let me," I said.

She didn't argue.

I pulled the tray out carefully. Perfect this time. Golden tops. Soft centers. I glanced at her, expecting a small victory smile.

She looked relieved. Tired. And happy.

"Ready?" I asked.

She nodded.

We carried the tray upstairs together.

The boys' room was loud when we entered. Levi and Louis were on the floor with them, and Aurora sat on the edge of the bed, smiling as Leon explained some dramatic story with wild hand gestures.

They all looked up when we walked in.

"Cupcakes!" Liam shouted, scrambling off the bed.

Leon ran straight to Olivia. "Mom!"

Their excitement hit me in the chest.

I set the tray down. "Don't thank me," I said quickly. "These are your mother's work."

Olivia glanced at me, then shook her head. "No," she said softly. "We did it together."

The boys didn't care about credit. They grabbed cupcakes with sticky fingers, laughing as crumbs fell everywhere.

"This is the best one," Leo declared with authority.

Then, without thinking, he turned and held one out to Aurora.

"You want one?"

Aurora blinked, surprised. "Oh—no, sweetheart. I think your mom made these specially for you three."

Leo frowned and looked up at Olivia. "Can she have one?"

Olivia smiled. It looked real. But I knew her too well.

"Yes," she said. "Of course."

Aurora thanked her quietly and took a small bite.

I saw it then.

The tightness in Olivia's shoulders.

The way her smile didn't quite reach her eyes.

She wasn't angry.

She was afraid.

Afraid Aurora was slipping into a space she used to fill.

I straightened. "Alright," I said. "Finish up. We'll be back."

I caught Levi's eye. Then Louis's.

They followed me without question.

The study room door closed behind us.

I didn't waste time.

"Aurora has to leave."

The words landed hard.

Levi's head snapped up. "What?"

Louis frowned. "Why?"

I exhaled slowly. "Because Olivia isn't comfortable with her being here."

Silence.

Then Louis spoke carefully. "Lennox... Aurora is like a sister to us."

"I know."

"She needs us right now," Levi added. "She was abused. She's healing."

"I understand that," I said. "But Olivia's feelings come first."

Louis shook his head. "So we're turning our backs on her when she needs us most?"

"No," I said sharply. "We're setting boundaries."

I ran a hand through my hair. "Olivia already feels pushed out. Every time she sees Aurora with the boys, with us... it hurts her."

Levi's voice softened. "And Aurora? What about her pain?"

"I care about Aurora," I said. "But Olivia is our mate..." I paused. Technically, she is no longer my mate. "The mother of my children," I continued. "I won't let her feel replaced in her own home."

Levi wanted to speak when I felt the air shift.

We all felt it.

The door opened.

Olivia stood there.

She had clearly heard everything.

Her face was calm—but her eyes were not.

"Aurora is not leaving," she said.

My brothers shifted behind me, equally stunned. Just minutes ago, I was ready to burn the world down to make her feel secure again, and here she was, standing in the doorway of my study, defending the very person who made her feel like a ghost.

"Olivia," I said, taking a step toward her. "You don't have to do this. You don't have to be the bigger person."

"I'm not being the bigger person, Lennox," she said, her voice steady even though I could see the pulse jumping in her neck. She walked into the room, closing the door behind her so no one would hear. "I heard what you said. I heard Levi and Louis too."

She looked at my brothers, her gaze softening for a fleeting second before returning to me. "Aurora is hurting. If she has nowhere else to go, throwing her out because I'm insecure doesn't make me feel better. It just makes me feel cruel."

"It's not about being cruel," Levi cut in, his voice laced with relief that he didn't have to turn Aurora away. "It's about your peace of mind, Olivia."

She turned to him, a bitter, sad smile touching her lips. "My peace of mind was gone the moment I felt like I had to compete for my own children's affection. But that's not on Aurora. That's on the dynamic we've created."

She looked back at me, her eyes boring into mine, reminding me of the heat we had just shared in the kitchen—and the cold reality that followed it.

"If she leaves because you forced her out, she becomes a martyr," Olivia continued. "The boys will wonder why 'poor Aurora' had to go. You and your brothers will secretly resent me for making you turn your back on a friend in need. I won't be the reason this family feels even more fractured."

"So what's the solution?" I asked, my frustration mounting. "You stay in the kitchen crying over burnt cupcakes while she plays 'mom' in the bedroom?"

Olivia flinched as if I'd slapped her, and I immediately regretted the harshness of my words.

"No," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "The solution is that I stop acting like a guest. And you all stop acting like she's a permanent fixture in our private moments."

She stays in the guest wing. She eats with us, fine. But the bedroom? The intimate moments with my sons? That stops now."

She stepped closer to me, her finger hovering near my chest, right where I could still feel the phantom heat of her touch from earlier.

"I am the mother of these boys, Lennox. Break or no break, mate or no mate—that is the one circle no one else gets to step into. Not Aurora. Not anyone. If you want her here, fine. But you make it clear where the line is. Because if I have to draw it myself, I promise you, no one will like where the ink falls."

The silence in the room was deafening. I looked at Levi and Louis; they looked humbled, the weight of her words finally sinking in. I looked back at Olivia, seeing the fire I had fallen in love with years ago.

"Understood," I said, my voice thick. "The lines will be drawn."

She nodded once, a sharp, professional gesture that hurt worse than an argument. She started to turn away, but paused. "And Lennox?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't ever assume you know what I need better than I do. We aren't there anymore."

She walked out, her footsteps firm and rhythmic, leaving a vacuum of cold air in her wake. The door clicked shut, and for a long moment, none of us moved.

"Shit," Louis muttered, breaking the silence. He rubbed the back of his neck, looking at the floor. "She's right. We let it get too comfortable. We weren't thinking."

"We were thinking about Aurora's trauma," Levi said, though his voice lacked its usual conviction. "We weren't thinking about Olivia's."

I didn't answer them. I couldn't. My chest felt tight, the words *We aren't there anymore* looping in my brain like a death sentence. She was right there in my arms an hour ago, her skin hot against mine, her breath hitching in her throat—and now she was a stranger again, a queen reclaiming a throne I had inadvertently allowed someone else to sit on.

"Go find Aurora," I commanded, my voice gravelly. "Tell her the guest wing is her space. Tell her... tell her she's welcome to the common areas, but the kids' wing is off-limits unless invited. Make it kind, but make it authoritative."

"Lennox—" Levi started.

"Do it," I snapped. "I've already failed Olivia enough today. I'm not letting this line get blurred again."

They nodded and slipped out, leaving me alone in the dim light of the study. I slumped into my leather chair, burying my face in my hands. The scent of vanilla and burnt sugar still clung to my shirt, mixed with the faint, floral perfume of the woman who had just checked me so thoroughly.

I looked at my hands. They were still buzzing from touching her.

I stood up. I couldn't stay in here. I walked back toward the kitchen, hoping she might still be there, maybe cleaning up or just breathing.

I found her leaning against the sink, staring out the dark window. She had a glass of water in her hand, but she wasn't drinking. She looked small, but there was a new, sharp edge to her silhouette.

"Olivia," I said softly.

She didn't turn. "Are they doing it? Are they talking to her?"

"Yes."

"Good." She finally took a sip of water. "Don't think this changes things between us, Lennox. The cupcakes, the... the counter... that was a lapse in judgment. Adrenaline. That's all."

I walked closer, stopping just a few feet away. "It didn't feel like a lapse in judgment to me. It felt like the first time we've been honest in months."

Chapter 637: Stalking

Lennox's POV

She set her water glass down and walked past me, her shoulder brushing mine—a deliberate, lingering contact that told me she wasn't as indifferent as she claimed.

I watched her go, the silence of the kitchen feeling heavier than ever. I had the boys. I had my brothers. But as I stood there alone, I realized that without Olivia's heart fully back in this house, I was just living in a very expensive, very crowded tomb.

I went to the sink and splashed cold water on my face. I needed to be sharp. I needed to see Aurora.

I found her in the hallway near the guest wing, Levi and Louis standing awkwardly a few feet away. She looked pale, her hands trembling as she clutched a shawl around her shoulders.

"Lennox," she whispered, her eyes wide with that familiar, broken look that had made us all so protective of her in the first place. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to cause trouble between you guys and Olivia. I can leave. I'll find a hotel—"

"No one is going to a hotel, Aurora," I said, my voice firm but not unkind. "But things are changing. Olivia is the heart of this family, and she's been feeling like a guest. That stops now. This wing is yours. You're welcome at dinner, and you're welcome in the gardens. But the boys' rooms and our private quarters... those are for family only."

Aurora nodded quickly, a look of profound guilt crossing her face. "I understand. I really do. She's... she's wonderful, Lennox. I never wanted to take her place."

"You couldn't even if you tried," I said, perhaps a bit too sharply.

I turned to my brothers. "Get her settled. I'm going to check on the boys one last time."

As I walked away, I felt their eyes on my back. I knew they thought I was being harsh, but they hadn't seen Olivia's face in the study. They hadn't felt her heart breaking against mine on the kitchen counter.

I reached the boys' room and cracked the door. They were all asleep, piled together in a heap of limbs and blankets. But Olivia wasn't there.

I walked back to my room, the silence of the mansion mocking me. My skin felt too tight, my mind racing with everything I wanted to say but couldn't. I needed to move. I needed the cold to snap me out of this spiral.

I grabbed a towel and headed down to the indoor pool area. It was late, the glass-walled room lit only by the soft, blue underwater LEDs.

As I pushed the heavy glass doors open, I froze.

Olivia was there. She hadn't left. She was sitting at the far edge of the pool, her back to me, her legs submerged in the water up to her knees. Her silhouette was framed by the moonlight streaming through the skylight.

She heard the door click and spun around, her eyes widening in surprise before they immediately narrowed into a frown.

"Are you stalking me now, Lennox?" she asked, her voice echoing off the tile.

I scoffed, partly out of relief that she was still here and partly because of her immediate defensiveness. "Stalking you? No. I'm going for a swim. I actually thought you'd left already."

"I'm still here," she snapped, turning back to look at the water. "I'm here. Now you should leave. I wanted to be alone."

"The pool is big enough for both of us," I countered, walking toward the opposite end. "I'll stay on my side. I won't even look at you if that's what it takes."

She rolled her eyes, a sharp, dismissive movement. "Unbelievable."

I didn't give her a chance to keep arguing. I pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it onto a lounge chair, then kicked off my pants. Standing there in just my boxers, I took a breath and dove headfirst into the deep end.

The cold water was a shock to my system, exactly what I needed. I broke the surface and shook the hair out of my eyes, looking across the blue expanse. She was still sitting there, staring at me with an unreadable expression, her toes cutting tiny ripples into the surface of the water.

"Fine," she muttered, though I barely heard her over the sound of the water. "Stay on your side."

I stayed on my side for exactly two laps before the distance between us felt like an insult. The water was cool, but the air between us was still thick with the heat from the kitchen.

I swam toward her, my movements silent until I reached the edge where she sat. She didn't move, just glared down at me as I broke the surface right between her dangling legs.

"I thought you said you'd stay on your side," she whispered, her voice trembling with a mix of anger and something else.

"I lied."

Before she could protest, I reached up, grabbed her ankles, and pulled. With a sharp gasp and a splash that echoed through the high-ceilinged room, she plunged into the water. She surfaced a second later, sputtering and wiping wet hair from her face, her eyes flashing fire.

"Lennox! You idiot, I'm soaking wet!" she yelled, her hands coming up to frantically splash a wave of water directly into my face.

I wiped my eyes, laughing darkly. "You were already halfway in, Olivia. Stop acting like a martyr."

"Go to hell!" she snapped, splashing me again, harder this time. "This is exactly what you do. You force your way in. You don't ask, you don't care about boundaries, you just take."

"Because if I don't take, you disappear!" I stepped forward in the shallow water, my chest brushing hers. "You want to talk about boundaries? You're the one who walked out on a family that loves you because you're too damn proud to admit you're overwhelmed!"

"I am overwhelmed because you treat me like a piece of furniture!" she screamed back, her palms landing hard against my chest to push me away. "You and your brothers don't love me like you used to."

"Don't you dare say that," I growled, grabbing her wrists and pinning them to her sides. "I just moved Aurora to the guest wing for you! I'm trying, Olivia! What the fuck do you want from me?"

"I want you to leave me alone!" she cursed, struggling against my grip. "I want you to stop making me feel like I'm losing my mind!"

"Then stop fighting me!"

"I hate you!" she choked out, her face inches from mine, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

"Liar," I hissed.

I crashed my lips onto hers. It wasn't a sweet kiss; it was a battle. It was filled with all the curses we'd just yelled, all the months of silence, and the desperate, territorial hunger that neither of us could suppress. She fought me for a second, her hands balled into fists against my shoulders, before her fingers uncurled and she pulled me closer, her mouth opening against mine with a soft, broken moan.

The water swirled around us, our bodies slick and tangled, the world narrowing down to just the taste of salt and the sound of our heavy breathing.

Clack.

The sound of a heavy door hitting the stopper cut through the air like a gunshot.

We broke apart instantly, treading water and looking toward the entrance.

Louis stood there. He was dressed in a robe, his face shadowed, but even in the dim light, the look on his face was unmistakable. He wasn't surprised to see us—he looked disappointed. Angry.

"The boys woke up," Louis said, his voice flat and devoid of its usual warmth. "They were looking for you, Olivia. I told them you were... gone."

He looked at me, his eyes cold in a way I'd never seen before.

"I thought we were giving her space, Lennox," Louis added sharply. "But I guess the rules only apply to the rest of us."

Without waiting for an answer, he turned on his heel and walked out, the heavy door thudding shut behind him.

Chapter 638: Rejection

Lennox's POV

Olivia looked hurt and worried by what Louis had said, and I completely understood her feelings.

"I'll go talk to him," I said.

She didn't say anything at all. She only nodded.

I pulled myself out of the water, grabbed my shirt, and left the pool area. I still didn't have my wolf, but my sense of smell was intact—sharp enough to guide me. At least I had that.

I found Louis in Levi's room.

They had clearly been talking, but the moment I walked in, the conversation died. The air went thick and heavy.

I sat on the edge of Levi's bed, the heavy silence of the room pressing against my chest. Louis was still staring out the window, his jaw tight enough to snap, while Levi leaned against the dresser, his arms crossed in a defensive posture.

"I'm not betraying anyone," I said finally, my voice rough. "And I'm not sneaking around behind your backs."

Louis let out a sharp, mocking laugh, finally turning to face me. "Really, Lennox? Because I just caught you kissing our mate in the pool while we were upstairs trying to figure out how to give her the 'space' you insisted she needed."

"You didn't 'catch' me, Louis," I countered, standing up to meet his gaze. "I wasn't hiding, and I sure as hell wasn't scared of being seen. If you want to talk about what's happening, let's talk. But stop with this pathetic narrative that I'm stealing her from you."

I took a step forward, looking at both of them. "This is exactly why our relationship went sour. This constant, simmering resentment because you think Olivia loves me more. You act like she's a prize I've rigged the game to win."

"Isn't she?" Levi muttered.

"No," I snapped. "If Olivia responds to me, it's not because of some unfair advantage. It's because even in the middle of a break, I am paying attention to the details. I study her. I know the exact moment she's about to break, and I know the exact shade of red her eyes get when she's been crying in secret. While you two are busy being 'respectful' or 'hurt,' I am putting in the effort."

Louis opened his mouth to argue, but I cut him off.

"You say she loves me more? Maybe she does right now. But that's not because I'm better—it's because I'm present. Look at tonight. We are supposed to be on a break, but I'm fighting for her. I'm in the kitchen burning cupcakes with her, I'm in the pool challenging her. Meanwhile, what have you two done? You've sat back and waited for her to come to you."

"We were following the rules!" Louis shouted.

"There are no rules when your family is falling apart!" I roared back. "You are her mates. She is supposed to feel bonded to you, to feel that pull in her soul, but you aren't even trying to trigger it. You're waiting for an invitation that she's too broken to send. You have to fight for her, Louis. You have to make her remember why she loves you too."

I shook my head, walking toward the door. "I cannot help you with this. I can't hand-deliver her heart to you on a silver platter. So stop saying she loves me more as an excuse for your own hesitation. If you want her back in that circle, stop standing on the outside looking in."

I paused at the handle, looking back at their stunned faces. "I love her. And I'm going to keep showing her that. If that makes you uncomfortable, then start showing her yourself."

I walked out, the adrenaline still coursing through me, leaving them to deal with the truth they had been avoiding for months.

The next morning, the dining room was suffused with morning light, but the atmosphere was as cold as a tomb.

I sat at the head of the table, my coffee gone cold in my hand. Olivia was seated to my right, picking at a plate of fruit. She looked exhausted, the dark circles under her eyes telling me she hadn't slept much more than I had. Across from her sat Aurora.

The change in Aurora was startling. She was quiet—subdued in a way that made my chest tighten with a flicker of guilt. She kept her head down, her movements small and hesitant, as if she were trying to make herself invisible. It seemed the "authoritative" talk from Levi and Louis last night had hit her harder than I intended. We had been harsh—perhaps too harsh—but the boundaries had to exist.

Levi and Louis entered the room together. They didn't look at me. They sat down in silence, the clink of silverware against porcelain the only sound in the room.

I felt Olivia's gaze on me. I looked up, and for a split second, our eyes locked. There was a world of unspoken questions in her sea-blue eyes—shame, longing, and a lingering spark of the fire from the pool. But as soon as the connection was made, she looked away, staring intensely at her coffee cup.

"Aurora," Louis said, his voice softer than usual, breaking the suffocating silence. "Would you like some more juice?"

Aurora flinched slightly before shaking her head. "No, thank you, Louis. I'm... I'm finished." She looked toward Olivia, a tentative, fearful glance. "I think I'll go for a walk in the gardens. In the common areas, like you said."

The reminder of the "rules" felt like a jagged blade in the room. Olivia's hand stilled over her plate.

"The boys will be down in a minute," Louis said, his voice flat as he looked at Olivia. He was trying to use the "effort" I had screamed about last night, but it felt forced, like he was reading from a script. "Since it's Sunday, I thought maybe we could take them to the lake today. All of us."

Olivia didn't look up. "I have a lot of work to catch up on, Louis. But you guys should go. It could be a sons-and-fathers bond."

The rejection was quiet, but it stung.

I could see Louis flinch in pain.

Chapter 639: Outing

Olivia's POV

I could have easily said yes, but then Levi offered Aurora juice, his voice dripping with a gentleness he hadn't shown me in weeks.

It was a small thing. A petty thing. But it felt like a hot iron pressed against an open wound.

Fine, I thought bitterly. If you have enough care to dote on her, you don't need me there to facilitate your afternoon.

It wasn't just about the juice. It was the way his body angled toward her. It was the way Louis hadn't even looked at me when he made the offer to go to the lake, as if he were asking a stranger out of obligation rather than a mate out of desire.

Fine, I thought, a cold, hard knot forming in my chest. If I'm just a ghost in this house, I'll act like one.

"I have a lot of work to catch up on, Louis," I said, my voice sounding hollow even to my own ears. "But you guys should go. It could be a sons-and-fathers bond."

I saw Louis flinch out of the corner of my eye. The rejection was sharp, and for a second, I felt a twinge of guilt—until I remembered the way they had all formed that perfect, closed circle around Aurora yesterday.

"The boys aren't asking for a 'fathers and sons' day, Olivia," Lennox's voice broke through the tension. I didn't look at him, but I could feel his gaze heavy on the side of my face. "They're asking for their mother. They've missed you. They'll be devastated if you stay behind to look at spreadsheets while we're all at the water."

I gritted my teeth. He was doing it. He was using the one weapon I couldn't defend against: my love for my children. He was guilt-tripping me in front of everyone, and the worst part was that it was working.

"The lake is their favorite place," Lennox continued, his tone smooth but relentless. "It would mean the world to them to see us all together. Just for a few hours."

I finally looked up, meeting his steady gaze. He knew exactly what he was doing. He was forcing the effort, forcing the integration. I glanced at Louis, who was staring at his plate, his face a mask of hurt and resentment. Then I looked back at Lennox.

"Fine," I snapped, the word coming out sharper than I intended. "I'll go. I'll be ready in twenty minutes."

The shift in the room was instantaneous. Louis's head snapped up, but he didn't look happy. He looked worse. The air turned sour as he realized that I had given Lennox a yes barely a minute after giving him a no.

Louis shoved his chair back, the legs screeching against the hardwood floor. "I'm going to go check on the boys and prepare them," he muttered, his voice thick with an

emotion he couldn't hide. He didn't look at me. He didn't look at Lennox. He just walked out, his shoulders hunched.

I felt like a monster, but I was also furious. Why was it Lennox who could always get through to me? And why did Louis and Levi make it so easy for me to say no to them?

"I'll go help him," Levi said quietly, his eyes lingering on me for a second—filled with a disappointment that made me want to scream—before he followed Louis out.

Now it was just me, Lennox, and a very quiet Aurora.

"You didn't have to do that," I whispered to Lennox, my hands trembling under the table.

"I did," he said simply, taking a calm sip of his coffee. "Because you were about to let your pride keep you away from your kids."

I frowned at his words but didn't give a response.

The drive to the lake was loud.

Too loud.

The boys filled the car with nonstop laughter, arguing about who would get to swim first, who would find the biggest fish, who would win the next game. Their joy bounced off the windows, bright and uncontrollable.

I sat by the window, my forehead resting lightly against the glass, watching trees blur past in streaks of green. Lennox's presence beside me felt heavy—solid, unavoidable. Not comforting. Not suffocating. Just... there.

Louis drove, his knuckles tight around the steering wheel, jaw clenched like he was holding too much inside. Levi sat in the passenger seat, staring straight ahead, silent in a way that told me his mind was working overtime.

No one mentioned what happened earlier.

But it was there.

Hanging between us.

When we arrived, the boys burst out of the car the moment the doors opened, racing each other toward the water. Their laughter echoed through the trees, wild and free.

Normally, the smell of pine and fresh water calmed me instantly. The lake had always been my place. My reset.

But today, my nerves felt raw.

We spread out the large picnic blankets, set up the umbrellas, and unloaded the baskets. Everyone moved around each other carefully, like one wrong step might crack something fragile.

I focused on unpacking the food, lining up sandwiches, arranging fruit, giving myself something to do with my hands.

That was when Liam suddenly clapped his hands, his eyes lighting up with mischief.

"I have an idea!" he shouted, jumping to his feet. "Let's play a game!"

Leon gasped dramatically. "What game?"

Liam grinned wider. "Since everyone is here, let's see who knows Mom best!"

My heart did a slow, painful roll in my chest. I looked up, the plastic container of strawberries trembling in my hand. "Liam, baby, I don't think—"

"Sure," Lennox interrupted, his voice smooth as silk. He adjusted his sunglasses and leaned back on his elbows, looking entirely too comfortable. "I'm in."

I swallowed hard. I hated the idea of this game. It felt like walking into a minefield. I looked at Louis and Levi. Louis looked like he wanted to disappear into the lake, but he gave a stiff, tight nod. Levi just sighed, his expression unreadable.

"Okay," I said softly, forcing a small smile for Liam's sake. "Sure. Let's play."

Chapter 640: Questions

Olivia's POV

Liam tore off sheets of paper and handed them out with the gravity of a professor. My three men sat in a row on the edge of the picnic blanket, looking like they were about to take the most important exam of their lives.

"Okay! No peeking!" Liam commanded, sitting cross-legged in front of them while his brothers giggled beside him, clearly excited; if only they had any idea how disastrous this was.

Question 1: Mom's favorite color!

They all scribbled quickly. I held up my own small slip of paper where I'd written the answer.

"On the count of three, show her! One, two, three!"

All three boards flipped around. Red.

"Correct!" Liam cheered. I gave a small, genuine smile. It was an easy start. Red was the color of my favorite dress, the color of the roses they used to bring me. For a second, the tension eased.

Question 2: If Mom could have any pet in the world, what would it be?

Levi and Louis didn't even hesitate. They wrote down their answers with confidence. Lennox, however, took a moment, his pen tapping against his chin before he wrote a single word.

"Flip them!"

Levi and Louis both held up: Dog.

Lennox held up: Rabbit.

Louis scoffed, a bit of his old confidence returning. "Lennox, she grew up with Golden Retrievers. She talks about getting a lab all the time."

"She talks about a dog because she thinks that's what a 'family' is supposed to have," Lennox said, his voice calm, eyes never leaving mine. "But when she's stressed, she watches videos of long-eared rabbits. She told me once, years ago, that she loved how quiet they were. That they didn't ask for anything but a bit of clover and a safe place to hide."

I felt the air leave my lungs. I turned in my paper. Rabbit.

"How..." Levi whispered, looking at the paper as if it were written in a foreign language.

"I listen, Levi," Lennox said simply.

Question 3: Mom's exact shoe size!

Louis and Levi both wrote down 7. It was what I usually bought. It was what was in the closet. Lennox wrote 7.5.

"Mom is a seven, Father Lennox!" Liam giggled.

"No," Lennox said, his gaze intense. "She buys a seven because she doesn't want her feet to look big in heels, but by the end of every gala, she's limping. Her running shoes and her 'comfort' boots? Those are seven and a half."

I looked down at the paper in my hand. 7.5.

The silence that followed was suffocating. Louis looked like he'd been punched in the gut. He stared at his paper—the 7 that he thought was a sure bet—and then at me. I couldn't meet his eyes. It was becoming painfully clear: Louis and Levi knew the version of me that I presented to the world. Lennox knew the woman who lived behind my ribcage.

The game continued, and it only got more awkward.

Favorite midnight snack? Levi wrote Salad. Louis wrote Chocolate. Lennox wrote Cold leftovers straight from the pot, specifically the spicy pasta he caught me eating at 2 a.m. years ago.

The place she wants to visit most? Levi wrote Paris. Lennox wrote A small cabin in the mountains with no cell service.

By the tenth question, the kids stopped cheering. Even a child could feel the shift. Lennox hadn't missed a single one. He sat there, relaxed, almost bored, while Louis and Levi looked increasingly like strangers at their own table.

Liam swallowed and looked down at his papers, suddenly less excited.

"Okay..." Liam said slowly, clearing his throat. "Next question."

He looked up at them again, trying to smile.

"Mom's favorite subject in school."

Levi and Louis relaxed a little this time. Finally, something solid.

They wrote quickly.

Biology.

Both of them.

Lennox paused.

Not long—but long enough.

His pen hovered over the paper, his brows drawing together as if he was sorting through layers of memories instead of facts. Then he wrote.

"Flip them!"

Levi and Louis turned theirs around with confidence.

Biology.

Liam nodded eagerly and turned to Lennox.

Lennox flipped his paper.

Literature.

Levi frowned. "No, that's wrong."

Louis shook his head. "She loved biology. She talked about it all the time."

I felt my chest tighten.

Lennox didn't argue. He just looked at me.

"She chose biology because she was good at it," he said calmly. "Because everyone told her it was 'practical.' But literature was where she disappeared. Where she felt things without needing to explain them."

My fingers trembled as I unfolded my paper.

Literature.

Silence.

Levi stared at the word like it had betrayed him.

"But you dropped it," he said quietly, almost hurt. "You stopped reading as much."

"I stopped having time," I whispered before I could stop myself.

Lennox's gaze softened—not victorious, not proud. Just sad.

Liam shuffled the papers again, his excitement now careful, like he was walking on thin ice.

"Okay... um... next one."

"Mom's favorite place to think."

Levi wrote The garden.

Louis wrote The bedroom balcony.

Lennox didn't write right away.

When he finally did, he folded the paper once—like he didn't want to show it too easily.

"Show!"

Levi and Louis flipped theirs.

Lennox unfolded his slowly.

The bathroom floor, back against the tub.

I sucked in a sharp breath.

That one hurt.

I opened my paper.

It matched.

Liam looked confused. "Why there?"

Lennox answered before I could.

"In there, there will be no disturbance."

I swallowed hard. Lennox knew because on several occasions he had met me there, thinking, and I never knew he would remember it.

Levi's jaw clenched.

Louis looked away.

The game didn't stop—but it changed.

Some questions, Levi and Louis got right.

Favorite fruit? Mango. All three.

Favorite season? Autumn. All three.

Favorite childhood food? Fried plantains. All three.

But every time the question went deeper—every time it stopped being about what I liked and became about why I was the way I was—only Lennox answered.

And every time Levi or Louis got one right...

Lennox had it too.

By the fifteenth question, Liam's voice was small.

"What is Mom's favorite physical feature on herself?"

Levi and Louis swapped a look. They both wrote quickly, smiles returning to their faces for a fleeting second. They both held up their papers: Her eyes.

"Everyone says it," Levi added, his voice warm with a memory. "The way they change color in the sun. You've always said you liked that you got them from your grandmother."

Lennox didn't even smile. He held up his paper: Her face.

I swallowed hard.

I didn't even open my paper.

I didn't need to.

The silence wasn't awkward anymore.

It was devastating.

Liam sensed the shift and tried to lighten the mood, flipping his notebook page. "Okay! Let's do a lightning round! Quick answers only!"

Question 17: Mom's favorite movie!

Levi and Louis didn't hesitate. They both wrote: The Notebook.

"You cry every time it's on cable!" Louis said, a bit of desperate hope returning to his eyes.

I bit my lip and showed my paper: Pan's Labyrinth.

Lennox flipped his paper: Pan's Labyrinth.

He didn't explain. He just looked at me, then at the lake, his expression unreadable.

Question 18: Favorite song!

Levi wrote: Something by Adele.

Louis wrote: Speechless by Michael Jackson.

Lennox wrote: "A Thousand "Years"—Christina Perri.

I held up my paper. It was "A Thousand Years."

Lennox didn't say a word about why. He just sat there, the victor of a game that was starting to feel like an execution.

Question 19: Favorite holiday!

Levi and Louis both scribbled :Christmas "The decorations, the cookies... you love the family being together," Levi said confidently.

I turned my paper around: Halloween.

Lennox flipped his: Halloween.

Question 22: What is Mom's favorite scent?

Levi wrote: Lavender.

Louis wrote: Vanilla.

Lennox wrote: The smell of the woods.

I flipped my paper. The smell of the forest.

Lennox didn't say a word. He just tapped his pen against his knee, looking out at the water as if he hadn't just exposed another layer of my soul.

Question 23: What is the first thing Mom does when she wakes up?

Levi: Checks her phone.

Louis: Prays.

Lennox: Stares at the ceiling for a few minutes in silence.

I swallowed hard and showed my paper. Silence / The ceiling.

I needed those five minutes to build the mask before I had to face the world. I didn't think anyone noticed. I thought they all believed I was just slow to wake up.

Question 27: What is Mom's favorite "guilty pleasure" TV show?

Levi: The news.

Louis: Medical dramas.

Lennox: Bad 90s sitcoms.

I flipped my paper. 90s sitcoms. He didn't mention the hours we spent watching reruns while the others were at the gym or in meetings. He just wrote it down, his expression stone-cold.

Liam looked at the score, his face falling. "Father Lennox got... every single one right. Father Levi and Louis... you guys only got three."

"I think we get the point, Liam," Louis said, his frown deepening. He looked at me, his eyes full of a pain so deep it made me look away.

Liam folded the papers carefully, his little face sad. I believed he thought this was going to be fun.

"I think..." he said softly, "...the game is over."

No one argued.

And for the first time, I understood something I hadn't wanted to face:

Levi and Louis loved me deeply.

But Lennox knew me.

And the scary part is that he has been away for four years and still knows me better.

Louis dropped his pen, the plastic clattering against the tray. He looked at the pile of papers—a mountain of evidence that he was living with a woman he didn't truly know. The heartbreak on his face was raw, but beneath it, there was a new, dangerous layer of resentment. Not just for Lennox, but for the fact that I had let Lennox in that deep while keeping him at arm's length.

"I think I've had enough," Louis said, his voice a jagged edge. He stood up abruptly, his face deathly pale. He didn't wait for a response, turning on his heel and heading toward the lake's edge.

Levi didn't follow him this time. He just sat there, staring at Lennox. "You make us look like fools, Lennox," he whispered. "Is that the goal? To prove we don't deserve her?"

Lennox finally lowered his guard, his expression softening into something like pity.

"No, Levi. The goal was for you to realize how much you don't know her."

Fated To Not Just One, But Three #Chapter 641: Mistake - Read Fated To Not Just One, But Three Chapter 641: Mistake

Chapter 641: Mistake

Olivia's POV

Levi frowned, then—just like Louis—he stood up. Without a word, he walked away.

Of course, the boys noticed. Children always do.

They felt the shift, the tension hanging thick in the air, the way something that was supposed to be fun suddenly turned wrong. And deep down, it hurt me more than anything else.

What kind of parenthood were we building like this?

"I'm sorry," Liam suddenly whispered, his small voice cracking. "I thought it was going to be fun... I didn't mean to make them sad."

My heart shattered.

I pulled him into my lap immediately, wrapping my arms around him and holding him close. Over his shoulder, I saw Leon and Leo watching us with wide, uncertain eyes. They weren't babies anymore. They could sense the rot beneath this so-called happy family outing.

"It's okay, darling," I whispered, smoothing Liam's hair. "This isn't your fault. Not at all. The adults are just... we're just having a hard day."

But Liam didn't look convinced.

He looked guilty—like a child who had accidentally broken something precious and realized too late that it could never be fixed.

I lifted my eyes over Liam's head and looked at Lennox.

He was still sitting there, leaning back on one elbow, his posture relaxed. Too relaxed. The lake behind him was calm, reflecting the sunlight—and he looked just like it.

He didn't look guilty or sorry. He looked like a man who had done exactly what he intended to do.

"Was it worth it?" I asked, my voice trembling with a cold, sharp anger.

Lennox tilted his head slightly, his eyes hidden behind his sunglasses.

"Making sure they face the reality of their neglect?" he said evenly. "Yes, Olivia. It was."

"You used my son," I hissed, lowering my voice once the boys had wandered a few steps away to play by the sand. "You used a game meant for a child to humiliate your brothers."

Lennox frowned. "How did I humiliate them, Olivia?"

"By agreeing to the game in the first place," I snapped. "You could have said no. You should have said no. But you didn't. You chose to embarrass them instead. How childish of you."

I stood up, anger boiling over.

"What?" I continued bitterly. "You think knowing so much about me will make me love you more? Want you more?"

I laughed harshly.

"Never. We're not even mates anymore."

The words left my mouth before I could stop them.

And the moment they did, I knew those words hit Lennox.

Even though I couldn't see his eyes behind the sunglasses, I saw it in the way his jaw clenched. The way his body went still. He didn't argue. He didn't shout.

He simply stood up.

Without looking at me, he walked toward the boys and joined them, kneeling down to help Liam build something in the sand.

Like nothing had happened.

I sat back down slowly, my chest tight.

God... I felt like an idiot.

A big one.

Those words—they were never meant to leave my lips.

How could I have said that to him?

My wolf stirred uneasily.

Go talk to him, she urged.

But fear held me back.

I was panicking. I didn't know how he would react. And with the kids around, I knew—or at least told myself—that it was better to stay away.

Moments later, Louis and Levi walked back together. From the look on their faces, I could tell they'd talked.

They sat down across from me, both of them unusually quiet.

"We're sorry," Levi said first, his voice low and sincere. "We've realized something."

Louis nodded. "We haven't been putting in enough effort. Not in this relationship. Not with you."

My chest tightened.

"You're our mate," Louis continued. "And yet... we barely know you anymore. We took you for granted."

Levi swallowed. "We want to do better. To love you better. To try."

They looked at me with something close to hope.

"Please," Louis said quietly. "Give us another chance."

Emotion welled up in my throat.

"Of course," I said softly. "We're all learning. None of us has done this perfectly."

They both smiled, relief easing their faces.

But Louis didn't look away from me.

His gaze sharpened slightly.

"Something happened between you and Lennox," he said carefully. "Didn't it?"

My heart dropped.

"Yes," I admitted.

Louis frowned. "What did you say to him?"

I swallowed hard.

"I told him..." My voice shook. "I told him we're not mates anymore."

The silence that followed was heavy.

Levi's face paled, and he let out a long, slow breath. "Olivia... that must have really hurt him. Even for Lennox, that's a jagged pill to swallow."

He looked toward the shoreline, where Lennox was patiently helping Leon with a sandcastle, his movements mechanical and distant.

"You should talk to him. Not here, not with the boys watching—but when we get back. You need to fix that bridge before it finishes burning."

I just nodded, the guilt sitting like a lead weight in my stomach.

The drive back was an exercise in agony.

On the surface, Lennox was the perfect father. He laughed at the boys' jokes, pointed out the constellations beginning to peek through the twilight, and made sure everyone was buckled in.

But to me, he was a ghost.

He didn't look at me once. Not in the rearview mirror. Not when he handed me a water bottle. Nothing.

It was as if I had truly become the stranger I claimed he was.

The unease followed me into the mansion like a physical chill.

After the long day, the boys were exhausted. I spent an hour bathing them and tucking them in, lingering longer than usual just to avoid the inevitable.

Finally, the hallway was quiet.

The mansion felt cavernous and empty.

I found myself standing in front of Lennox's heavy oak door. My hand trembled as I raised it to knock.

After the second knock, the door didn't just open—it was pushed wide with a suddenness that made me jump.

Chapter 642: Crossed The Line

Lennox stood there, still in his clothes from the lake, though his shirt was unbuttoned at the collar. His face was a mask of polite, chilling indifference.

"Olivia," he said, his voice flat. "It's late. Do you want something?"

The softened voice he used on me was gone. The warmth was gone. He looked at me like a landlord looking at a tenant who was late on rent.

"I... I wanted to talk about what I said at the lake," I began, my voice small. "Lennox, I was angry, and I didn't—I was out of line. I lashed out because I felt cornered, but I didn't mean it. I know we're still... that you're still my mate."

Lennox let out a short, hollow breath—not a laugh, just a puff of air.

"It's okay, Olivia. I forgive you."

He said it so easily. Too easily. There was no weight behind the words, no lingering heat.

"Get some rest," he added, his hand moving to the edge of the door to close it. "Good night."

He was dismissing me. Just like that.

I stood there as the door began to swing shut, and a cold panic flared in my chest. This wasn't right. I realized in that moment that I had come here expecting—maybe even wanting—him to yell at me. I wanted him to roar about how much I'd hurt him, to argue, to show me the fire that had been in the pool yesterday.

I wanted him to fight for us again.

But this?

This polite indifference was a thousand times worse.

"Lennox, wait," I said, putting my hand out to stop the door. "You haven't forgiven me."

He paused, his eyes sliding back to mine. He looked tired, but in a way that had nothing to do with sleep.

"I said the words, didn't I?" he replied quietly. "I told you it's fine."

"The words are empty!" I snapped, my voice rising in the quiet hall. "What makes me think you haven't forgiven me? Because you aren't even looking at me. You're treating me like a business associate you're forced to tolerate. You're being... nice. And you are never just nice to me."

Lennox finally let go of the door and took a slow step toward me, invading my space just enough to make my heart skip.

But he didn't touch me.

He didn't even lean in.

"You told me that knowing you doesn't make me your mate," he said, his voice a low, terrifyingly calm vibration. "You told me that my effort—the way I've spent years learning the map of your soul—was nothing more than a childish game of humiliation. You asked for space, Olivia. You spent weeks telling us to back off, to let you breathe, to stop hunting you."

He tilted his head, his expression calm.

"So I'm doing it," he continued. "I'm giving you exactly what you asked for. I'm letting go of the thread. You wanted to be 'just Olivia'? Well, here you are. I've stopped fighting for a woman who looks me in the eye and tells me our bond is dead."

His eyes swept over me once, slow and clinical, making me feel more naked than I had at the lake.

"I have forgiven you, Olivia. And besides, what you said wasn't wrong," he added quietly. "You were right. We aren't mates anymore."

He reached for the door again.

I didn't think.

I just moved.

The door brushed my shoulder as I slipped inside before he could stop me.

Lennox didn't turn around.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then he exhaled slowly, like I had confirmed something he already knew.

"You shouldn't be here," he said quietly.

I didn't answer.

He didn't wait for one.

He walked past me without even a glance, his shoulder missing mine by inches, like I was a piece of furniture he had learned to move around. He unbuttoned the rest of his shirt as he crossed the room, every movement controlled, distant.

I stood there, watching, hoping he would say something.

But he shrugged the shirt off and dropped it on the chair. Kicked off his shoes. Unfastened his belt.

"You can sit if you want," he said without looking at me. "Or leave. Either way."

My chest ached.

I lowered myself onto the edge of the armchair, my hands clasped so tightly together my fingers hurt. I didn't trust myself to move closer. I didn't trust myself to speak.

He disappeared into the bathroom.

The door didn't close fully.

I could hear the shower turn on.

Water hitting tile.

Steam creeping under the door.

I sat there while he showered.

I stared at the floor and tried to breathe around the weight crushing my chest.

This was worse than anger. Worse than shouting.

When the water finally stopped, my heart jumped like it had been waiting for permission to feel again.

He came out wrapped in a towel, hair damp, skin still warm from the heat. He didn't acknowledge me. Didn't slow. Didn't ask why I was still there.

He dressed quietly—boxers, then sweatpants. No shirt.

The Lennox who used to look at me like I was gravity didn't exist in this room.

He moved to the bed, pulled back the covers, and lay down on his side, facing away from me.

Then he pulled the blanket up.

Covering himself and closing himself off.

The finality of it knocked the breath out of me.

I stood slowly, my legs unsteady, and took a few hesitant steps toward the bed.

"Lennox," I whispered.

No response.

I waited.

Nothing.

I sat on the edge of the mattress, close enough to feel the warmth of his body, but not close enough to touch.

He didn't shift.

Didn't tense.

Didn't react.

"I didn't mean it," I said softly. "What I said... about the bond. About you."

Still nothing.

My throat burned.

"I was scared," I continued. "I was angry. I felt like I was losing everything at once, and I lashed out. But that doesn't mean I stopped loving you."

His breathing remained even—like he was already asleep, or like he had trained himself not to respond.

Tears finally blurred my vision.

"I'm right here," I whispered. "I came here because I wanted you to fight me. To pull me back. To remind me why I'm yours."

My voice cracked.

"But you're letting me go."

The words hung in the air, unanswered.

I stayed there anyway.

Sitting beside the man who used to be my home.

Listening to his breathing.

Wondering when—exactly—I had crossed the line from asking for space... to being left alone.

Chapter 643: Don't Want Space

Olivia's POV

For several minutes, I remained seated on the bed as I stared at his back turned against me... his breathing steady, like he was asleep.

Feeling heartbroken, I stood up, and with tear-filled eyes, I turned to leave as I walked toward the door.

"Isn't this what you wanted?" Lennox suddenly spoke from behind me, his voice not sounding like someone who was asleep.

I turned back, the tears finally spilling over. "I was wrong. I lashed out because I didn't want to be vulnerable, and you're the only one who makes me feel that way."

"Being vulnerable is a choice," he murmured. "And you chose to be 'Just Olivia.' You can't have it both ways. You can't ask for the freedom of a stranger and then cry when I treat you like one."

I walked back to the bed, dropping to my knees on the floor beside where his head lay. I reached out, my fingers trembling as I brushed a damp strand of hair from his forehead. He didn't flinch, but he didn't lean into it either.

"I don't want to be a stranger," I sobbed, my forehead resting against the edge of the mattress. "I don't want this space anymore, Lennox. It's too big. It's too cold."

He finally turned over. The moonlight hit his face, and for the first time, I saw the cracks. His eyes weren't just cold; they were exhausted. There were no more schemes in them, no more plans to "fix" us.

"Then what do you want, Olivia?" he asked, his voice cracking just a fraction. "Because I can't keep guessing. I'm tired of being the only one fighting a war while you're waving a white flag."

"I want you to hold me," I whispered. "Not because of a bond. Not because you're my mate. But because you're Lennox, and I'm lost."

He stared at me for a long beat, the silence stretching between us. Then, slowly, he lifted the edge of the blanket. He didn't say a word. He didn't pull me in. He just opened the space.

I crawled in beside him, shivering as the warmth of his body hit mine. I tucked my head under his chin, my hands clutching his chest as if he might disappear if I let go. He didn't wrap his arms around me immediately. He just lay there, stiff and silent.

"I'm still mad at you," he whispered into the top of my hair.

"I know," I breathed, closing my eyes.

"And I'm not going to pretend everything is fine tomorrow just because you're in my bed tonight."

"I know."

Finally, his arm came around me, heavy and protective, pulling me flush against him. It wasn't the passionate embrace from the pool; it was the way you hold something dear to you.

"Sleep, Olivia," he sighed. "We'll talk in the morning."

I nodded against his chest, the steady thrum of his heart acting like a lullaby I hadn't heard in years. For the first time in months, the static in my brain went quiet. There were no expectations, no "rules" of the break, and no walls—just the heavy, protective weight of Lennox's arm holding me together. I drifted into a sleep so deep it felt like healing.

When the morning light began to filter through the heavy velvet curtains, I reached out instinctively, my hand searching for the warmth of his skin.

My fingers met cold sheets.

My eyes snapped open, and the peaceful bubble from the night before popped instantly. The bed was empty. The pillow beside me still held the indentation of his head, but he was gone.

I sat up, pulling the duvet tightly around my chest, my heart racing. But before I could spiral into a full-blown panic, the heavy oak door clicked open.

I froze—but it wasn't just Lennox who walked in.

It was all three of them.

Lennox led the way, looking devastatingly handsome in a simple black T-shirt that hugged his shoulders. Behind him came Louis and Levi, and my breath hitched. They had clearly been to the gym; their hair was damp, and they wore casual sweats that sat low on their hips. Seeing them together—really together, without the usual cloud of resentment—was a shock to my system.

Louis was carrying a massive silver tray loaded with everything I loved: fresh fruit, steaming coffee, and the specific chocolate croissants from the bakery in town. Levi followed with a single crystalline vase holding a sprig of white jasmine.

They looked powerful. They looked united. They looked... sexy.

"You're awake," Lennox said. His voice was still grounded.

"We decided that if we're going to start learning who you are," Louis said, his brown eyes soft as he set the tray down across my lap, "we should start with the most important meal of the day."

Levi stepped forward, placing the jasmine on the nightstand. The scent filled the air immediately.

I looked at the three of them, my eyes stinging. Lennox stood at the foot of the bed, his arms crossed over his chest. He didn't say much, but the way he watched me told me that while we weren't "fixed," he had kept his promise. He hadn't let go of the thread.

"Breakfast in bed, Olivia," Lennox said, a ghost of a smirk finally playing on his lips. "Eat. We have a lot to talk about today, and you're going to need your strength."

I looked down at the feast, then back at my three mates standing around me—the men I had spent weeks pushing away, who were now standing here with an offering of peace.

A sudden spark of the old Olivia—the one who loved to play with them—flickered in my chest. I looked at my hands, then slowly looked up at them with a feigned pout.

"This all looks delicious," I murmured, my voice dripping with exaggerated helplessness. "But... I think I hurt my hand yesterday at the lake. It's so cramped, I don't think I can even hold a fork. I can't possibly feed myself."

I watched the way their expressions shifted. They knew. They absolutely knew I was teasing, but for the first time in months, the air didn't feel like it was made of glass.

Louis let out a low, huffed laugh—the first genuine sound of amusement I'd heard from him in forever. He stepped closer, sinking onto the edge of the mattress. "Is that so? A tragic lake injury?"

"Very tragic," I whispered, holding back a smile.

"Well," Louis said, picking up a piece of melon with a fork and bringing it to my lips, "it looks like we'll have to take care of you. Just like the old days."

I bit into the fruit, my eyes locked on his. The tension was still there, but it was shifting into something warmer—something that felt like a bridge being rebuilt. Levi didn't stay standing either; he sat on my other side, his thigh pressing against mine, while Lennox sat at the foot of the bed, his large frame grounding the entire space.

For the next twenty minutes, the room was filled with the quiet clink of silverware and low conversation. Louis fed me bits of croissant, Levi held the coffee cup to my lips, and Lennox—though he didn't join in the feeding—watched every movement with a dark, intense focus. It was intimate and domestic, a glimpse of the life we used to have before the secrets and the break had torn us apart.

But as the tray grew empty, the playful energy began to evaporate, replaced by a heavy, necessary gravity.

Lennox reached out and took the tray from my lap, setting it aside on the nightstand. He didn't move from the bed. He stayed right there, forming a physical circle around me with his brothers. He looked at Louis and Levi, then back at me.

"We need to talk about us."

Lennox didn't just wait for a response. He reached over to the nightstand and pulled out a leather-bound notebook and a pen. It was classic Lennox—calculated, organized, and ready to dismantle a problem with surgical precision.

He flipped it open to a page already filled with his sharp, disciplined handwriting. My heart hammered against my ribs. He had thought about this day.

"I've spent the morning talking with Louis and Levi," Lennox began, his gaze steady as he looked at me. "We've identified the issues. We aren't just going to 'try harder.' We

are going to fix the specific things that are rotting this family, because we are spending the rest of our lives together. I will make sure of it."

He turned the notebook so I could see the list. At the top, in bold letters, was written **IMBALANCE**.

"We have to talk about the things that cause a rift between brothers sharing one mate," Lennox said, his voice dropping into a low, serious register. "First: jealousy. Not just the kind where we want to keep you to ourselves, but the kind that grows when we feel like we're losing a competition we didn't know we were in."

Chapter 644: The Flaws

Olivia's POV

Lennox tapped the notebook, his eyes moving between Louis, Levi, and me. The room was silent, save for the sound of my own heartbeat.

"Next is Sharing," Lennox said, his voice firm. "We are three men sharing one woman. It's hectic. It's hard. But we have to learn how to share you equally. Jealousy is a poison. If Louis gets a morning with you, Levi and I shouldn't spend that time sulking or looking for a replacement. We have to be happy that our mate is being loved."

Louis looked down at his hands, then up at me. "He's right. I've been acting like a child when I'm not the center of your world. I'll work on myself, Olivia. I promise."

Levi nodded in agreement. "Me too. No more competing. We're a team, not rivals."

Lennox turned the page. "Point Two: Favoritism. This one is for you, Olivia."

I swallowed hard as he looked me in the eye.

"You can't favor one of us over the others," Lennox said plainly. "I know you have different levels of comfort with each of us, but you can't act like you love one more. It creates a rift. If you have a problem, don't just whisper it to one of us. Talk to all three. If you want to be held, don't just seek out the 'safe' one. Give us all the chance to be your strength."

"I... I'll try," I whispered. "It's just been so hard to open up lately."

"We know," Lennox said, his expression softening just a fraction before he moved to the third point. "Point Three: The Single Soul. You have to start seeing us as a single soul in three bodies again. If you love me more today, they will feel the cold. If you give Levi a secret but keep it from Louis, Louis will feel less important."

"I never wanted anyone to feel less important," I said, my voice shaking.

"I know, baby," Lennox replied. He flipped the page again. "Point Four: No Comparing. Don't compare Louis's laugh to my silence, or Levi's gentleness to my intensity. We are different, but we are all yours. When you compare us, you make us feel like we're failing a test we can't win."

Finally, he looked at the last item on his list. "Point Five: The Silent Treatment."

He set the pen down. "No more running away. No more shutting us out for weeks. If you're mad, scream at us. If you're hurt, tell us. But the silence stops today. Silence is where the rot starts. It's where we start looking elsewhere for a voice that will actually talk back to us."

The mention of "looking elsewhere" made my mind flash to Aurora, and the air in the room grew heavy. Lennox closed the notebook and stared at me right in the eyes.

"We are spending our lives together," Lennox said, his gaze as sharp as a blade. "I am going to make sure of it. But that only works if we are united and want this... so do we want this?"

"Yes," Louis and Levi responded without hesitation.

All eyes moved down to me as they waited for my response.

I looked at Louis, whose brown eyes were pleading for a fresh start. I looked at Levi, whose hand was still warm against mine. Finally, I looked at Lennox, the man who had stayed awake all night turning our chaos into a map.

"Yes," I whispered, my voice gaining strength as I looked at each of them. "I want this. I want us."

The tension in the room didn't just snap; it dissolved. Louis let out a breath he seemed to have been holding since the lake, and Levi squeezed my hand so hard it should have hurt, but it only felt like a tether.

"Good," Lennox said, his voice dropping into that dark, satisfied tone that sent a shiver down my spine. He set the notebook aside and looked me straight in the eyes.

"Whatever you don't like or want, you speak, okay... don't keep it in."

"Yes," I said, my voice finally steady. "No more keeping it in."

The relief in the room was a living thing. Levi reached out first, his fingers trembling slightly as he touched my arm. "I am so sorry, Olivia. For the jealousy, for the wrong decisions, for making you feel like you had to hide in your own home. I was a fool, and I'll spend every day making it up to you."

"I forgive you," I whispered. I looked at Levi, who looked like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

"We're starting all over," Lennox declared. "A clean slate. No more 'break,' no more 'Just Olivia.' We are whole again."

"Yes," I agreed, a genuine smile finally breaking through. "Starting all over."

They all leaned in at once, pulling me into a massive, warm group hug. I buried my face against them, inhaling the familiar, intoxicating mix of their scent, that spiced citrus that always meant home. It was the most secure I had felt in months.

I slowly pulled away, my heart racing with a sudden, bold energy. My eyes met Lennox's first. He was watching me with that intense, guarded look, but before he could say anything, I reached up, grabbed his shirt, and pulled him down into a kiss.

He stiffened for a split second in pure shock, but then he groaned into my mouth, his arms wrapping around me like iron as he kissed me back with a desperate, hungry heat.

When I broke the kiss, I was breathless. I turned to Louis, who was watching with a wide, stunned smile. I didn't give him a chance to speak before I pressed my lips to his. He tasted like the chocolate croissant and pure joy, his hands tangling in my hair as he pulled me closer.

Finally, I moved to Levi. He met me halfway, his kiss soft and filled with a silent promise. It felt like re-establishing a claim, a way of telling them—and myself—that I was done being a ghost.

I pulled back, flushed and dizzy, looking at the three of them. They were all staring at me with a mix of awe and possessive heat.

"Well," Louis breathed, rubbing his thumb over his lower lip. "That's definitely one way to start over."

Lennox's eyes were dark, his pupils blown wide. "I think," he said, his voice husky, "we need to check on the kids... they should be up by now."

I laughed softly, watching the way Lennox's jaw tightened. He was the master of control, but that kiss had clearly rattled the cage he kept his desires in. He stood up, smoothing out his shirt, but he wouldn't meet my eyes for a second—a rare sign of him being genuinely flustered.

"Yes," I teased, my voice still a little breathless. "The kids. Always the responsible one, Lennox."

Louis and Levi stood too, looking equally dazed. The room felt lighter, the air finally clear for the first time in what felt like years. We walked out of the room together, a tight-knit unit, heading toward the boys' wing.

The sound of giggling greeted us before we even reached their door. When we walked in, the boys were already jumping on Liam's bed, a mess of blankets and pillows everywhere. They froze when they saw all four of us standing in the doorway together—not arguing, not cold, but standing shoulder-to-shoulder.

"Are we going to the park today?" Leon asked, his eyes darting between us, searching for the "adult tension" he had grown used to.

"Better," Louis said, swooping in to grab Leon and hoisting him onto his shoulders. "We're going to have a proper family day. No work, no school. Just us."

The boys cheered, the pure joy in their voices echoing through the hallway.

We went shopping, letting the kids pick out toys they didn't need, and ran through the park until my legs ached. For the first time, it didn't feel like a performance for the public. It felt like we were finally breathing the same air.

By the time we pulled into the mansion's driveway, the backseat was silent. Liam, Leon, and Leo were tangled together in a pile of limbs and exhausted smiles, fast asleep.

We worked as a team to carry them in, a quiet, synchronized dance of parents tucking their children into bed. As I smoothed the blankets over Liam's shoulder, I looked up at the three men standing in the doorway. The moonlight hit them, and the domesticity of the moment made my chest ache with a different kind of hunger.

"Can we sleep together tonight?" I whispered, my voice small but certain. "All four of us? In my room?"

I saw the way their bodies tensed, a collective surge of heat passing through them. "Your wish is our command, baby," Louis murmured, his voice thick.

We moved to my master suite. The air in the room was cool, but the atmosphere was electric. I didn't hesitate. I reached behind my back, unzipping my dress and letting it pool at my feet. I stood there in just my lace undergarments, feeling their eyes—six points of fire—tracing every inch of my skin.

They began to undress with a focused, hungry silence, shedding their shirts and trousers until they were down to their boxers.

I climbed into the center of the massive bed. Lennox immediately moved behind me, his large, solid frame a wall of heat against my back. Levi settled in front of me, his eyes on

me, while Louis sat at the foot of the bed, his hands wrapping around my ankles before he crawled up to join the circle.

Chapter 645: Off

Lennox's POV

I stood in the kitchen, the scent of sizzling bacon and fresh coffee filling the air. For the first time in months, the house felt alive. Louis was flipping pancakes while Levi and Olivia were laughing over a story about Liam. It was the perfect picture—the one I had fought so hard to rebuild.

But as I reached for a plate, a sharp, white-hot needle of pain shot through my temple. I blinked, the bright kitchen lights suddenly feeling like daggers.

"Lennox?" Levi's voice cut through the fog. He was looking at me, his brow furrowed. "You okay? You look pale."

"Just tired," I gritted out, forcing a small smile. I leaned against the counter, waiting for the world to stop spinning. "Late night, remember?"

Louis smirked, but Levi didn't look convinced. "You should sit down, brother. We can handle the rest."

"No," I snapped, perhaps a bit too quickly. "I'm fine. I'm not missing this."

The "fine" didn't last long. By the time we were ready to serve, the floor felt like it was tilting beneath my feet. A wave of nausea hit me so hard I had to grip the edge of the sink until I got my composure back. I knew my body; this wasn't just exhaustion. This was a system failure.

"Excuse me for a moment," I muttered, not waiting for an answer. I made it to my room, closing the door just as my knees buckled. I slumped against the wood, gasping for air. The room was dark, but black spots danced across my vision. I almost fainted right there on the rug. Something was wrong—terribly wrong.

A soft knock came at the door before Levi slipped inside. He saw me on the floor and was at my side in a second. "Lennox! Talk to me. What's happening?"

"I don't know," I whispered, my voice sounding thin and distant. "Call the healer. Get her here now. But Levi... don't tell Olivia. Not yet. She just got her happiness back. I won't be the one to take it away again."

I forced myself to go back down. I had to. If I stayed in my room, she'd come looking.

The family was at the table, the boys chattering away. I sat down, but the air in the room felt like lead. It was getting harder to draw a full breath. I stared at my plate, the food looking like ash.

"Lennox?" Olivia's voice was soft, laced with that intuition that usually made me proud, but right now, it made me terrified. "You're not breathing right. Are you okay?"

I looked at her, seeing the worry starting to cloud her beautiful eyes. "I feel a bit sick, Olivia. I've already sent for the healer. It's probably just a bug. Nothing serious."

"Let me check you," she said, starting to stand up.

"No," I said, my voice firmer than I felt. "Stay. Eat with the boys. I just need a moment to rest upstairs. The healer will be here any minute."

I retreated to my room, the walk up the stairs feeling like climbing a mountain.

A few minutes later, the pack healer, Martha, entered. She didn't waste time with small talk. She ran her hands over my chest, her eyes closed as she tapped into my vitals.

As she worked, the room went silent. I watched her face, looking for the usual you're just overworked smile. But it never came. Instead, her skin paled, and her mouth thinned into a hard, straight line. She pulled her hands back as if my skin had burned her.

"Martha?" I prompted, my heart thudding painfully against my ribs. "What is it?"

She didn't look at me. She looked at her kit, her hands shaking. "Alpha Lennox... this isn't a bug. And it isn't exhaustion."

She finally met my eyes, and the pity I saw there was more terrifying than the pain in my head.

"Martha," I said again, slower this time. "What is it?"

She took a shaky breath. "It's cancer."

The word hit me like a blow to the chest. I let out a short, disbelieving laugh. "That's not possible," I said immediately. "I never got a symptom about it."

"You healed fast because you had your wolf," she said quietly. "Your wolf masked it. Fought it. Slowed it down. But now..." Her voice cracked. "Now that your wolf is gone, there's nothing suppressing it anymore."

I stared at her.

"No," I said. "That doesn't make sense. I would've felt it before. I would've known."

"You did feel it," she replied gently. "The headaches. The weakness. The breathlessness. Your wolf absorbed most of the damage before you could notice."

My hands curled into fists.

"So heal me," I said sharply. "That's what you're here for. Heal it."

Martha shook her head slowly. "I can't," she whispered.

"What do you mean you can't?" I snapped. "You've healed broken spines. Crushed organs. You've brought warriors back from the brink of death."

"Yes," she said, tears gathering in her eyes. "With wolves. I can only heal men with wolves."

She stepped back from me.

"You don't have that anymore." The silence that followed was suffocating. "Without a wolf," she continued, "my magic can't touch it. Cancer doesn't respond to healing spells alone. It requires human medicine now. Surgery. Treatment. Long processes, especially since you don't have a wolf."

I laughed in disbelief.

"And how long do I have?" I asked.

She hesitated.

That hesitation told me everything. "... don't know for sure," she said carefully. "But from how fast it's spreading now that your wolf is gone..."

She couldn't finish the sentence.

"Say it," I demanded. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Not much time, Alpha."

Something inside me broke.

"You have to see a doctor, Alpha," she pleaded. A sudden knock came at the door. Before Martha could stop them, it opened.

Olivia walked in first, her eyes already filled with concern. Levi and Louis followed close behind her, their faces tight with unease.

"What's wrong?" Olivia asked immediately, rushing toward me. "I felt it. Something's wrong with you."

My heart clenched.

This—this was exactly what I had tried to avoid. I forced myself to straighten, schooling my face into something calm. Controlled. Alpha.

"It's nothing," I said quickly. "Just... stress. My sugar dropped. That's all."

Martha stiffened beside me, but she said nothing.

Olivia searched my face like she always did, like she could see past my lies if she stared long enough. Her eyes moved to Martha, then back to me.

"You're lying," she said softly.

I shook my head. "I'm not. I just need to eat and rest."

I turned deliberately toward the door where the head maid stood. "Monica," I called.

A moment later, she appeared, wiping her hands on her apron. "Yes, Alpha?"

"I didn't eat this morning," I said. "Can you prepare some soup for me?"

She nodded immediately. "Of course. I'll bring it right away."

She left, closing the door behind her.

The room fell silent again.

Olivia took a step toward me, but I lifted my hand gently, stopping her. "Please," I said quietly. "Don't worry. I'll be fine."

Her lips parted like she wanted to argue, but Levi placed a hand on her arm.

"Let him breathe," Levi said softly, though his eyes never left me.

Reluctantly, Olivia nodded. "I'll be in the kitchen. I'll make the meal myself," she said, and she left.

The door closed.

Now it was just me, Levi, Louis... and the truth pressing so hard against my chest it felt like it might crush me.

I exhaled slowly.

"I lied," I said.

Both of them went still.

Levi straightened instantly. "What do you mean, you lied?"

I looked at Martha.

She stepped forward, her hands shaking. "Alpha Lennox asked me not to tell Luna Olivia yet."

Louis frowned. "Tell her what?"

I swallowed.

"I have cancer."

The words landed like a bomb.

The room went dead silent.

Levi stared at me like he hadn't heard right. "What?" he whispered.

Louis took a step back. "No," he said immediately. "No, that's not possible."

"It's been there," I said quietly. "For a while."

Martha nodded. "His wolf suppressed it," she explained. "Fought it. Slowed its growth. That's why there were no clear symptoms before."

Levi's hands clenched into fists. "And now?"

"And now," Martha said softly, "he no longer has a wolf."

Louis's face drained of color.

"Without his wolf," she continued, "his body is human. Fully human. My healing magic cannot reach it anymore."

Levi shook his head violently. "No. That's bullshit. You've healed worse than this."

"With wolves," she said, her voice breaking. "I can only heal wolves. Right now, Alpha Lennox is like a human. Magic alone won't work."

Louis swallowed hard. "So... what happens now?"

"He needs human medicine," Martha said. "Doctors. Scans. Surgery. Treatment. And he needs it fast."

The word fast echoed in my head.

Levi looked at me, fear naked in his eyes. "Cancer of the what?" he asked hoarsely.

Martha hesitated.

That hesitation sent a cold chill down my spine.

"Of the brain," she said quietly. "It explains the headaches. The dizziness. The breathlessness."

Louis staggered back, sitting heavily on the edge of the bed.

"No," he whispered. "No, no, no..."

Levi moved closer to me, his voice trembling. "How long?"

Martha closed her eyes.

"I don't know exactly," she said. "But without immediate medical intervention..."

She couldn't finish.

I gave a bitter laugh. "Not much time," I said for her.

Chapter 646: No Time Left

Lennox's POV

The air in the room was thick with the scent of fear. Levi looked like he wanted to punch the wall, and Louis looked like he was about to collapse. Seeing them like this—seeing my brothers, my lieutenants, my family, shattered—was worse than the diagnosis.

"I have to see a doctor first," I said, my voice cutting through their panic with the last of my Alpha authority. "A human specialist. Someone who knows how to fight this without a wolf's help."

"Lennox, we have to tell Olivia," Louis choked out, his eyes red. "We promised her no more secrets. This is the biggest secret there is."

"No," I snapped, then winced as a sharp pain flared behind my eyes. "Not yet. I have my reasons. If I tell her now, she'll spend the rest of the day mourning me while I'm still standing. I want to know exactly what we're facing before I break her heart again. We see the doctor first."

Levi rubbed his face with his hands. "How are we supposed to get you to a specialist in the city without her knowing? She may not be your mate, Lennox. She feels your every move."

"I'll handle it," I said grimly. "Just back me up."

The door opened, and Olivia walked in carrying a tray. The scent of the homemade soup hit me, and for a second, my stomach turned. She looked at me, her eyes searching for any sign of the truth we had just buried.

"You look a little better," she lied, though I could see the tremor in her hands as she set the tray down on my lap. "Martha? What's the verdict?"

I caught Martha's eye in a silent warning.

"Severe exhaustion and a dip in his blood pressure, Luna," Martha said, her voice remarkably steady for someone who had just delivered a death sentence. "He needs rest and nourishment."

"I'm fine, baby," I said, forcing myself to take a spoonful of the soup. It felt like swallowing lead, but I smiled at her. I ate as much as I could, acting strong, acting like the man who had held this pack together for years.

Once the tray was empty, I set it aside and started to stand. Olivia immediately moved to stop me.

"Where do you think you're going? Martha said rest." "I have an emergency meeting at the pack hospital," I said, reaching for my jacket. "There's a dispute with the medical supply borders. I need to be there to sign off on the new shipments. Levi and Louis are coming with me."

"Lennox, you're sick," she argued, her brow furrowed. "Let your brothers handle it."

"I'm okay, Olivia. Truly," I said, leaning down to press a lingering kiss to her forehead. I held it a second longer than usual, memorizing the scent of her skin. "I'll be back before the kids wake up from their nap. I promise."

I dressed quickly, my hands shaking so much I could barely button my shirt. Louis helped me with my coat, his face a mask of grief. We walked out, past the nanny and the kids, and got into the back of the black SUV.

"Drive," I told the driver. "Fast."

The pack hospital was a gleaming building of glass and white stone. When we stepped through the doors, the atmosphere shifted instantly. The head doctor, Dr. Vance, and a team of healers were already waiting. They had seen the Alpha's car pull up.

Dr. Vance bowed low, but his eyes were wide with confusion as he looked at me. He was a shifter, and he could tell something was wrong.

"Alpha Lennox," he said, his voice hushed. "We weren't expecting—"

"We need to talk," I interrupted, my breath coming in short, shallow hitches. "In private. Now."

I walked past him toward his office, my legs feeling like they were made of water.

I told him my condition, and he began to work. He worked in a frantic silence, running scans and checking monitors while Louis and Levi stood behind me like two statues of grief.

Vance stepped back from the screen, his face ashen. He pointed to a dark mass on the imaging—a jagged shadow nestled deep within the tissue.

"It's aggressive, Alpha," Vance said, his voice barely a whisper. "It's pressing directly against a major artery in the brain. If we had your wolf, the regeneration would keep the artery wall strong while we operated. But right now? The tissue is paper-thin."

"What does that mean, Vance?" Louis demanded, his voice filled with fear. "In plain English."

"It means surgery is almost impossible," Vance replied, looking down at his tablet. "If we cut, and that artery ruptures without a wolf's healing factor to seal it instantly... you'll bleed out on the table in seconds."

Levi stepped forward, grabbing the edge of the doctor's desk. "Then what? We just sit and watch him die? Give us a number. How much time does he have?"

Vance hesitated, his eyes flicking to me with a look of pure tragedy. "Without treatment? You have maybe two weeks of lucidity left. With immediate, aggressive human treatment—chemotherapy and targeted radiation—we might be able to shrink it enough to risk a surgery."

"And if we do that?" I asked, my voice surprisingly steady. "How long?"

Vance let out a long, slow breath. "At most? A month. Maybe six weeks if we are lucky."

"We have to start today," Vance continued. "But I have to be honest, Alpha... the treatment itself is brutal. It will strip what's left of your strength. You won't be able to hide this from the Luna for more than a few days. You'll be too weak to stand."

Louis turned away, his shoulders shaking as he finally broke, sobbing silently into his hands. Levi just stared at the scan, his eyes burning with a mixture of helplessness and rage.

"A month," I whispered, the words tasting like ash. I looked at my brothers. "I need you to listen to me. If I only have a month, I'm not spending it in a hospital bed. We start the treatment, but I do it at home. You set up a wing. You bring the machines. I will be with my children and Olivia until the very second I can't be."

"Lennox, you can't—" Levi started.

"I can," I snapped, the last of my Alpha fire flickering in my eyes. "Because if I'm going to die as a human, I'm going to die surrounded by the people who made my life worth living. Now, get the equipment ready. We're going home."

The silence in the SUV on the way back to the mansion was suffocating. Louis was staring out the window, his jaw tight as he tried to keep his composure. Levi was vibrating with a silent, restless fury.

But my mind was already somewhere else.

I looked at my hands. They were steady for now, but Vance was right—the treatment would change that. Within days, I'd be a shell. Olivia would see me wasting away, and she would pour every ounce of her soul into trying to save a man who was already a ghost.

I couldn't let her do that. I couldn't let her last memories of me be filled with the scent of sickness and the sound of my failing breath. If she loved me when I died, the grief would destroy her. It would break the bond in a way she might never recover from.

"I need to find a woman," I said, my voice cutting through the silence like a blade.

Louis snapped his head toward me, his eyes wide. "What? Lennox, you're delirious. The cancer is—"

"I'm not delirious," I hissed, leaning forward. "Listen to me. If I die while Olivia is deeply in love with me, the mate loss will kill her too or leave her so broken she can't mother our boys. I need to make her hate me. I need to make her want to leave."

"You want to fake an affair?" Levi asked, his voice rising in disbelief. "Now? After everything we just fixed? That's insane."

"It's mercy," I argued, a sharp pain blooming behind my eyes. "I'll find a woman. Someone who can play the part. I'll tell Olivia the bond was a mistake, that I've found my 'true' mate, or that I simply don't want her anymore. I'll push her toward you two. You'll be her comfort. You'll be the ones she leans on when I'm 'gone' with this other woman."

"She'll never believe it," Louis choked out. "She knows you."

"She knows the Alpha. She doesn't know a dying man's desperation," I replied. "I'll make it convincing. I'll be cold. I'll be cruel. I'd rather she spend her life angry at my memory than wasting it mourning a corpse. If she hates me, she survives. That is the final duty of an Alpha."

Levi shook his head, tears finally spilling over. "You're asking us to help you break her heart. Again. We just got her back, Lennox."

"I am asking you to save her life!" I roared, then immediately doubled over as a coughing fit seized my lungs. I tasted iron. I pulled my hand away from my mouth; it was stained with dark, crimson blood.

I showed it to them.

"See this? This is reality," I whispered, my voice trembling. "I have thirty days. I'm not spending them watching her cry for me. I'm going to spend them making sure she's strong enough to live without me."

Chapter 647: The Third Chance Mate

Olivia's POV

They arrived home, and the look on their faces told me something wasn't right. My wolf could feel it; despite Lennox and I no longer being mates, I could somehow feel him. I just can't explain it—that feeling was just there.

They looked exhausted, like they had a long meeting, but I knew it wasn't just about the meeting. Something was really wrong. I stared at Lennox. He looked different. It had only been a few hours, but the man who had kissed me so fiercely this morning seemed to be receding behind a mask of cold marble. His skin was the color of winter ash, and his eyes, usually so sharp and predatory, looked distant.

They sat on the couches in the living room, a synchronized collapse of three powerful men who suddenly looked very small.

"Lennox... what is happening?" I asked, my voice trembling. I ignored the coffee I'd been making and walked toward them, my gaze fixed solely on him. "I don't know if it's

just me, but you look... you look worse. Tell me the truth. What happened at the hospital?"

Lennox sighed, a long, rattling sound that seemed to drain the last of the light from his face. He didn't look at me. He looked at the ornate rug beneath his feet, his jaw set so tight I thought it might shatter.

"I met someone at the hospital, Olivia," he whispered.

The air in the room seemed to vanish. I stood frozen, my heart stuttering in my chest. "You met someone? At the hospital? Lennox, what are you talking about? I don't understand."

He finally looked up, but his eyes were filled with tears. He swallowed hard, exchanging a look with Louis and Levi that made my stomach drop. It was a look of shared grief, of a secret so heavy it was crushing them all.

"The reason I was suddenly unwell this morning, Olivia... the reason I couldn't breathe, the headaches..." He paused, his voice dropping to a jagged whisper. "It's because my mate is sick. Our bond was reacting to her pain."

I felt like I had been doused in ice water. "Your... mate?" I stammered, shaking my head. "Lennox, I'm right here. I'm your mate."

"No," he interrupted, the word sounding like a death knell. "We were mates. But not anymore; you know that. I met my mate at the hospital today, Olivia. She's my third-chance mate. The Moon Goddess gave her to me because you and I are over."

"No!" I screamed, the sound tearing from my throat. "No, that's not possible! You can't have another mate! We have children! We have a life!"

"It is possible," he said, his voice terrifyingly flat. "She was brought into the emergency room while I was there. She's ill, and the second I was near her, I felt it. The pull. The agony. That's why I fell sick this morning. My body was mourning for her before I even saw her face."

My legs gave out. I collapsed onto the floor, my knees hitting the hard tiles with a thud I didn't even feel. The world was tilting, spinning into a dark abyss. I couldn't believe it. I wouldn't believe it. The Moon Goddess wouldn't be this cruel. She wouldn't take my Lennox and give him to a stranger just as I was finding my way back to him.

"You're lying," I sobbed, my forehead resting against the cold floor. "You have to be lying."

Lennox looked pained, his hand twitching as if he wanted to reach for me, but he stayed rooted to the couch. Louis and Levi looked away, their faces twisted in a misery so profound it almost felt like they were the ones dying.

"I'm not lying, Olivia," Lennox said. I wiped my eyes, looking up at him with a desperate, frantic hope. "But how? How do you even know? Lennox, you don't have your wolf! You can't feel a mate bond without a wolf! What if this woman is lying? What if she's just trying to take your title?"

"She isn't lying," he said, his voice cracking just a fraction before he hardened it again. "I feel it even without my wolf. It's a soul-pull, Olivia. And my sudden illness... the way I started dying the moment she was in pain... that proves it. The Moon Goddess has made her choice."

"No... no..." I shook my head, moving toward him on my knees, crawling across the cold tiles until I reached the edge of the sofa. I grabbed the hem of his jacket. "You are rejecting her, right? You have to..." I pleaded desperately, my voice breaking into a thousand pieces. "Lennox, look at me. It's me you love. You love me."

Lennox looked down at my hands clutching him, and for a fleeting second, his mask slipped. A look of pure, unadulterated agony crossed his face—the look of a man watching his entire world burn. But then, his jaw set into a hard, cruel line.

"I can't," he whispered.

"Why?" I shrieked, the sound echoing through the rafters of the house. "Why can't you? Just say the words! Reject her and stay with me!"

"I can't, Olivia," he said, his voice becoming eerily calm, though his eyes remained glassy with unshed tears. "She's sick. She's dying. If I reject her now, the snap of the bond will kill her instantly. I won't have her blood on my hands. I'm an Alpha; I have a duty to my mate, whether I chose her or not."

"But what about your duty to me?" I sobbed, my fingers slipping from his coat as he slowly stood up. "What about our boys?"

He didn't answer. He couldn't even look at me anymore. He turned his back, his shoulders hunched as if he were carrying the weight of the entire world. Without another word, he began to walk away, his footsteps heavy and hollow against the floor. Every step felt like a nail being driven into my heart.

"Lennox! Don't leave me! Lennox!"

I tried to get up to follow him, but my legs were like lead. I slumped back onto the floor, the tiles chilling my skin as I wailed. I felt like a limb had been torn from my body.

Suddenly, I felt strong arms wrap around me. Levi and Louis rushed to my side, pulling me up from the floor and into their laps. They held me tight, their own tears wetting my hair.

"We're here, Olivia," Levi choked out, his voice thick with a pain I didn't fully understand yet. "We've got you. We aren't going anywhere."

"He's gone," I gasped, clutching Louis's shirt as I buried my face in his chest. "He's leaving me for someone else. Why would the Goddess do this?"

"You still have us," Louis whispered, his grip so tight it was almost painful. "You have us, baby. We'll take care of you. We'll be everything you need."

I felt their warmth, their familiar scents, and their love—but it wasn't enough. I didn't just want them. I wanted all three.

Chapter 648: Something odd

Olivia's POV

The next morning, I stood in the living room feeling uneasy. Lennox was bringing his mate home just after he had met her yesterday.

The front doors swung open, and I froze. I expected to see a woman on a stretcher—someone pale and sick, someone who looked like she was actually the cause of Lennox's sudden agony.

But when Lennox walked in, he was supporting a woman who looked radiantly healthy. She was beautiful, with glowing skin and bright-green eyes that didn't look like they had ever seen the inside of a hospital wing. She leaned into him, her hand tucked firmly into the crook of his arm, and Lennox was looking at her with a focus that made my stomach turn into knots.

"Lennox?" I whispered, my voice sounding small in the vast foyer.

Before he could answer, a team of medical orderlies followed them in, pushing heavy, high-tech machines and rolling IV poles. It looked like they were moving an entire intensive care unit into our home.

"What is going on?" I asked, my voice rising with a mix of confusion and mounting dread. "You said she was sick, but she... she looks fine. Why is all this equipment being brought into the house?"

Lennox stopped, his expression blank. He didn't even look at me; he kept his eyes on the woman. "She has a condition that flares up internally, Olivia. Just because she looks healthy doesn't mean she isn't dying inside."

He tightened his grip on her waist. "She will be receiving her treatments in my room. From now on, that wing is off-limits to everyone except the medical staff and my brothers. I need to focus on her."

Without another word, he guided her toward the stairs. I watched them go—the man I loved, the father of my children, walking away with a stranger to the bedroom we used to share.

I felt a hand on each of my shoulders. I didn't have to turn around to know it was Louis and Levi.

"Olivia," Louis said softly, his voice trembling with a forced calm. "Let's leave. Just for a while. Let's take the boys on a trip. We can go to the cabin by the lake, or even out of the country. Just us. We'll have fun, and the kids won't have to see... any of this."

"Yeah," Levi added, his grip on my shoulder tightening as if he were trying to hold me together. "It'll be good for you. For all of us. Let's pack the bags now and be gone by sunset."

I looked at them, then back at the stairs where the last of the medical monitors was being wheeled out of sight. I knew what they were doing. They were trying to shield me. They wanted to hide the betrayal behind a curtain of vacations and distractions so I wouldn't have to hear the sounds of him tending to another woman in the next room.

I pulled away from them, wiping the tears from my cheeks with a sudden, fierce resolve.

"No," I said, my voice cold and firm.

"Olivia, please—" Louis started.

"I said no," I snapped, turning to face them. "I know you're trying to protect me, and I know you want me to look away, but I'm not going anywhere. This is my home."

I looked up at the stairs.

"If he wants to bring another woman into this house and treat her like a queen while I'm still standing, then he's going to have to look me in the eye every single day and see exactly what he's throwing away. I'm not running, and I'm not hiding. I'm staying right here."

Hours later, I couldn't sit in the living room and pretend this was normal. Every time the heavy thud of a medical machine moved across the ceiling above me, it felt like a

hammer hitting my chest. I waited until I saw Louis and Levi go toward the kitchen, then I slipped up the stairs.

I didn't knock. I couldn't. This was my room too—or it had been until yesterday.

I pushed the heavy oak doors open and froze. The scene was chaotic. The beautiful woman was sitting in a chair by the window, idly scrolling through her phone, looking perfectly fine. But Lennox—he was slumped on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands. His skin wasn't just pale; it was gray. Sweat soaked through his shirt, and his breathing was shallow—a terrifying rattling sound coming from his chest.

"Lennox?" I gasped, rushing forward.

He flinched, his head snapping up. His eyes were bloodshot, the dark circles under them looking like bruises. "Olivia? What are you doing here?" he rasped, his voice barely a ghost of itself. "I told you... you should knock. This wing is restricted."

"Lennox, you look like death," I whispered, reaching out to touch his forehead, but he flinched away from my hand. "Why do you look so pale? You look worse than she does! Why aren't the machines on her?"

I glanced at his so-called mate. She looked up from her phone, her green eyes bright and alert. There wasn't a bead of sweat on her. She didn't look like she was in pain. She didn't look like she was dying.

"I told you," Lennox said, his voice straining as he forced himself to stand, though his legs trembled violently. "Her illness... is my illness. The bond is deep. If she hurts, I hurt. It's a soul-pull, Olivia. Get out."

"But she's not pale!" I shouted, pointing at the woman who was watching us with a strange, detached expression. "Why is it only hitting you this hard?"

Martha, the healer, stepped out from behind a tall monitor, her face full of exhaustion and sorrow. She looked at me, then at Lennox, then back at me.

"He is more like a human, Luna," Martha said softly, her voice heavy with a hidden truth. "And as he said, he has no wolf to protect him. Because he is wolf-less, the 'bond' hits him with ten times the force. He has no supernatural defense to mask the symptoms. His body is absorbing everything."

"Then let me help!" I cried, stepping toward them. My wolf was howling in my chest, desperate to reach him. "I still have my wolf. I can share my strength. I can heal her—or him. If the bond is the problem, let me use my energy to stabilize it!"

I reached for Lennox's hand, but Martha moved quickly, stepping between us and gently blocking my path.

"I am a healer..." I started, looking at her for permission.

Martha shook her head, her eyes brimming with tears. "You can't, Luna. Your wolf and his... they aren't connected anymore. If you try to pour your healing magic into him now, his human body won't be able to process it. It would be like pouring fire into a paper cup. You would only cause him more pain."

"So I'm just supposed to watch him waste away for a stranger?" I asked, my voice cracking.

Lennox let out a harsh, wet cough into a handkerchief. When he pulled it away, I saw the splash of red. He tucked it away quickly, but I had seen it.

"Go, Olivia," he groaned, leaning heavily against the bedpost. "Take the boys to the garden. Don't come back in here."

My eyes darted around the room, the frantic energy of my wolf making every detail sharp. Something wasn't adding up. I looked at the machines—the humming monitors, the IV stands, the oxygen concentrator.

Then I saw it.

The wires weren't trailing toward the window where Elena sat. The transparent tubes and the pulse oximeter weren't anywhere near her. They were all coiled and positioned toward the head of the bed—specifically, the left side. Lennox's side.

"The machines," I whispered, my heart stopping. "They aren't hooked up to her. Lennox, why is the oxygen mask on your nightstand?"

Lennox's eyes widened in a flash of pure panic. He opened his mouth to speak, but he was interrupted by a sharp, theatrical gasp from the window.

"Oh! Oh, it hurts! Lennox!"

The woman suddenly collapsed from her chair onto the floor. She began to writhe, her back arching as she let out a series of jagged, high-pitched whimpers. It looked like a seizure, but my wolf didn't growl in sympathy; she growled in suspicion. There was no scent of distress in the air—no spike in pheromones that usually accompanied a shifter in pain.

"Elena!" Lennox choked out. He lunged toward her, but his knees buckled halfway across the room. He crashed to the floor, his face contorting in genuine, agonizing sympathy.

"See?" Martha said quickly, rushing to Lennox's side instead of the woman's. "The bond! She has a flare-up, and it's hitting him. Luna, you have to leave! The stress of your presence is making the transition harder for them!"

I stood frozen as Lennox crawled—actually crawled—toward the woman. He reached out, his hand trembling as he touched her arm. "I'm here," he rasped, his voice sounding like it was being dragged over broken glass. "I've got you."

Elena grabbed his hand, her "convulsions" slowing as she buried her face in his neck. Over his shoulder, for just a split second, her eyes met mine. There were no tears. No clouded gaze of a dying woman.

"Get out, Olivia!" Lennox roared, the effort causing him to break into another violent, wet coughing fit. He didn't look at me. He was huddled on the floor, holding a stranger while his own life force seemed to be leaking out of his pores.

I backed away, the bile rising in my throat. I didn't believe in the "Third-Chance Mate." I didn't believe in the soul-pull.

Chapter 649: She's lying

Olivia's POV

The house felt like a hollow shell the next morning. At the breakfast table, Lennox's chair was empty, as was the seat for the woman he claimed was his soul's new half. The boys kept glancing at the door, their cereal soggy and untouched.

"Where's Dad?" Leon asked, his voice small.

"He's just... very busy with work and the new guest, sweetie," I lied, the words tasting like poison. "Eat up."

Once they were safely off to school, the silence in the mansion became unbearable. Louis and Levi were nursing cups of coffee, their eyes bloodshot. They looked like they hadn't slept a wink, but they wouldn't meet my gaze.

"I found something odd yesterday," I said, leaning against the counter. "The machines in that room... they weren't for her. They were for him. And she didn't smell like a shifter in pain, guys. She didn't smell like anything but expensive perfume."

Louis sighed, rubbing his temples. "Olivia, the bond works in strange ways when a wolf is suppressed. We'll... we'll look into it. We'll check the medical records ourselves."

"Don't worry, baby," Levi added, his voice strained. "We're on it."

I didn't believe them. They were pacifying me.

Suddenly, the sound of heavy, dragging footsteps echoed on the staircase. We all turned. Lennox walked past the kitchen door. He looked like a living corpse—his skin was translucent, his eyes sunken, and he was leaning heavily on a cane I'd never seen him use before.

"I have to be somewhere," he rasped, not even glancing into the kitchen. "Don't wait up."

The front door clicked shut behind him.

I waited five minutes, pretending to head up to my room to lie down. Instead, once the coast was clear, I moved through the shadows of the hallway and slipped into his suite.

The woman, Elena, was sprawled out on the silk sheets of the bed—our bed—looking entirely too comfortable. She was scrolling through a fashion magazine, a glass of juice on the nightstand. When she saw me, she didn't look sick. She looked annoyed.

"You again?" she sighed, tossing the magazine aside. "I know what you're doing," I said, my voice vibrating with a cold fury. "I don't know what game you're playing, but I have nothing against you personally. I just want you out. Leave this house, leave my man, and never come back."

She let out a dry, mocking laugh. "I'm not leaving, honey. I'm the mate now. You're just... yesterday's news. You're pained, I get it, but it's time to move on."

"You don't look sick," I hissed, stepping closer. "Not a single symptom. No sweat, no pale skin, no labored breathing. What are your plans? Is it money? Power?"

She ignored me, reaching for her juice.

That was it. My wolf snapped. I lunged forward, grabbing her by the arm and dragging her bodily off the bed. She shrieked. "Get out! I'm throwing you out myself!"

"Stop it! You're hurting me!" she yelled, though her voice lacked any real terror.

"Olivia! Let her go!"

The door slammed open. Lennox stood there, clutching the doorframe for support, his chest heaving as he struggled for air. He looked horrified, his gaze darting between my aggressive stance and the woman cowering on the floor.

"What are you doing?" he choked out, stumbling toward us. "I told you to stay away from her!"

"She isn't sick, Lennox!" I yelled, my grip tightening on Elena's arm as she whimpered at his feet. "Look at her! Look at her skin, look at her eyes! She's perfectly fine, while you're standing there looking like you're ready for a casket. She's using you, and I won't let her stay in this house a second longer!"

Lennox flinched as if my words were physical blows, but his expression quickly shifted into a mask of cold, jagged fury. He stumbled forward, his cane clicking sharply against the floor.

"What is wrong with you?" he roared, though the sound ended in a ragged, wet cough. He reached down and gently—so gently it broke my heart—helped Elena back onto the bed. "She spent the entire night in agony, Olivia. Her fever didn't break until dawn. She's finally recovering, finally getting a moment of peace, and you burst in here like a madwoman to assault her?"

"Lennox, she's faking it!" I pleaded, my voice cracking. "Please, just scent her. Use your senses—"

"I told you," he hissed, his eyes dark with a terrifying intensity. "My wolf is gone. I can only feel what the bond tells me. And right now, it tells me that my mate is terrified of you."

The door swung open wider, and Louis and Levi rushed in, their faces pale as they took in the chaos. They looked at me, then at the trembling Elena, and finally at Lennox, who was leaning so heavily on his cane I thought it might snap.

Lennox turned his gaze to his brothers, his voice dripping with anger. "Louis. Levi. Please tell your mate to stay away from mine. I won't have Elena harassed in her own recovery room."

"Lennox, let's just calm down—" Louis started, reaching out a hand.

"No," Lennox snapped, his chest heaving as he struggled to draw enough air to speak. "If she can't respect these boundaries, I'll be forced to divide this mansion. I'll wall off this wing entirely. If I have to, I'll take Elena and leave the pack territory altogether. Is that what you want? To force a dying woman and her mate into the streets because Olivia can't handle the truth?"

I felt like he had reached into my chest and squeezed my heart until it stopped. His wing. His mate. He was willing to tear our home apart—to wall me out of his life—for a woman he had met forty-eight hours ago.

Louis and Levi moved toward me, their expressions pained. They didn't defend me. They didn't call him a liar. They just gently took my arms to lead me out.

"Come on, Olivia," Levi whispered, his voice thick with unshed tears. "Let's just go downstairs. Give him space."

I looked back at Lennox one last time. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to me, stroking Elena's hair as she "sobbed" into his shoulder. He looked so frail, so broken, yet he was using the last of his strength to protect a lie.

"I'm not the one who can't handle the truth, Lennox," I whispered, though I doubt he heard me over the sound of his own labored breathing.

Chapter 650: The Best

Lennox's POV

The door clicked shut, and with it, my strength evaporated. My legs turned to water, the cane slipping from my numb fingers as I collapsed. I didn't hit the floor; Elena caught me, her small but strong frame bracing mine as she guided me back onto the pillows.

"Easy, Alpha," she whispered, her voice no longer high-pitched and dramatic, but steady and professional.

She immediately reached for the pulse oximeter on the nightstand, sliding it onto my finger while she checked the flow of the IV. Elena was a palliative care nurse I'd hired through a shell company—someone with no ties to the pack who could play a role and keep a medical secret.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her eyes scanning the monitor. "Your heart rate is dangerously high. That outburst cost you too much."

"I'm... fine," I managed to rasp, the word catching on the fluid in my lungs. "Just give me a minute."

"You need the oxygen," she insisted, reaching for the mask.

I pushed it away for a moment, looking her in the eyes. "You have to pretend more, Elena. When she's here, you can't look like you're checking my vitals. You have to look like the one being tended to. You were too slow to react today."

Elena set the mask down and looked at me with a heavy, mounting sadness. "Alpha Lennox, I've seen a lot of patients in my time, but I've never seen anyone do this. Are you sure you're doing the right thing? This is the last Chapter of your life. These are your final weeks. You're supposed to be surrounded by the people who love you, not spending your energy pushing them into a state of hatred."

"You don't understand," I said, a bitter cough rattling my ribs. "Our bonds... they aren't like yours. If I die while she is anchored to me, her soul will try to follow mine. I'm protecting her, Elena. I'm preparing her to lose me by making the loss feel like a relief."

"It's not a relief," Elena countered softly. "It's trauma. You're trading her grief for a different kind of pain—the pain of betrayal. That scar never heals."

"A scar is better than a grave," I whispered, finally letting her place the mask over my face.

I closed my eyes, the cool hiss of oxygen filling my lungs, but it couldn't soothe the ache in my chest. I could still see the look in Olivia's eyes—the way she had pleaded with me, the way her fingers had trembled. Every time I broke her heart, I felt my own soul splintering.

I was dying. I knew it. The doctors knew it. But as I lay there, listening to the hum of the machines that were the only things keeping me upright, I wondered if the cancer would kill me before the guilt did.

Some nights, I prayed it would be quick. Not because I feared death—but because I feared staying long enough to hurt her again. Every extra day felt like borrowed time paid for with her tears.

The door creaked open, and for a terrifying second, I thought it was Olivia again. I tried to sit up, to hide the mask, to be the Alpha she expected, but my arms were made of lead.

"Lennox?"

Luckily, it was Levi. He didn't wait for permission. He stepped into the room, his eyes scanning the monitors, the IV, and finally landing on Elena, who was holding my hand to steady a needle.

"Get out, Elena," Levi said, his voice low and vibrating with a suppressed sob. "I need a minute with my brother."

Elena looked at me. I gave a microscopic nod. She set my hand down gently and slipped out of the room, her eyes cast toward the floor.

Levi didn't sit. He stood over me, his hands clenched so tight they were shaking. "I just saw her, Lennox. I just saw Olivia in the hallway. She looks like a ghost. She's pacing like a caged animal, and the boys... Liam asked me if you were dying because you wouldn't look at him this morning."

I pulled the mask away, my hand trembling. "Then you tell him... you tell him I'm busy. You keep the lie alive, Levi. That's your job."

"My job?" Levi laughed, a harsh, jagged sound. "My job was to protect this family. How am I protecting them by watching you rot while our mate's heart breaks in the next room? This 'mate' plan... it's sick, Lennox. It's the most cold-blooded thing you've ever done."

"It's working," I rasped, a sharp pain lancing through my temple. "She's angry. She's fighting. That's... that's what I need."

"She's not just angry; she's losing her mind!" Levi snapped, leaning down until he was inches from my face. "She knows something is wrong. She saw the blood, Lennox. She saw the machines. You think she's stupid? You think her wolf doesn't know the difference between a new mate and a dying husband?"

I closed my eyes, the monitor beside me beginning to beep a rapid, frantic rhythm. My heart was struggling to keep up with the stress. "I don't care... what she knows. I care... about what she believes. Help me... Levi. Don't let her in again."

Levi looked at the monitor, then back at me. The anger in his eyes softened into a terrible, agonizing pity. He reached out, his hand hovering over my shoulder before he finally let it drop, squeezing me gently.

"I hate you for this," he whispered, his voice breaking. "I hate that you're making me a part of this lie. But I'll do it. For her. Because I don't know what else to do."

I swallowed hard and whispered, "Thank you."

Levi stared at me with pain-filled eyes, the kind of pain that had nowhere to go. For a long moment, he didn't move, as if turning away would make this real. Then his jaw tightened, and he turned to leave.

I called him back.

"Levi."

He slowly turned, tears already sliding down his cheeks.

"This is for the best, brother. Trust me."