

His Rejected Mateless Luna Chapter 36

Terra

It was mid-morning my nerves skyrocketed when the former Alpha appeared again unannounced, his stately presence unmistakable despite casual dress.

I leapt up, pulse racing. "Elder, I wasn't expecting you. Is everything alright?" Visions of accidents or emergencies raced through my mind.

But he raised his hand. "Peace. I'm not gravely ill, only a fool errand." Rue twisted his mouth. "I'm here to plead a case on your behalf...and my son's."

Though touched, I steeled myself. Nathan was using his father as an emotional bargaining chip. I would not be manipulated so easily, whatever the costs.

"There are no sides here." I spoke firmly despite his crestfallen look. "Your loyalty is admirable. But the conflict between Nathan and I cannot be resolved by others' wishes."

The former Alpha clearly longed to argue, but ultimately just nodded wearily and took his leave. My breath left in a shaky exhale as the door closed behind him.

Holding my ground felt necessary, but that made it no less painful denying his sincere intervention efforts. Hurting this dear wolf who had been a second father to me after losing my own was the deepest possible betrayal in Nathan's eyes. Everything between us lay in ruins now.

I turned the clinic's 'closed' sign early that day, needing time alone to grieve the final disintegration of my bond with Nathan that today's encounter signified. No common ground remained between us, only barricades and landmines.

Stepping outside to catch my breath, my eye caught on an exquisitely arranged bouquet of wildflowers lying on the steps. My throat clenched instantly recognizing Nathan's bold romantic gestures. The attached note in his elegant script confirmed the suspicious origin.

"A small hope these may yet bridge the divide. We were friends once, you and I. Is redemption impossible now? – N"

A futile romantic hope perhaps, but the raw sincerity was undeniable. He was trying desperately to salvage our tattered history, despite all rationality. This peace offering penetrated my defences with painful nostalgia.

But even appreciating the poignant sentiment felt like betrayal of myself and my sons. I could not forget the past. My role was safeguarding the innocent from future suffering, not redeeming those who inflicted wounds.

With leaden steps, I carried the lovely bouquet inside and placed it in water on my office shelf. Despite everything, some deeper part of me could not bear to destroy this last fragile link. But letting the flowers remain in no way weakened my resolve to protect the boys.

That night I tossed and turned restlessly, besieged by memories and doubts until pale dawn brought no further chance for sleep.

Moving through the morning clinic routine required monumental effort. My weary mind could hardly focus on patients' concerns when constantly straining for any sound of Nathan's approach.

But only silence and stifling solitude filled the little sanctuary now. My sons' beloved drawings and toys seemed to reproach me for sending them away. The cabin's warmth felt impossibly far away, separated by months rather than mere miles.

At last the final patient departed and I began closing up shop for the evening. Sheer emotional exhaustion left me numb, focused only on placing one foot before the other until I was somewhere I could collapse unseen.

Stepping outside into the cool dusk, I froze. Nathan sat on the clinic steps, elbows braced on knees and head bowed in a weary mirror of Atlas bearing the world's weight. This time he had come without theatrics, only grave resignation.

Even expecting him, the sight pierced deep. Nathan lifted his haggard face to meet my gaze, amber eyes naked with anguish. "You once said I didn't understand life's greys, only black and white extremes," he spoke h**ely. "Now I see how the world blurs and bleeds painfully."

He searched my face beseechingly. "I don't ask you to forget, or even reconcile, Terra. Only give me a chance to prove myself worthy of knowing my sons. I would trade all else to be their father." His voice broke on the admission.

My own hard-won composure threatened to crack wide at this glimpse of the Nathan I once knew. Perhaps he had changed as profoundly as I in ways only suffering teaches.

But the sound of a slamming screen door nearby made me start, jolting the hypnotic spell. The clinic property provided too little buffer for diplomacy if he lost restraint.

I took a bracing step back, holding up a warding hand though it trembled faintly. "I can't risk them getting attached before knowing your heart is true. Please understand."

Nathan opened his mouth to continue arguing, but my quelling look gave him pause. With a bone-deep sigh, he rose slowly.

“You’re right. I’ve done little to demonstrate good faith.” His voice rang hollow, only bitter resignation left. “I won’t force the issue and cause more hurt.”

He turned to walk back down the shadowy path, shoulders slumped in defeat. But at the gravel drive he hesitated, looking back once more with eyes full of raw anguish. “Just tell them someday their father tried to make amends, but came too late.”

Before I could respond, Nathan slipped away into the gloom without another glance. His parting words reverberated through my chest, an aching echo of roads not taken.

Bitter tears escaped as I watched until the darkness swallowed his silhouette completely. Perhaps some wounds cut too deep to ever heal, no matter how we try.

The evening hours passed in fitful misery until emotional and physical exhaustion finally left me numb enough to collapse into bed. But sleep remained elusive, thoughts chasing relentlessly.

When pink dawn light crept through the blinds what seemed mere minutes later, I rose bleary-eyed after tossing and turning all night.

A bone-d**p weariness clung that had nothing to do with lack of sleep. The showdown with N**n had depleted my last reserves. I longed desperately to hold my sons close again and find some rejuvenation in their innocent affection.

Moving through morning rituals mechanically, I decided closing the clinic another day was necessary for my stability. I would make the long drive to Collins’ sanctuary by the lake and surprise the boys instead. Just feeling their little arms

fractured spirit. around me would restore my

The winding forested roads lulled my agitation some during the journey. But my pulse leaped erratically the closer I drew to that haven promising comfort and safety.

Too soon the charming log cabin tucked against the lakeshore came into view. I pulled up beside Collins’ sturdy old truck with profound relief. Here at last was refuge, however temporary

But when I burst through the front door, no exuberant shouts or pattering footsteps greeted me. “Boys?” I called tentatively. Only silence answered.

Dread crept up my spine as I searched each room frantically, finding no sign of habitation. The cheerful home I expected stood utterly still and empty, like a discarded shell. They were gone.

Finally I spotted a note weighted beneath a magnet on the refrigerator, Collins' sturdy print unmistakable. Hands shaking violently now, I lifted it to read his brief alarming message:

"Terra, Nathan showed up just after you left demanding to see the kids. I refused and tried stalling but he had the place surrounded. He gave me no choice but to cooperate or put them at greater risk. Don't worry, I'm staying with them for now. But Nathan is their father by blood, there was no legal justification to keep them from him. I'm so sorry. Please be careful. – Collin"

The page drifted from my numb fingers. Desolation swept through me, more piercing than any physical pain. My greatest fear had come to pass. Nathan had wrested my sons from me, exploiting his power without mercy. And he had finally succeeded in turning my closest friend against me.

I was well and truly alone now. No options remained but accepting utter defeat, the fatalistic conclusion Nathan longed to force me to from the beginning. Unless...

No. I squeezed my eyes shut, refusing to complete the dark thought. I could not let desperation drive me to such extreme measures, even for my sons' sake.

But how else could I reclaim them now except through dangerous means? Either way, we all stood poised on the edge of an abyss with no clear salvation in sight. And time was running out

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Terra

"How's Mr. Jensen's foot looking today?" I asked Lucy as I entered the clinic exam room.

She finished redressing the older man's injured ankle and stepped back. "Much improved after a week of rest and ice. I think light activity should be fine now."

I completed a quick check, confirming the swelling had gone down nicely thanks to Lucy's excellent nursing care. "Looks like you're well on the mend. Take it slowly easing back into regular chores, and keep icing after activity."

Mr. Jensen nodded, clearly relieved to be given leave to use the foot again. I smiled reassuringly as he hobbled out. Routine patient concerns kept me grounded amidst inner turmoil. Here, helping people was my sole focus.

With the morning appointment rush complete, I retreated to my office intending to update patient charts. But exhaustion quickly overwhelmed me. Days of relentless worry

and sleeplessness since the cabin confrontation with Nathan had drained the last reserves keeping me functional.

I allowed my heavy eyelids to drift closed, just for a moment. But sudden tapping nearby jolted me awake for what seemed like seconds later. I bolted upright, heart hammering.

Nathan stood scowling in my office doorway. I shrank back, fully expecting vitriolic recriminations over keeping him from his sons.

“Get out,” I managed sharply, despite quaking inside. “Haven’t you done enough damage already?”

His stern expression flickered briefly to remorse before shutting down again. “I only came to talk, Terra. Clear the air between us finally.”

I searched his face warily. Nathan seemed uncharacteristically hesitant, lacking the coiled aggression of our recent clashes. But I could not trust any guise he put on after being so ruthlessly outmanoeuvred.

Seeing my unspoken scepticism, Nathan ran an agitated hand through his hair. “Please, Terra. I’m trying to make peace between us, however undeserved. This feud serves none.”

When I remained stonily silent, he stepped closer, hands spread beseechingly. “At least tell me if the boys are settling alright? I never meant them harm.”

Red-hot protective rage temporarily overcame fear. “They were happy and safe until you interfered!” I hissed. “What right do you have to just seize them without warning?”

Nathan flinched but stood his ground. “I’m their father, Terra. I only did what any parent would in wanting to know my sons. Can’t you understand that?”

His earnest appeal nearly cracked my anger, but I clung to it desperately. If he saw weakness, he would exploit it ruthlessly.

I stood abruptly, moving around my desk to force space between us. “You lost any rights over them or me long ago with your actions. I want you gone from our lives for good.”

“Damn it Terra, stop trying to shut me out!” Nathan slammed his fist on my desk, making me jump. “I’m done being cast as the villain here when you kept my own flesh and blood from me for years!”

Seeing him lose restraint sent panic racing through me. I fumbled to grab my keys off the desk, ready to flee his temper, but Nathan gripped my wrist lightning-fast.

“Let me go!” Tcried, tugging futilely. But his hold remained unbreakable, his wiry strength far superior.

Nathan’s chest heaved with barely-leashed fury, eyes blazing, but his voice dropped low and lethal. “No more running away. For once you will face me honestly, or I will walk straight to the authorities and show them what a conniving fraud their precious Dr. Terra really is.”

His unveiled threat stole my breath. I stared helplessly, trapped between equally perilous options now – bolster his twisted allegations by resisting further, or gamble precariously on diffusing this volatile situation through placation. When it came to the boys, he held all the power.

Seeing my desperate indecision, Nathan eased closer, grip softening by a fraction. “Please Terra, this mutual war gains us nothing. I’m trying to make things right somehow. But you’ve got to give a little too.” His impassioned plea held a tinge of the friend I once trusted deeply.

I wavered, the last defences weakening. What choice did I have but to hear him out, however hollow the promises? I had to believe some shred of nobility yet lingered in Nathan, however deeply buried. Conceding gracefully remained my only hope of sparing the boys greater trauma.

Reluctantly I inclined my head in acquiescence and slowly retook my seat as he released my wrist. Nathan visibly relaxed too, pulling over a chair to sit adjacent but maintaining a cautious distance between us. The clash of wills had passed its violent crest, leaving a weary routine of rebuilding from the wreckage. Neither of us spoke for a long tense moment.

Finally, Nathan broke the fragile silence gently. “I know you’ve suffered deeply on account of me, Terra. You have every right to hate what I’ve become.” His amber eyes were mournful. “But don’t punish two blameless children for their father’s sins.”

The simple but incisive plea pierced straight through to my maternal heart. As much as I despised Nathan for threatening everything I held dear, he was right. My sons deserved a chance to one day know their biological father with open minds, not bi**ed through my bitter experiences.

With herculean effort, I unclenched my white-knuckled grip on the chair arms. There could be no yielding on basic principles of right and wrong. But the door stood ajar now for trying to guide this river of bad blood between us into less destructive channels.

I took a slow breath, then met Nathan’s gaze levelly. “I want that chance at redemption for them, and you.” He blinked rapidly at the admission, some tension leaving his battle-ready shoulders. “But it will take time earning back even scraps of my trust. Your bullying tactics proved precisely why I fear your influence.”

Nathan looked sharply away, muscle in his jaw feathering. I braced for outraged denial. But he just gave a bone-deep sigh. "You're entirely justified in those fears. I let obsession rule reason." His gaze when it met mine again reflected raw honesty. "All I can do is vow to be worthy of your faith someday...and give you space until you believe my heart is true."

I searched his solemn face. This humility was unprecedented from the arrogant, entitled Nathan I knew. The words could still be calculated manipulation, but something in his raw anguish felt sincere. Was a chance at redemption possible between two souls so scared? The Kontings did not surrender easily. But for my sons, we must try.

Slowly I extended a hand between us, a fragile olive branch. Nathan grasped it gently, his larger calloused palm dwarfing mine. I still flinched at the contact from deeply ingrained mistrust. But we maintained the feather-light clasp for a moment, a wordless promise of tentative peace between us.

Then I withdrew my hand deliberately and sat back. "Don't mistake my small trust as approval yet regarding the boys. You ambushed them with no consideration for their wellbeing. That betrayed your own interests.

Nathan's hopeful expression crumpled, but he nodded resignedly. "That was foolishly short-sighted, you're right. I was so focused on claiming my rightful place, I never considered how it would feel through their eyes." His eyes took on a faraway sheen. "They must be so confused and scared now."

My tone softened slightly, seeing his earnest regret over causing the boys distress. "Collins is with them for familiarity. But yes, it's an overwhelming change." Nathan looked reassured hearing the trusted doctor remained nearby.

After another weighted pause, I added quietly, "When the shock fades some, perhaps short visits with their father would help the transition." Nathan's gaze flew to mine, naked hope dawning again. "But only under my supervision, in surroundings comfortable for them," I cautioned sternly.

"Yes, of course. You have my word." Nathan could hardly contain eager relief at this concession. However strained our armistice, keeping the boys' wellbeing paramount was essential common ground. Their upheaval left no victors, only unified grief.

I stood then, signalling this excruciatingly difficult meeting and new understanding was concluded for now. Nathan rose as well, wisely not trying to prolong our contact. But at the door he glanced back once more, golden eyes softened with shy vulnerability so unlike his usual formidable aura.

"Thank you for taking a chance, despite everything. I'll do right by them. And you." The raw sincerity in his tone resonated through all my defences.

Then he stepped outside, leaving me leaning heavily against the doorframe, emotionally hollowed out. Fate seemed determined to continually intertwine our lines, no matter how resistant the threads.

Where the pattern ultimately led, none could foresee. But the loom's shuttles were in motion again now, however reluctantly.

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Nathan

"You seem distracted tonight, son. Everything alright?"

I glanced up to see my father eyeing me with concern across the dining table. I set down my untouched dinner fork, knowing deception would be futile under that piercing parental gaze.

"My apologies, Father. I don't mean to be in poor company this evening." I with a more pained grimace. "My thoughts are rather scattered lately."

tempted a reassuring smile that likely appeared

Father nodded sagely, setting his own utensils aside and leaning forward, brow furrowed. "Understandable, given the upheaval these past weeks. Learning you have three spirited young sons so suddenly would unsettle any man. Have you spoken more with their mother since the rather explosive confession?"

I looked away, shame crawling up my neck. "No. Terra refuses any contact still." I rubbed my temple wearily. "Not that I deserve her trust after the ruthless tactics I employed trying to force the truth from her."

Father was silent for a long moment. "You acted from deep pain upon discovering the existence of children kept hidden from you for years. Such betrayal would enrage any parent." He sighed heavily. "But the path ahead requires compassion from you both now."

I studied the grave ancient eyes that seemed to see straight through to my soul. "You speak truthfully. I pray Terra and I can somehow move forward in our sons' best interests, not clinging resentfully to past wrongs."

"The goddess often leads us up steep and rocky slopes, but the views opened at the summit prove worth the trials endured. Father smiled gently. "Those boys will be your redemption, if you let them."

His simple but profound wisdom settled over my spirit like a comforting breeze, scattering the clouds of anger and bitterness. He was right – despite the painful

revelations between Terra and I, newfound joy waited ahead if I had courage to seek it openly.

“Thank you for the guidance, as always.” I clapped his shoulders warmly. “Now, tell me more of your travels to the northern forests. I could use some vicarious adventures to sweep the cobwebs away.”

Father’s eyes crinkled fondly. For the rest of the meal he regaled me with colourful tales of his earlier explorations in those rugged territories, temporarily transporting us both from current troubles. I treasured these opportunities to glimpse the adventurous soul still thriving beneath his ageing exterior. The years had never tamed the wild spirit within.

But later, as I lay sleepless churning over fractured hopes regarding Terra and our estranged sons, inspiration struck. Come morning I hurried to Father’s study to propose it eagerly.

“Let us take a short journey, just you and I. It’s been too long since we travelled any distance together.”

Father glanced up from his writing desk, surprise melting into a grin. “An excellent notion! The fresh mountain air would rejuvenate us both.” He stood, already mentally planning the excursion’s details.

I smiled, relieved he welcomed the spontaneous suggestion so readily. “It’s settled then. I’ll make arrangements for an extended stay at the northern estate. Time away may grant much-needed clarity for the path ahead.”

In no time, preparations were complete for several weeks respite in the high peaks where Father often retreated when worldly concerns weighed too heavily. I hoped the calming isolation of the wilds would settle my own restless spirit as well.

The morning of departure, golden light filtered through the windows as Father and I shared a quiet breakfast. Despite eagerness to be off, contentment wrapped me in that peaceful moment. Today’s open road promised welcome change from the claustrophobic tension pervading the penthouse.

But just as we finished eating, Derek arrived unannounced looking at the grave. My pulse quickened instantly – he never made social calls unless something urgent demanded attention.

“My most sincere apologies for the intrusion, Alpha. But a concerning matter requires your input,” Derek began without preamble.

I set down my napkin, breakfast’s comforting mood evaporating “Of course follow down the hall. Father trailed behind, features creased with worry.

Let's speak in my office." I gestured for him to

Once settled in the study, Derek addressed me somberly. "Word came early this morning that our northern allied pack's Beta has been assassinated. They request you to travel to consult regarding retaliation."

I rose swiftly to pace, gut churning. Losing a high-ranking pack leader signalled vulnerability. Rivals might seek to press that weakness.

"This is deeply troubling. Of course I will go offer aid immediately." I turned to Father. "My apologies, but it seems our travels must be postponed."

To his credit Father simply inclined his head in graceful acceptance. "I understand completely. Duty must come first, especially in times of crisis." But disappointment weighed clearly on his ageing shoulders. My own spirit sank witnessing it. This was not the diversion either of us had hoped for.

Packing a small bag, I hastily made arrangements for transport north. But an impulse prompted me to make one brief detour before departing the penthouse for unknown weeks. After asking the driver to wait, I hurried upstairs and knocked firmly on Terra's suite door.

Her look of surprise when she opened the door twisted rapidly to suspicion. "Why are you here?" she demanded bluntly

I lifted my palms placatingly under her fiery gaze. "Peace. I've come only to inform you that urgent pack business requires me to leave the city for some time. But my offer stands, for the boys' sake." I hesitated. "And for ours, if you are willing."

Terra studied me warily. But her aggressive posture relaxed slightly at seeing my travel attire and solemn expression. She stepped back, waving me impatiently inside. I felt her eyes track me as I paced the plush carpet.

"Speak plainly then. What is this about?" Her voice remained chilled, but held less hostility. I quickly outlined the situation, relieved when her face gradually shifted to understanding, then grave concern.

"That is certainly an urgent threat requiring the Alpha's direct intervention." Terra's brow furrowed thoughtfully. "Keep caution your highest priority. Unrest endangers the entire pack structure."

I inclined my head in sincere gratitude for the counsel, however unnecessary she likely felt it was. "You have my word, I will act only with care and wisdom for greater stability. And..." I hesitated. "If you can bear it, now I hope to finally talk openly when I return."

Terra crossed her arms, eyes shuttering closed again. “We shall see. Safe travels, and give my regards to your father. His guidance serves you well.”

Sensing dismissal in her tone, I simply bowed my head and took my leave.

Terra’s small concession today sparked a glimmer of optimism within my heart’s murk.

With time and care, perhaps the gulf between us could narrow someday. Patience and understanding were my allies now.

I hope we get to settle things while I am back.

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Ofith the boys, I nearly faltered, afraid they might sense the lingering devastation’s magnitude. But love’s light proved the more powerful beacon. The very air shimmered in their youthful glow, banishing the hulking darkness. No flaws could withstand such brilliant purity.

As we walked together through the sheltered

castle gardens, I released the last stubborn burdens in my heart, willing them to the river’s passing waters. Terra’s choices were mine to judge or lament anymore. I simply gave thanks that fate had granted me these precious boys to guide through life’s rapids ahead. Their arms bracing me kept my head above the crushing currents.

By the time evening’s chill crept beneath the towering trees, I felt some semblance of equilibrium restored. My sons’ bright spirits had scoured away the lingering traces of bitterness towards their mother. For their innocence, our time would remain only light. The shadows between us were my own to confront and conquer alone.

I bent to embrace the boys tightly once more, breathing in their sweet mischief and purity. “Be good, and know I eagerly await our next adventures,” I whispered against their silky hair. Looking up, I gave Terra a sombre but sincere nod. Her assessing eyes reflected surprise and something that may have been respect. But I did not linger to analyse further, taking quiet pride in simply doing right. My only lingering wish was to someday stand as worthy in my own eyes.

Rather than immediately departing alone, stifling silence in my sole company, I wandered slowly through the sheltered woods surrounding Terra’s majestic estate after leaving the boys. Her world was not mine – but for a few stolen moments I could still savour the graceful oaks standing sentinel, their tranquil healing.

No land truly belonged to one being alone, though we vainly marked deeds in ink. All was borrowed for a fleeting heartbeat from those who come before and after. Wisdom lay in honouring that grace, not grieving its loss.

Dusk deepened as I finally turned reluctant feet homeward. But unexpectedly, voices nearby drew me up short. A familiar confident baritone sent acid churning in my gut.

The rival Alpha. He stood arrogantly with one hand braced on a mighty trunk, head inclined toward Terra obscured in shadows.

They spoke too softly to make out words, but intimacy conveyed in their subtle movements screamed louder than any shouts. A moonbeam illuminated his blond head dipping as though to steal a kiss. My vision washed red.

Some primal darkness unleashed then. Reason fled before blistering rage. I was upon them in seconds, shouting accusations and tearing them apart.

But even as my fists pummelling ribs and stomach, dodging counter blows viciously, the black wave broke.

I stumbled back in dismay from the ravaged figure now curled on pine needles at my feet, groaning in pain. It was Collins, not the nameless rival I envisioned. And his split cheek oozed blood.

“Oh goddess forgive me...” I choked out hoarsely, shaking. Terra shoved past immediately to assess Collins’ injuries with tender care that lanced my heart anew.

She shot me one blistering look promising wrath to come, then turned dismissively back to Collins. They conversed in low tones that seemed painfully intimate.

A gulf now yawned between us too expensive to ever bridge. This savagery was the very poison she feared from me. I had proven myself the beast at last.

Numbly I backed away, her hissed threats barely registering through the roaring in my skull.

No excuses existed for such primitive violence, whatever their clandestine relationship. She had every right to turn from me.

My quest for redemption lay in ruins among the rustling pines. I had sacrificed everything tenuously rebuilt between us upon suspicion’s bloody altar once again. No true evolution was possible while jealous possessiveness yet ruled my heart. I was damned.

Once the trees engulfed me in shadow, I finally turned and staggered on. Even the loyal Derek’s urgent queries barely registered through the smothering shroud of despair enfolding me. I had lost all claim to authority among civilised companies.

The only possible path now was exile back to the wild myself.

of unreasoning beasts. There I could savage none except

I roamed for hours trying to quell the ugly throbbing darkness with pure physical exertion. But no matter how far or desperately I ran, the ravening madness yet hounded my heels. These primal demons were bound to my soul.

Sometime deep in the blackest dead of night, I found myself on hands and knees retching helplessly beside an icy stream. Nothing but bitter bile emerged to purge the foulness inside. Soul sickness could not be vomited out.

At last I collapsed against a mossy bank, spent. Utterly disgraced and despondent, only one possible redemption existed now...if possessed courage enough to carry it through.

But despite profound stains on my conscience, a flicker of fatherly love yet burned stubbornly against fate's battering winds. I must try for my sons' sake.

On leaden legs I slowly turned back towards the city, shuddering against the rising dawn wind. However undeserved, I still clung fiercely to a glimmer of light in the encroaching darkness.

Weeks passed in fog. My public facade remained intact enough thanks to years of practised composure. But nights still found me hunched over the toilet or sink retching endlessly to expunge demons that could not be purged. Sleep held only nightmares of violence leaving my hands dripping red. And every waking moment was tormented with visions of Terra's contemptuous eyes. I had proven myself irredeemable.

But grim determination goaded me on through bleak days. However outrageous the demands on my restraint, I would not fail again. Small consistent acts affirming compassion and service were the only path to redemption now. My own wants mattered naught. By submitting fully to leadership's sacrifice, perhaps the spirits I had utterly betrayed might someday be appeased.

Father had melded seamlessly into the role of interim Alpha in my absence with Derek's aid.

Neither pressed for details when I appeared those first several days haggard and battered. They simply led bracing forest runs ending in quiet companionship around flickering bonfires that gradually helped pieces splinter off my spirit. But fuse certain shards back together, I could not.

That mortification was now my permanent burden to bear. I drew some pathetic comfort knowing I had spared Collins or Terra far worse violence in my blind savage state. But remorse could never erase deeds done, however genuine. The blood my hands. forever stained

Allowing Father governance and removing myself from petition hearings felt necessary postures of contrition. The pack deserved leadership uncorrupted by primal impulse. But curiously my self-imposed penance seemed to lighten others' steps.

Counsellors smiled more readily without my morose presence. Common workers I passed on brief sanctioned walks clasped my shoulder in encouragement, their humble voices bolstering my flagging will.

Somehow despite my disgrace, letting true wolf spirit guide us again inspired fresh unity and purpose. I could not comprehend it. But the pack accepted me, however unfit to lead. Their loyalty humbled and offered the faintest hope.

When Father suggested I resume trade agreement negotiations soon, I floundered between raw panic at my unworthiness and instincts craving purpose. But his calming faith grounded me once more. "The pack needs your presence, Nathan. You fell, but did not fail entirely. Rise now. We shall walk this redemption path together."

And so I haltingly resumed attending agricultural council meetings, relearning basics of self-discipline under Father's discreet guidance. The direct needs of the people anchored me. Blunders were frequent, rage still simmered dangerously near boiling.

But each small victory of patience under provocation was another vital step out of darkness. Some days my only achievement was refraining from howling or rending furniture to splinters.

Yet it sufficed. None were without stains. I had to reclaim my own redemption with time, as with any wilderness slowly regrowing after fire's devastation.

The years ahead would surely bring lapses and doubts aplenty. But calm purpose once again settled tentatively in my being. I could not erase past savagery. Its branding would remain eternally.

But through consistent humble leadership, preventing future harm became possible. That was now my solitary concern – disproving the brutal beast Terra knew yet lurked within me. I had sworn to always walk in the light for my sons.

That oath stood, whatever the costs.

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Terra

"Stop! Let me go!" I shouted, twisting violently in Nathan's bruising grip as he dragged me deeper into the shadowy woods. Behind us Collins lay groaning on the pine needles, face bloodied by Nathan's savage temper.

At my furious struggles Nathan halted, chest heaving. His eyes still smouldered with irrational fury and possessiveness. I wrenched my throbbing arm free and stepped back warily, poised to flee or fight. But he made no move to recapture me.

“Why?” The hoarse whisper held oceans of torment. Nathan’s proud shoulders slumped defeatedly.

I hesitated, thrown by his swift shift from mindless violence to despair. But sympathy would only enable this dangerous pattern to repeat. “You attacked without cause or warning,” I bit out harshly. “Your temper is unstable, Nathan. I won’t expose the boys to it.”

He flinched as though struck, looking away. “You’re right to despise me,” he rasped. “I’m no fit parent or leader. Only an animal.” His hunched, wretched posture radiated genuine remorse and self-loathing. But damage was done. More bitter words clawed up my throat.

“I depended on you once too, before you threw me aside for polished pedigrees.” My voice shook with pent-up anguish. “Collins was the only one who helped me pick up the pieces after. He’s more family to me than you ever were.”

Nathan’s face contorted with fresh old wounds ripping open again.

agony at my

bald words. But he bore the accusations silently. I blinked back furious tears,

“The boys deserve so much better than you as a role model. Your volatility and obsession will cause only harm.”

Each harsh statement was a twisted knife plunging deep. But Nathan merely stared at the dark forest floor, defeated. “You’re right,” he repeated hollowly. “I’m a plague upon all near me.”

His self-flagellating words deflated my own toxic anger. Sickness festered yet in Nathan’s spirit, but raw honesty shone through now. Further driving the blade would serve no purpose except petty vengeance. I took a slow breath, searching for calm.

“We’ve both made grave mistakes, Nathan. The only path forward is learning compassion.” My voice gentled slightly. “Control your darkness. Prove yourself the patient father and wise Alpha they need.”

Cautiously I stepped closer, lifting his chin firmly until his anguished eyes met mine again. “I know that a noble wolf exists beneath the scars. Find him, for the boys’ sake. And your own.”

Nathan searched my face desperately, seeming scarcely to believe redemption remained possible. "I swear to you, I will become worthy of them," he rasped urgently. "Whatever it requires, even renouncing my title." His reckless promise gave me pause. But actions would prove devotion far more than any words or vows now.

I released his chin and stepped back, my own turbulent emotions in tumult. Nathan wavered on his knees a moment before slowly rising. His ravaged expression reflected bone-deep exhaustion suddenly. This confrontation had purged us both.

"Return to your family, Nathan. Be the anchor and lighthouse they need, instead of the storm." My quiet counsel felt inadequate for wounds so profound. But time's salve worked slow and steady.

He nodded wearily, understanding our fragile truce rested upon what unfolded in the days after this reckoning. With immense effort he gathered the rags of his dignity. But his eyes yet pleaded wordlessly for a slim promise of redemption.

If you walk in the light, I will not deny your bond with the boys, I conceded carefully. "But it will take time rebuilding demolished trust."

Hope flickered across Nathan's ravaged face. "That is all I dare ask," he rasped. "You show grace beyond worth." He seemed to wrestle internally a moment before adding thickly, "No matter what comes, I will always cherish the gift you gave, however obviously."

My throat tightened at the oblique but unmistakable reference to the children sleeping unaware back at the estate. I simply nodded, unable to voice the roiling emotions. But understanding passed between us.

For a long weighted moment we regarded each other, equals now in pain and yearning for absolution. Then Nathan straightened and turned away without another word, shoulders set with grim determination into the wind. This stark reckoning marked a crossroads. Our roads converged briefly here. Where they led next remained to be travelled.

I watched until Nathan's silhouette disappeared fully into the shadowy woods before making my own unsteady way back to where I had left Collins.

The confrontation had drained fury, leaving only weariness and dull relief. Closure and justice lived often only in myth. But clearing venom between us was essential for the boys to someday have a stable relationship with their father. However long that is required.

I found Collins slumped against a towering oak, gingerly probing his torn cheek. But he attempted a pained half smile at my approach. "Remind me not to get between you two

again.” His weak jest barely concealed simmering anger. I laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“He’s gone now. Let’s get you cared for.” Collins tried waving off my concerns, but couldn’t quite hide wincing as I helped him to his feet. My own bruised limbs screamed in protest, but that could wait.

Together we limped slowly from this haunted clearing bound painfully by old wounds and mistakes. But the poison at last felt lanced. Tomorrow is awaited.

Back at the estate, I quickly sutured Collins’ cheek gash after disinfecting it, blinking back useless tears at his gruff reassurances. The foul temper I had suffered seemed even more egregious turned viciously on this kind guardian. But recriminations were pointless now. Setting it right was all that mattered.

“There, the worst is over,” I soothed after securing the bandage, keeping my tone low and calm despite the day’s chaos. “I’ll bring you a painkiller tea that should help you rest. Collins regarded me with his trademark mix of compassion and humour.

“I’m fine, stop fussing. It’s you that I’m worried about.” His rough hand covered my own, eyes searching. “Are you really alright?”

I attempted a wan smile. “I will be, in time. Just painfully reminded of the past’s lingering shadows.” His steady presence was balm, allowing me to admit vulnerability. Together we could face whatever darkness yet lingered.

Collins frowned, anger resurfacing. “If he ever tries hurting you again-”

I quickly squeezed his hand. “He didn’t truly harm me. We both said bitter things best left buried.” At Collins’ sceptical look, I added gently, “Rage breeds only more rage. He walks in his own private hell already.”

Collins slowly exhaled but nodded. “You’re right, as always. But I still say he doesn’t deserve you.” Pride warmed his tired eyes, kindling my own small smile. However painful Nathan’s demons, Collins’ steadfast light yet shone undimmed. With him I could weather any storms.

Over the next few days a cautious new understanding settled between Nathan and I. We maintained a formal polite reserve when interacting, but no longer felt charged with barely suppressed hostilities. The abscess had drained, leaving us weary, vulnerable even. But oddly lighter without so much festering unspoken.

I supposed in some ways the violent confrontation had been necessary to purge our deepest bitterness. The poison between would likely never drain fully. But perhaps its power to overwhelm reason had been lanced. That was progress enough for us now.

Nathan seemed more tired and subdued when visiting the boys now rather than aggressively overcompensating his devotion.

But he listened to them attentively, angerless patience replacing demands for their affection. And the boys gradually warmed to this gentler father. Their innocence sensed true change, however gradual.

Watching Nathan's tender care with them reawakened almost maternal instincts protective of his damaged spirit.

Perhaps if we could maintain this cautious equilibrium, the good man I once knew as a stalwart friend could emerge again, forged by trials. His road was destined to remain difficult, shadowed by past stains. But having known darkness gave him wisdom to walk it humbly.

One afternoon while Nathan accompanied the boys on some adventure in the sun-dappled estate orchards, Collins joined me observing discreetly from the shaded windows. I was glad for his solid company. Trust would be hard-won between Nathan and I, and still the fruit fell far from the tree...

"He seems to be improving, at least," Collins commented neutrally as we watched Nathan laughing and joining some raucous game of chase. I sensed old resentment still simmered in his tone. My heart warmed anew – dear Collins had weathered so much at my side through the years. I knew he held no personal grudge towards Nathan despite the violent history, only protectiveness for my sake and the boys. His integrity shone like an unwavering beacon. I was forever blessed beneath its light.

Impulsively I wrapped both arms around one of his large sturdy ones, leaning into his strength.

Collins blinked down in surprise but quickly returned my fierce unexpected embrace. We maintained that tight comforting contact for a long moment.

However slow Nathan's path to redemption, with steadfast Collins here hope could take root and blossom from the ashes, His faith sustained me.