

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 181[1,758 words]

Chapter 181: Chapter 181

After Johnny and Elodie finished ordering, Rex added a couple dishes and they started talking business.

Then the food started arriving.

At first, Rex thought Johnny had been joking about not holding back.

But as plate after plate came out... lobster, wagyu, some kind of rare fish he'd only heard about, his eyes started twitching.

They'd ordered half the premium menu.

Johnny, completely unbothered, kept piling food onto Elodie's plate. "Elodie, take your time. No rush."

Elodie nodded. "Okay."

Rex just sat there with his jaw tight.

Johnny was absolutely messing with him on purpose.

Not that either of them actually cared about the bill. It was the principle.

As they ate, the conversation shifted back to serious business talk. Timelines, deliverables, technical specs.

Elodie stayed quiet for most of it, only jumping in when she had something to add.

But when she did speak? Her points were sharp. Insightful.

Rex found himself actually impressed.

He'd assumed she was just... there. That Johnny kept her around because he liked her, not because she was useful.

But watching them work together, it almost seemed like Johnny deferred to her more than the other way around.

Maybe that's why Johnny was so hung up on her. She wasn't just pretty.... she was smart. Capable.

That actually made sense.

Toward the end of the meal, Elodie excused herself to the restroom.

When she came back out, she nearly walked straight into Dante.

He'd just come out of the men's room.

They both froze.

Dante looked at her but didn't say anything. Like he didn't know what to say. Or didn't want to bother.

Elodie wasn't planning to talk to him either. She started to walk past.

Then stopped.

"When can we finalize the divorce?" she asked.

She'd never pushed him on it before. But it had been long enough. She wanted it done.

Dante's expression didn't change. "It'll be a while longer."

"How long?"

"I'll let you know when it's ready."

Elodie didn't press further. She turned to leave.

Then Dante added, "Nonna knows about it now."

Elodie paused. "Good."

At least now the old woman wouldn't keep trying to force them to play happy family. And Elodie wouldn't have to keep pretending.

"Yeah," Dante said.

They walked down the hallway together in silence, side by side but miles apart.

That's when someone came barreling around the corner.

Both of them stepped aside, but the person still clipped Elodie's shoulder.

She stumbled backward, right into Dante.

His hand shot out on reflex, catching her by the waist to steady her.

The person who'd bumped into her muttered a quick "sorry" and rushed into the restroom.

Elodie realized she was still pressed against Dante and started to pull away—

"You two—"

Rex's voice cut through the hallway.

He'd come around the corner and stopped dead, staring at them. At Elodie against Dante's chest. At Dante's hand still on her waist.

Dante let go immediately.

Elodie stepped to the side, putting distance between them. She didn't look at either of them. Just turned and walked away.

Rex watched her go, then slowly shifted his gaze back to Dante.

Dante smiled, perfectly calm. "Mr. Hardin. Also here for the restroom?"

Rex's jaw tightened. "...Yeah."

Dante nodded like nothing had happened and walked off.

Rex stood there, staring after him.

He'd never once thought about Elodie and Dante being... anything. They'd crossed paths at Wilson Corp, sure, but they'd never talked. Why would they? She was low-level tech staff. He was the CEO. Different worlds.

The only time he'd seen them interact was at that banquet. And even then, Dante had probably only approached her because of Sienna.

So what the hell was that just now?

When Elodie got back to the private room, Rex still hadn't returned.

By the time he finally showed up, they were almost done eating. They wrapped things up, paid the bill, and left. Rex headed back to his office to prep some documents. Elodie and Johnny went back to Cole.

Around three that afternoon, Harry showed up at Cole.

At almost the exact same time as Rex.

They ran into each other in the lobby.

Rex nodded. "Mr. Becker. So you finalized things with Cole?"

"I did. You here to sign the contract?"

"That's right."

Harry raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised. At the banquet, Johnny had shut Rex down hard. No hesitation.

And now they were doing business together?

Interesting.

Harry wasn't sure what had changed, but—

That's when Elodie and Johnny walked into the conference room.

Johnny didn't particularly like either Harry or Rex, but his attitude toward Harry was noticeably warmer. Especially when it came to Elodie.

So when they sat down, Johnny let Elodie handle Harry's side of things while he dealt with Rex.

Rex didn't seem to care about the arrangement.

But Harry?

Harry smiled. "Then I'll leave things in your capable hands, Miss Miller."

Elodie nodded. "Of course, Mr. Becker. This way."

They sat down and got to work. Elodie talked through specs and timelines with Harry's technical team. The conversation was detailed, technical, and smooth.

By the time they finished, it was already dark outside.

As they filed out of the conference room, Harry glanced at her.

"Miss Miller, would you like to grab dinner?"

Elodie shook her head. "I've got something I need to take care of. Let me check with Johnny first—"

Johnny walked out of the conference room right then, catching the end of the conversation.

"Dinner? Sure, I'm in." He glanced at Elodie. "Go handle whatever you need to. I've got this."

Elodie nodded, gave Harry a small wave, and left without even looking at Rex.

Harry stood there, a little thrown.

Johnny turned to Rex. "Mr. Becker's buying dinner. You coming, Mr. Hardin?"

Rex's expression was flat. "Yeah. Let's go."

Elodie drove straight to the Miller family house.

She'd come back to talk business with her uncle Jason. Cole was prepping two huge projects right now, and each one had been broken into smaller outsourced chunks.

Elodie had deliberately set one of those pieces aside for Jason to handle.

When she laid out the proposal, Jason was immediately interested.

"Will Johnny have a problem with this?"

"No. I already talked to him about it."

"Good." Jason paused, then frowned. "The thing is, cash flow's a little tight right now. I'm not sure I can—"

"I've got over ten million I can put in," Elodie said. "If that's not enough, we can auction off those two gifts from Nonna's birthday. That should cover the rest."

The gifts Dante had given at her grandmother's party... she'd been planning to sell them anyway. Now that the divorce was moving forward, it made sense to liquidate them. Dante wouldn't care.

Still, Jason hesitated.

"Dante's got connections everywhere. If we auction off gifts he gave and he finds out... won't that cause problems?"

"He won't care," Elodie said firmly.

Jason studied her face, then nodded. "Alright."

Between her ten million and the estimated thirty million the gifts would bring in, plus whatever Jason could scrape together, they'd have around fifty million. That would be enough.

And if it wasn't...

Elodie's eyes drifted toward the window. Toward the villa across the way.

The next afternoon, Jason sent the items to the auction house.

Not long after, the auction house called Dante.

His assistant took the call, then walked into his office.

"Sir, the auction house called. Two items registered under your name are being put up for sale."

Dante didn't look up from his laptop. "Alright."

"Do you want them to hold the items for you?"

"No."

The assistant nodded and left quickly, not wanting to linger.

Sienna, sitting across from him at dinner, looked up. "Something going on at work?"

Dante slipped his phone back into his pocket. "No. Just the auction house."

Sienna smiled, about to respond, when Liora piped up from her seat.

"What's an auction house?"

Dante cut into his steak, keeping his tone casual. "It's a place where people sell things. Bid on them."

"Bid on them? What kind of things? Is it fun?"

Sienna laughed. "It can be. Haven't you ever been to one, Liora?"

Liora shook her head. "Nope."

Her eyes lit up. "Do they have treasures there?"

"Sometimes," Dante said.

"I wanna see what it's like!" Liora said, practically bouncing in her chair.

Sienna smiled gently. "The things there might not be very interesting to you, sweetheart."

"Oh..." Liora's face fell immediately.

Dante set down his knife and fork. "You can still come. You could help me raise the paddle when I bid."

"Raise the paddle?"

"Yeah."

He grabbed Liora's tablet from the side table and pulled up a video, showing her how auctions worked. Liora watched, eyes wide, as people held up numbered paddles and nodded at auctioneers.

After a minute, she grinned. "That looks fun! Dad, can we go? Please?"

"Next time I'm free, I'll take you. You can buy whatever you want."

"Really?!"

"Really."

Sienna just smiled and sipped her wine, letting them have their moment.

The next morning, Rex showed up at Wilson Corporation early.

When he walked into the conference room, both Sienna and Dante were already there.

Rex paused when he saw her. "Miss Brown. Didn't expect to see you here."

Sienna smiled. "I'm still managing the project I was assigned before. Just continuing where I left off."

Rex nodded. "Got it."

He'd assumed that once her family got involved in the new Wilson project, she'd have stepped back to help them. Guess not.

Dante gestured to the chair across from him. "Mr. Hardin. Please, sit."

Rex sat down, but as he did, his mind flashed back to the hallway at the restaurant. Dante's hand on Elodie's waist. The way she'd been pressed against him.

He shook it off and focused on business.

They talked for over an hour. At some point, Sienna excused herself to handle something else. She came back a bit later with coffee that Dante's secretary had prepared, settling into the chair beside him.

Then Dante's phone rang.

He glanced at the screen, stood, and stepped out to take the call.

Rex watched him leave, and that image popped back into his head. Dante holding Elodie. Again.

"Mr. Hardin, did you want to say something?"

Sienna's voice pulled him back. She was watching him, her eyebrow slightly raised.

Rex's hesitation must've been obvious.

He shook his head. "Just thinking... Mr. Wilson treats you very well."

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Rex shook his head quickly. "I just think Mr. Wilson treats you really well."

That scene in the hallway was still bothering him. But bringing it up felt... wrong. Invasive, maybe.

After turning it over in his head a few times, he decided to drop it.

Besides, the evidence was everywhere. Dante had picked up abandoned projects at Wilson Corp just to help Sienna build her career. He'd introduced her family to all the right people. He'd even opened an entire new project at Wilson Group and handed parts of it to her and the Browns.

The man was bending over backward for her.

Rex could see it clear as day.

Honestly, if Rex were in Dante's position, he didn't think he could do half as much.

There was no question about how Dante felt about Sienna.

So yeah. That thing in the hallway? Probably just a misunderstanding.

Friday morning, Elodie had barely gotten out of bed when her phone rang.

Her grandmother.

"Sweetheart, there's a Master Hall exhibition on Sunday morning. Would you come with me?"

Elodie smiled. Her grandmother was obsessed with Master Hall's work. The guy was a legendary painter, and he hadn't held an exhibition in over a decade. This was a big deal.

"Of course, Grandma. I'll go with you."

She hung up.

Two seconds later, her phone rang again.

And it was with Liora's line.

It was the first time her daughter had called since the parent-child event on Monday.

Elodie stared at the screen.

Then let it go to voicemail.

Saturday afternoon, she went back to the Miller house for dinner. Sunday morning, she left early with her grandmother to head to the exhibition.

When they pulled up to the venue, Elodie was getting out of the car when she spotted another familiar vehicle.

Johnny's.

She blinked. "Johnny?"

He looked just as surprised to see her. "El? Grandma Miller? You're here too?"

"Yeah."

Old Madam Miller smiled warmly. "Mr. Gray, I didn't know you were interested in paintings."

Johnny scratched the back of his neck. "Not really. I'm just here to drop off a gift for my family. For Master Hall."

Master Hall wasn't just a famous painter—he came from the *Hall* family. Old money. Serious influence.

Every time he held an exhibition, it was a whole event. People from their circle showed up to support him. Others showed up to kiss ass and try to get in good with the family.

Rumor had it that between the paintings sold and the "gifts" people brought to curry favor, Master Hall's exhibitions pulled in eight figures easy.

Not that the Hall family needed the money. That's actually why Master Hall had stopped doing exhibitions for so long that he got sick of all the fake smiles and brown-nosing.

Johnny's family didn't need to suck up to the Halls. The relationship had cooled over the years, though the two patriarchs were still friends.

Now that Master Hall was holding an exhibition again after all this time, Johnny's dad couldn't be bothered to show up. So he'd sent Johnny to deliver a gift on his behalf.

He definitely hadn't expected to run into Elodie and her grandmother here.

Back when Master Hall used to hold exhibitions, the place would be packed wall-to-wall. And now, after more than ten years? With the Hall family still as powerful as ever? Johnny knew this place was going to be a zoo.

Which meant people like Dante, Sienna, and the whole Brown family crew were probably going to be here too.

Elodie had been too young to attend the last Master Hall exhibition. Over the years, she'd heard he rarely showed his work publicly anymore, so she didn't really know what to expect from events like this.

She noticed Johnny's expression shift... just slightly and frowned. "What's wrong?"

He smiled quickly. "Nothing. Wait here. Let me park the car and we'll go in together."

"Okay."

After Johnny parked, the three of them walked into the exhibition hall together.

Just like Johnny predicted, the place was absolutely mobbed. Three floors, all of them packed with well-dressed people holding champagne glasses and pretending to care about art.

But before they could even look at a single painting or pay their respects to the Hall family, they ran smack into the Brown and Green family entourage.

Grandmother Brown, Grandmother Green, and a few others were all standing near the entrance, smiling and chatting with various guests like they owned the place.

When they spotted Elodie and her grandmother, they didn't even look surprised.

Of course they'd known Old Madam Miller would be here. The woman was obsessed with Master Hall's work. No way she'd miss this.

Elodie's hand tightened on her grandmother's arm.

Old Madam Miller calmly patted her hand. "It's fine, dear."

If they could guess she'd come, she could just as easily guess they'd be here too.

Johnny leaned in slightly. "Grandma Miller, let me go find Master Hall. You two can come with me. I'll introduce you."

He was trying to give them an out. A reason to slip away from this awkward standoff.

But Old Madam Miller shook her head. "Just being able to see so many of his paintings in one place is more than enough. I don't want to bother the man."

Johnny hesitated, clearly not wanting to leave them alone with the Browns and Greens lurking nearby.

Elodie gave him a small smile. "Go. We'll be fine."

The Brown and Green families cared too much about appearances to cause a scene here. They wouldn't dare.

Johnny reluctantly nodded and headed off.

Elodie turned to her grandmother. "Which painting do you want to see first?"

Old Madam Miller smiled. "Let's just start with the ones nearby."

"Okay."

They were about to move when two more people walked in.

Rex and Yves.

Rex spotted Elodie immediately.

Yves, ever the opportunist, looked like he was about to walk over and say something, but Rex frowned and stayed put.

Elodie ignored them both and turned to leave.

Old Madam Miller glanced at them briefly. "Do you know those two?"

"Work," Elodie said flatly.

Her grandmother didn't push.

Right then, Logan and his wife Janice arrived. They spotted Rex and started to head over, but Rex beat them to it.

"Mr. Brown, Mrs. Brown. Didn't expect to see you here."

"Yes, well, wouldn't miss it," Logan said smoothly.

Before he could say more, Grandmother Brown and Grandmother Green appeared, their eyes sharp and curious.

"Logan, Janice, who are these young men?" Grandmother Brown asked, though her gaze lingered on Elodie for just a beat too long.

She'd clearly noticed that Elodie and Rex seemed to know each other.

Logan smiled. "This is Mr. Hardin. A friend of Sienna and Dante."

"Ah. I see."

After some polite small talk with the Brown and Green families, Rex and Yves headed inside to drop off their gift.

When they spotted Johnny already there, they weren't surprised.

"Mr. Gray. Didn't know you'd be here."

They were all here on behalf of their families, so the usual formalities were toned down a bit.

Johnny barely glanced at them. "Yeah."

Right then, Jimmy walked out holding a cup of tea. He handed it to Johnny, then looked over at Rex. "Oh, you guys made it."

"Yeah," Rex said. "Where's your grandfather?"

"Inside talking to someone. He'll probably be out in a bit. You can wait here if you want."

Rex sat down. "Alright."

But Johnny kept glancing at his watch, clearly distracted.

Jimmy noticed. "Gray, you in a rush?"

Johnny hesitated. "Not really. Just... got some things I need to handle."

He'd shown up like he was supposed to. But leaving before actually seeing Master Hall felt rude. Still, his worry about Elodie was winning out.

"Sorry, Hall. I'll step out for a minute."

Jimmy waved him off. "No worries. Go ahead."

Johnny left.

Rex watched him go, already guessing he was heading straight for Elodie.

Jimmy leaned back in his chair. "My grandfather's probably gonna be tied up for a while. You guys want to step outside? Get some air?"

Rex thought about what Logan had mentioned earlier, that Sienna and Dante were supposed to show up too.

He stood. "Yeah. Text me when your grandfather's free?"

"Will do."

Rex and Yves headed out.

Just as they stepped into the main hall, Harry and Levi walked in.

Members of the Brown and Green families immediately swarmed them.

Harry shook hands with Logan, all polite smiles.

Levi looked around. "Dante and Sienna aren't here yet?"

Before anyone could answer, he spotted Elodie across the room.

"Holy shit."

He couldn't believe it. Her? Here?

Harry, confused, followed his line of sight.

And saw Elodie.

His expression shifted. Just slightly.

Right then, Johnny was walking toward Elodie and Old Madam Miller.

Harry turned back to Levi and Logan. "Excuse me for a second. I'm gonna go say hi."

He left before anyone could respond.

"Mr. Gray. Miss Miller."

Johnny and Elodie both turned.

Johnny's smile was tight. "Mr. Becker."

Hearing the name Becker, Old Madam Miller gave Harry a longer look, remembering what Hugo and Jason had mentioned before.

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Harry picked up on the closeness between Elodie and Old Madam Miller pretty quick. He straightened up a little, respectful.

"You must be Old Madam Miller. It's an honor."

Old Madam Miller smiled warmly. "Hello, Mr. Becker."

Back near the entrance, the Brown and Green families had assumed Harry was heading over to schmooze with some VIP. Someone important.

They didn't expect him to walk up to Johnny and Elodie.

Johnny, sure. That made sense.

But Elodie? And Old Madam Miller?

Watching Harry be so polite to them, Old Madam Green's eyes narrowed. She turned to Levi.

"What's going on over there?"

Levi kept her voice low. "Harry's partnered with Johnny on a big project. And Elodie? She's got serious pull at Cole now. Johnny was ready to kill his deal with Harry because of her at one point. So Harry's playing nice. Business over personal feelings, you know?"

Old Madam Brown and Old Madam Green both nodded, understanding now.

They knew about Cole. The Brown family had tried working with them before. But because of Elodie, it fell through. So yeah, they weren't exactly fans.

Because of that, they didn't read too much into Harry being respectful. It was just business. That's all.

Tracy, holding onto Old Madam Green's arm, leaned in and whispered, "I didn't realize Mr. Gray was so... attentive to her."

Seeing how much Johnny seemed to value Elodie made her stomach twist a little.

Old Madam Green stayed calm. "Don't worry about it."

Whatever was going on between Elodie and Johnny, it wasn't going to last.

Once Dante officially divorced her, Elodie would be a *second-time bride*. Damaged goods. How could the Gray family ever accept a woman who'd already been married and had a kid?

Elodie's good luck would run out soon enough.

Just then, Sophia showed up.

She hadn't wanted to come. Art exhibitions bored her to tears. But she'd heard Harry was going to be here, and she hadn't seen him in a while, so she changed her mind.

After saying quick hellos to her family and Levi, she was about to ask if Harry had arrived yet when she turned and spotted him. Talking to Elodie.

Her eyes went wide.

"Why is Harry talking to her?"

Before Levi could answer, Sophia started moving toward them.

Levi grabbed her arm. "They're talking business."

"Business?"

"Yes."

Sophia stopped, lips pressed into a thin line. She let out a sharp breath through her nose, trying to swallow down the irritation bubbling up inside her.

But her eyes stayed locked on Harry and Elodie.

Elodie was wearing a long winter dress that was simple, elegant, not overdone. But somehow she still stood out. And standing next to Harry like that, they looked... good together.

Sophia knew nothing was happening. She knew that.

But it still bothered her.

Sophia tugged at Levi's sleeve, impatient. "What are they even talking about? It's been forever."

Levi sighed. Sophia's crush on Harry wasn't exactly subtle. Everyone knew. And everyone also knew Harry had zero interest in spoiled, high-maintenance girls like her. He'd already turned her down. Multiple times.

"It's just networking," Levi said. "That's how business works."

"Can't they network on a workday?"

Levi was getting tired of this conversation. He just wanted to go inside, sit down, drink some tea. But Harry was still out here chatting, so he was stuck.

Right then, Dante and Sienna finally showed up.

Levi perked up and waved them over. "Hey! Over here!"

Logan and the others immediately rushed over with bright smiles.

"Frank! Sienna! You made it!"

Dante nodded, about to respond, when his eyes landed on Elodie and Harry talking a few feet away.

The Brown and Green families watched him closely, waiting to see how he'd react.

Dante barely paused. He turned his attention back to them and said smoothly, "I'll go say hello real quick."

Old Madam Green and Sophia both stiffened slightly.

Dante walked off.

Sienna smiled at the group, her tone light and casual. "Old Madam Wilson and their family have always had a good relationship. Even after the divorce, I don't think he'd just cut them off completely."

So running into them here and saying a polite hello? Totally normal.

That was all it was.

Hearing that, Old Madam Green and the others visibly relaxed.

For a second there, they'd thought...

Sienna glanced in Elodie's direction briefly, then looked away, calm as ever.

Elodie had been facing Logan and the others when Dante and Sienna arrived. She'd noticed.

But she definitely hadn't expected Dante to walk over to her.

Her brow furrowed.

"Old Madam Miller."

Dante greeted her grandmother first, polite as always.

Old Madam Miller, who'd been smiling just moments before, went cold. "Mr. Wilson."

Dante didn't react to the chill in her voice. Just nodded.

Then he looked at Elodie.

She turned her face away. Didn't acknowledge him at all.

Like Sienna said, he was just here to say hello. That's it. After this, he'd leave.

Before he turned to go, he glanced at Harry, a silent question in his eyes. You coming?

Harry nodded and turned back to the group. "I've got some things to take care of. I'll catch up with you all later."

Johnny waved him off without a word.

Old Madam Miller smiled politely. "Of course. We'll talk soon."

Harry and Dante turned and headed back toward the Brown and Green families.

"Harry."

The second Harry got back, Sophia's voice went all sweet and hopeful.

Harry gave her the barest nod. Cold. Dismissive.

Dante was scanning the room, clearly looking for someone. Sophia jumped in helpfully.

"Sienna just got a phone call. She went outside to take it."

"Got it. Thanks."

Right then, a ripple of excitement spread through the crowd.

Old Master Hall had stepped out.

Jordan Hall, Jimmy Hall, and the rest of the Hall family flanked him as he made his way through the room. With so many people packed in, it took a moment for everyone to quiet down.

Once they did, Master Hall gave a short speech, thanking everyone for coming.

Elodie, Johnny, and Old Madam Miller were standing toward the back, but Jordan still spotted them.

Johnny had come to deliver a gift on behalf of his family's patriarch. Jimmy had already told Jordan and the old master about that.

But Elodie? Jordan hadn't expected to see her here.

When their eyes met, Jordan smiled and gave her a small nod.

Elodie had no idea Jordan was connected to Master Hall.

Seeing him acknowledge her, she smiled politely back.

Over by the Browns and Greens, people noticed Jordan nodding at someone but couldn't tell who.

After Master Hall wrapped up his thanks, the room burst into applause.

Then the crowd swarmed. People pushing forward to talk about his art, others angling to introduce themselves to Jordan and the rest of the Halls.

It took a while, but eventually Harry and Dante made their way over to Master Hall.

He accepted their gifts with a gracious nod. "Very thoughtful of you."

His eyes moved over Dante, Harry, Rex, and the others, a smile tugging at his lips. "It's been years since I've seen you young men. You've all grown into fine adults. Very impressive."

While Master Hall chatted with Dante's group, Jordan excused himself and started making his way through the crowd.

Toward Elodie.

Johnny saw him coming and stepped forward to greet him first.

After exchanging pleasantries with Johnny, Jordan turned his attention to Elodie.

"Elodie. Good to see you again."

Elodie smiled. "Uncle Hall."

Jordan's smile widened. He knew who Old Madam Miller was, and he shook her hand warmly.

When Elodie mentioned that her grandmother was a huge fan of Master Hall's work, Jordan's face lit up.

"If you don't mind, I'd love to invite you inside for a more private viewing. There are a lot of guests here today, but honestly? I think only a handful of them actually *appreciate* my father's work. Meeting someone who truly understands it would make his day."

Jordan had come over specifically to talk to Elodie.

But to everyone else watching? It just looked like he was making the rounds, greeting guests, and happened to stop by Johnny.

Most people figured he was just being polite to the Gray family.

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But he kept his mouth shut.

Maybe it was because they didn't really know each other that well yet.

At first, both Old Master Fisher and Dante were playing a little loose, feeling each other out.

But as the game went on, they started to get a read on each other's style. Old Master Fisher was aggressive, pushing hard, always on the attack. Dante, on the other hand, played defensively, but he was constantly looking for openings, waiting for the right moment to strike.

It looked like Dante was struggling.

But Elodie knew better.

She watched the board closely, her eyes narrowing as she tracked each move.

Johnny, who also knew his way around chess, leaned over. "Who do you think's gonna win?"

Elodie hesitated. "Hard to say."

Sienna and Levi, sitting nearby, overheard her vague answer and exchanged a look. Like, what kind of non-answer was that?

But Johnny knew she had more to say. She just wasn't saying it out loud.

Because Elodie did have thoughts.

Dante looked like he was on the back foot most of the time. But every time it seemed like he was about to lose, he'd find a way to turn it around.

Or... and this was the part that made her pause... he was leading Old Master Fisher exactly where he wanted him to go.

Making it look like an even match.

The thing was, Elodie wasn't sure if Dante actually wanted to win.

As the younger player, if he didn't want to embarrass the old man...

She was still thinking it over when Old Master Fisher let out a sharp laugh.

"Young man from the Wilson family," he said, shaking his head, "I may not be a grandmaster, but you're being way too polite here. It's starting to piss me off."

Dante smiled. "It's been a while since I played. I'm a little rusty."

Old Master Fisher snorted. "Rusty, my ass."

But he didn't push it. Instead, he kept playing.

After another ten minutes or so, he finally lost a key piece and got checkmated.

Old Master Fisher wasn't mad though. If anything, he looked thrilled. He wanted to see what Dante could really do.

Dante gestured toward the board with a small smile. "Another?"

"Damn right," Old Master Fisher said, already resetting the pieces.

This time, Dante didn't hold back. He came out swinging.

Old Master Fisher stared at him, caught off guard by the sudden shift in strategy.

Dante grinned. "You told me not to be polite."

Old Master Fisher barked out a laugh, clearly enjoying himself. It had been a long time since someone had beaten him so cleanly.

He immediately demanded a rematch.

Before they started, he pointed a finger at Dante. "Show me what you've really got. Don't think you can fool me just because I'm old."

Dante's expression stayed calm. "You've got the wrong idea, Old Master."

"Hmph." Old Master Fisher ignored him and focused on the board.

Of course, he lost again.

He set his pieces down, stood up, and nodded. "I admit it. You're good."

Before Dante could respond, Old Master Fisher turned to the others watching.

"Anyone else want a turn? Not to beat him, it was just to make him work for it a little."

Elodie had been quietly reviewing the game in her head when Old Master Fisher's words broke through her thoughts. Her heart did a little jump.

Then she heard Sienna's voice, soft and gracious.

"Old Master Fisher, after watching your match, I'm really tempted to give it a try. But my skills are limited, so if I were to face Dante, I'm afraid—"

"It's fine, it's fine! I was just joking around," Old Master Fisher said with a laugh. "But if you're interested, go ahead. Let's see what you've got."

Sienna was about to respond when someone else in the crowd chimed in, laughing.

"Miss Brown, from the way you're talking, it sounds like you might actually give him a run for his money!"

Another voice joined in. "Even if President Wilson's chess skills are incredible, if he beats Miss Brown, he'll probably have to sleep on the couch tonight, right?"

Laughter rippled through the group.

Old Master Fisher hadn't known about Sienna and Dante's relationship before. But now, seeing how poised and confident she was—and how good they looked standing next to each other—he connected the dots pretty fast.

He grinned and turned to Dante. "Oh, so *that's* how it is. Well, I'll be watching closely to see if you can play as calmly against your girlfriend as you did against me."

Sienna, now the center of attention, stayed perfectly composed. She turned to Dante with a small smile.

"I'm not someone who can't handle losing. Let's just play a fair game."

Dante's lips curved into a faint smile. "Alright."

Someone in the crowd couldn't resist. "They haven't even started yet and they're already flirting."

"True, but Miss Brown's no joke. Top PhD grad from a world-class university. I bet her chess game is just as sharp."

Old Master Fisher's eyebrows shot up. "A PhD, huh?" He looked at Dante approvingly. "You've got good taste, young man."

Johnny, standing off to the side, rolled his eyes so hard it was a miracle they didn't fall out of his head.

He'd actually been about to ask Elodie if she wanted to play.

But Sienna had swooped in before he could open his mouth.

Now, watching this whole performance unfold, he felt a headache starting. He muttered under his breath, "If you're gonna play, just *play.* Why all the theatrics?"

His voice was quiet, but Elodie and Harry both heard him.

Elodie's lips twitched, fighting back a smile.

Harry glanced at her, checking her face. She looked calm. Not upset. Not bothered.

That was... good. He relaxed a little.

Dante and Sienna started their game.

Elodie watched for a bit. Sienna clearly knew what she was doing. She wasn't a beginner—her moves were deliberate, thoughtful.

But after a few minutes, Elodie looked away.

Johnny watched for a bit longer, then rolled his eyes again. He looked like he was about two seconds away from walking out.

Noticing Elodie didn't seem all that interested in watching anymore, he leaned over. "You wanna go sit with your grandmother for a bit? Grab something to eat?"

Elodie shook her head. "No, it's fine. Let's wait a little longer."

Harry had noticed before Johnny did that Elodie had already checked out mentally.

When Dante and Old Master Fisher were playing, she'd been locked in. Focused. But now, with Dante and Sienna? She'd watched for maybe two minutes before her attention drifted.

The game was entertaining enough. And Sienna clearly knew what she was doing. She wasn't at Old Master Fisher's level—definitely not at Dante's—but she was good.

Still, Elodie had lost interest.

Which seemed to suggest...

"She's decent, I guess."

The voice came from the side.

Old Master Hall had appeared out of nowhere, Jimmy beside him. They were standing near Old Master Fisher now.

Old Master Fisher smiled. "Yeah, she's pretty good."

A moment later, he turned to Jimmy. "Why didn't you bring your paintings over?"

Jimmy grinned. "I was worried you'd say I wasn't being attentive enough, so I came to check on you."

"Go, go, go. Get back to your own business. You're distracting me," Old Master Fisher said, waving him off.

But Jimmy didn't leave.

Meanwhile, the Brown and Green families were practically glowing after hearing Old Master Fisher and Jimmy praise Sienna.

A lot of people in the room already knew who she was. And now, watching her play? It just confirmed what they'd thought.

She was the whole package. Beautiful, brilliant, accomplished. And now she'd impressed Old Master Fisher and Jimmy Hall with her chess skills too.

Plus, she'd won over Dante Wilson. The most eligible bachelor in their circle. Her relationship with him had boosted the Brown and Green families' status significantly.

Who wouldn't want a daughter like that?

Some of the older women started gushing.

"Old Madam Brown, Mr. Brown, Mrs. Brown... what a wonderful granddaughter you have! What a remarkable daughter!"

"Truly, truly," another chimed in. "You must share your secrets. How did you raise such an outstanding young woman? We're all friends here, surely you can give us some parenting tips?"

Before long, Mrs. Brown and Old Madam Green were surrounded by a crowd of elite wives, all eager to soak up whatever wisdom they could offer.

Sienna, soaking in all the praise and admiration, couldn't help but feel a swell of pride.

Tracy was right there with her, beaming.

She glanced over at Elodie, standing off to the side, and smirked. Leaning toward Janice, she whispered, "Compared to Sienna, she's really just... there, isn't she?"

Janice's expression went ice-cold. She clearly didn't appreciate Tracy comparing her daughter to Elodie like that.

But the Browns, Old Madam Brown, Logan, and the others... had heard Tracy's comment too.

They all turned to look at Elodie.

And yeah. In every measurable way, Sienna was clearly superior.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 185[1,314 words]

Chapter 185: Chapter 185

With that thought, they turned their attention back to Sienna, their expressions warm and full of pride.

Right then, Sienna stood and turned to Old Master Fisher with a gracious smile. "I'm sorry. I lost."

Old Master Fisher waved her off kindly. "Even in losing, you played beautifully. Not everyone's like that young man from the Wilson family. A young person who excels in both academics and chess? That's already quite rare."

Sienna's smile stayed modest. "You're too kind, Old Master Fisher."

"Want to go another round?" he offered.

She shook her head, still smiling. "One round of showing off is plenty. I'll leave the next game to someone else."

Old Master Fisher, clearly enjoying himself, looked around. "Anyone else want to take a turn?"

Silence fell.

Harry had been half-watching the board, half-lost in thought. Then he realized Dante was holding a chess piece and staring right at him.

Before Harry could react, Elodie stepped forward.

"How about a game?" she said, looking directly at Dante.

Dante froze, a chess piece still in hand. His eyes locked with hers.

Harry's head whipped around, genuinely surprised.

He hadn't expected Elodie to challenge Dante. Not here. Not in front of all these people.

Sienna and the Brown and Green families looked equally stunned.

From what they knew of Elodie, she wasn't the type to put herself out there like this. She was quiet. Reserved. The type of person who'd rather fade into the background than make a scene.

But now...

The Browns frowned.

Logan muttered under his breath, "If I'd known she was going to pull something like this, I would've said something to her earlier."

Then Dante spoke.

"Alright."

Elodie sat down across from him.

After the initial shock wore off, Sienna's face smoothed back into calm composure. She greeted Old Master Hall and the others politely, then moved to stand beside Dante.

It wasn't just Harry and the Browns who were surprised. Jimmy and Old Master Hall exchanged quick glances too.

Jordan had introduced Elodie earlier, but neither of them really knew her. From what they'd seen, though, she seemed gentle. Soft-spoken. Not the type to draw attention to herself.

So for her to step up and challenge someone publicly, no less was unexpected.

Old Master Fisher didn't know Elodie, but he'd definitely noticed her. It was hard not to. She was striking... beautiful, but in a quiet way. She looked gentle and polished. The type of girl who looked like she came from a good family. Honestly, she seemed like the perfect granddaughter-in-law material...

He just hadn't expected her to know how to play chess.

Dante looked at her. "You want to go first?"

In Go, the first player usually had the advantage.

Elodie didn't hesitate. She made her opening move.

Dante responded.

At first, neither of them made any bold plays. Their moves were careful, measured. They didn't talk. Just focused on the board.

Elodie kept her eyes down, barely even glancing at Dante across from her.

After a while, Old Master Hall, Old Master Fisher, and the others started to pick up on something.

Elodie's style matched her calm and steady personality. Whether she was attacking or defending, every move was purposeful. She wasn't just reacting. She was thinking three, four, five steps ahead.

Realizing this, the older men exchanged surprised looks.

Earlier, they'd praised Sienna for being sharp and strategic. And she was good, no question. But watching her game with Dante, it had been clear he was guiding her the whole time. Going easy on her. It felt like a playful match between a couple, nothing too serious.

Still, for a woman her age, Sienna's reflexes and adaptability were impressive.

But now...

Dante seemed to realize that Elodie wasn't following his lead. She wasn't reacting to his strategy.

She was pulling him into hers.

When Dante slowed down his attacks, trying to regain control, Elodie didn't give him an opening. She shifted seamlessly from defense to offense, launching a counterattack that forced him to pause mid-move.

He looked up at her.

And smiled. Just slightly.

Seeing Elodie's aggressive play, Old Master Fisher couldn't hold back.

"Beautiful!" he exclaimed.

Johnny raised an eyebrow, grinning.

Harry and Jimmy just stared, stunned.

They'd completely lost track of her strategy. Her early moves had been so calm, so defensive, that they'd assumed she was just playing it safe. They hadn't noticed the trap she was setting.

It wasn't until now that they realized that Elodie didn't just know how to play.

She was really good.

Sienna, standing beside Dante, had been focused more on his side of the board. Like Harry and the others, she'd already fallen behind in tracking his moves.

At first, she'd assumed Elodie would lose quickly.

But now, she noticed Dante's expression had changed. He was more focused. More serious. Even more so than when he'd played against her.

When she saw Old Master Fisher and the others completely absorbed in the game, it finally hit her.

Elodie wasn't just holding her own.

She might actually be better than Sienna.

From that point on, Sienna kept her eyes glued to Elodie's side of the board.

When she saw Elodie navigate out of a complicated trap Dante had set, one Sienna herself wouldn't have seen coming, her chest tightened.

And when Old Master Fisher praised the move out loud, Sienna's mood sank even further.

Elodie, meanwhile, was completely locked in. She didn't notice the murmurs around her, didn't register the eyes watching. Her entire focus was on the board in front of her.

The position was manageable for now. But if she wanted to actually win...

She paused and looked up at Dante.

Dante made his move.

Elodie stopped, her hand hovering over a piece as she thought it through.

Old Master Hall, watching intently, let out a low chuckle. "Truly remarkable. I never thought I'd see a game this exciting between two young people. Very, very impressive."

Old Master Fisher shot him an irritated glare. "Would you shut up?"

Old Master Hall went quiet.

A few minutes later, Elodie placed her piece. The balance shifted slightly back in her favor.

Two minutes after that, Dante responded.

Elodie carefully set the piece she'd been holding back on the board.

"I lost."

She could've dragged it out a few more moves, sure. But the outcome was already decided.

No point.

She stood up, ready to leave, when Dante's voice stopped her.

"Another game?"

Elodie hesitated. Then sat back down.

Old Master Hall laughed, clearly delighted. "This girl seems so quiet and reserved, but look at her, still jumping at the chance to play another round with the young man from the Wilson family. She must not get many opponents at this level. Now that she's found one, she's not letting go."

He directed the comment at Johnny.

Johnny could tell what was happening too.

He nodded. "Yeah."

Old Master Hall grinned. "I bet you can't beat her either."

Johnny, despite being one of the sharpest minds in their circle, who was second only to Dante was completely honest.

"Nope. I can't."

Elodie had mostly played against Professor Nolan before this.

She'd never beaten him. Not once. But the way Nolan reacted to her games, the way he praised her strategies? That said everything.

She was already a serious threat. And she was still so young.

Nolan hadn't lost a game since his teenage years. The fact that he spoke so highly of Elodie's play... regardless of her age or gender... put her in an extremely rare category.

That alone was proof. She was good.

By the time they finished talking, Elodie and Dante had already reset the board.

Dante looked at her. "You go first."

"You first."

She'd lost by more than a single move last time.

She needed to see exactly where her limits were.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 186[1,481 words]

Chapter 186: Chapter 186

Old Master Hall had guessed right. Apart from Professor Nolan, Elodie hadn't faced anyone at this level in a while.

She wasn't about to pass up the chance now.

To her, Dante was just another opponent. That's it. Nothing more.

She wasn't going to hold back just because of who he was.

Hearing her response, Dante didn't push it. He made the first move.

From there, they played in complete silence. No words were said. No distractions.

But Old Master Hall and Old Master Fisher both noticed something strange as they watched.

There was a rhythm between the two of them. An unspoken understanding. Like they weren't strangers at all, but people who'd known each other for years.

The older men glanced at Dante, then at Elodie, and finally at Sienna. Their brows furrowed slightly.

Then, in the middle of the silence, Dante spoke.

"It's been a while since you played, hasn't it?"

Elodie was in the middle of dismantling one of his setups. She didn't look up.

"Yeah."

Since marrying him, she'd basically stopped playing altogether.

"I can tell," Dante said. "You're a little rusty."

Elodie didn't respond. She just kept her eyes on the board.

The position looked bad for her right now.

It seemed like Dante had a clear path to victory. But she could see it, she could see the the hidden traps he'd laid, waiting for her to step into them.

After thinking it through, she avoided the bait and placed her piece somewhere else entirely.

The board shifted. Suddenly, Dante was the one on the back foot.

Dante raised an eyebrow, a faint smile tugging at his lips. After a moment, he made his move.

The tension ratcheted back up.

A few more exchanges, and Elodie pulled slightly ahead.

But in the end, she still lost.

Old Master Hall let out a low whistle. "What a shame. But that game was even better than the first one. You didn't have the advantage of going first, but you read part of his strategy anyway. You blocked his attacks with setups of your own. At your age, to have that kind of observation, memory, and control over the board? Truly impressive."

He turned to Old Master Fisher with a grin. "You couldn't beat her."

Old Master Fisher grunted. "I know."

If he had been playing against Elodie earlier, he wouldn't have lasted half as long.

Elodie started clearing the pieces off the board, preparing to stand.

Seeing that she wasn't planning to continue, Dante spoke up again.

"Another round?"

Before she could answer, someone else chimed in.

"Yeah! The gap was so close, maybe one more game and you'll win!"

"Exactly!" another voice agreed.

Elodie shook her head. "No. I'm good."

Sure, the gap looked small. And yeah, it seemed like she'd almost cracked his strategy.

But who's to say she wasn't just walking into another carefully laid trap?

With that thought, she stood up, turned, and walked away without looking back.

Old Master Lowe stepped up to take Elodie's place at the board.

Johnny walked over. "Want to grab a drink?"

Elodie nodded. "Yeah."

Old Master Hall noticed how comfortable Johnny and Elodie seemed together and stopped mid-step. "That young man from the Gray family is a lucky one."

Old Master Fisher nodded. "He really is."

They'd thought Sienna was impressive earlier.

But after watching Elodie play two games? There was no comparison.

When it came to chess, they weren't even in the same league.

Elodie was calm, sharp, her eyes clear and focused. She gave off this quiet intelligence that screamed good upbringing. The two old masters had been thinking about asking if she had a boyfriend, maybe even hinting at an introduction to Jimmy.

But Johnny had swooped in first.

Old Master Hall sighed. "They're a good match."

He glanced over at Jimmy.

Jimmy caught the look and gave a small, helpless smile. His eyes drifted toward where Elodie and Johnny had walked off, lingering for just a few seconds before he looked away.

Elodie and Johnny had just settled into seats near Old Madam Miller when Lauren and Logan appeared.

From their perspective, Elodie had only played chess with Dante earlier to try and win back his attention. To make him reconsider the divorce.

And worse, Dante had seemed different with her. His attitude had softened compared to before.

That wasn't good. Not for them.

So they'd come over to "talk."

Logan put on his best fatherly smile. "Elodie—"

Before he could finish, Johnny cut in smoothly. "Mr. Brown, are you here to publicly announce your relationship with Elodie?"

Logan's smile faltered. He let out an awkward laugh. "Mr. Gray, I just need a quick word with Mag. If you could give us a moment—"

Johnny didn't even let him finish. "If you want everyone here to know you're her father, go right ahead. Say whatever you want. I'd actually welcome it."

Logan wasn't stupid. He didn't want to piss off Johnny.

He and Lauren exchanged a look, then turned to leave.

But before he walked away completely, Logan looked back at Elodie. "I'll call you later. Make sure you pick up."

Elodie said nothing.

She couldn't be bothered.

And when he did call? She definitely wasn't answering.

Johnny let out a frustrated breath once they were gone. "Honestly, I'm this close to just saying screw it."

Elodie felt the same way.

But when it came to her and Dante, the lies, the accusations, the twisted version of events everyone believed, she'd never been able to find the proof she needed to clear her name.

Elodie's POV~

If I openly went after the Brown family, Dante and Harry would probably come down on me hard to protect Sienna.

And I'd already seen what the Green family was capable of when their backs were against the wall.

My mother was still stuck in that rehabilitation center because of them.

After chatting with Johnny for a bit, I turned my head and realized Dante and the others had stopped playing chess.

It was getting late. Time to find Grandma and head out.

I found her just finishing up a conversation with Old Master Hall about some painting technique I didn't quite catch. He had another friend arriving soon, so he excused himself to greet them.

Grandma didn't want to overstay her welcome. When she saw me, she nodded. "Let's go, dear."

But before we could leave, Old Master Hall came back out, holding a painting. He handed it to Grandma with a warm smile. It was a landscape of Pine Mountain, one she'd been admiring earlier.

After some polite thank-yous and goodbyes, we finally headed out.

On the way to the exit, I saw them.

Dante and Sienna, sitting together in the pavilion. Drinking tea. Talking. Looking completely comfortable.

They noticed us too.

Dante's eyes flicked toward me for half a second, then went right back to Harry and Levi like I wasn't even there.

Sienna saw the whole thing. She smiled, just a little, then turned away too.

Harry gave me a polite nod.

I nodded back. So did Johnny.

Then we left without looking back.

The next day, Johnny and I went to work like usual.

Cole's new projects were ramping up, and there was a mountain of work to get through. I buried myself in it, grateful for the distraction.

The next few days were a blur of meetings, emails, and late nights.

Then one afternoon, I came back to my desk and found a bunch of apples sitting there.

I blinked at them, confused.

"Is it Christmas already?" I asked out loud. "That snuck up fast."

One of my coworkers stretched and grinned. "Yep. The whole city's decked out. I'm heading out with friends after work to soak it all in. You got plans?"

I smiled and shook my head, setting the apples aside. "No. Just work."

After my shift ended, I remembered one of the plants at home was dying. Figured I'd swing by the mall and grab a replacement.

When I got there, the pedestrian street was completely transformed.

Christmas trees everywhere. Giant inflatable Santas. Lights strung up across every storefront. Music playing from hidden speakers.

It was festive. Overwhelming, almost.

The street was packed with families. Couples. Groups of friends laughing and taking pictures.

Everyone had someone.

I stood there for a second, frozen, unable to make myself move forward.

Liora loved Christmas.

Every year, we used to decorate the tree together. She'd insist on putting the star on top herself, even when she was too short and I had to lift her up.

We'd go out on Christmas Day, just the two of us, wandering the streets and soaking in the energy.

But ever since Dante took her abroad, we hadn't done that.

Actually, I hadn't celebrated Christmas at all.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 187[1,502 words]

Chapter 187: Chapter 187

Elodie had tried to let go.

Really, she had.

But after carrying her daughter for nine months, raising her for years, being there for every scraped knee and bedtime story, it wasn't that simple.

Now, standing here surrounded by all these people, the lights, the music, the laughter... several memories kept crashing over her. One after another. No matter how hard she tried to push them away.

"Miss Miller?"

She turned.

Jimmy Hall was standing there, looking mildly surprised to see her.

She nodded politely. "Mr. Hall."

"What are you doing out here by yourself?" he asked.

Elodie pushed down the ache in her chest and forced a smile. "Just picking up a plant for my apartment."

Jimmy stepped a little closer. He noticed the way she stood there, alone in the middle of the crowd. The look on her face was the definition of calm on the surface, but underneath, there was something heavy. Sad.

He didn't know her well enough to ask what was wrong.

Instead, he said, "Want to grab a drink or something?"

She shook her head. "I'm just going to buy what I need and head home." Then, to be polite, she asked, "What about you? What brings you here?"

"Dinner with a friend. He had to leave early."

There was a pause. Then Jimmy said casually, "There's a big fireworks show happening here later. You might want to stick around for it."

He wasn't asking her to stay with him. Just letting her know.

Elodie smiled faintly. "Oh. That explains all the people."

She and Jimmy weren't close. She was about to excuse herself when she froze.

Three familiar figures appeared in the crowd.

Dante. Sienna. And Liora.

They were heading toward the main square, walking together like a family. Probably here for the fireworks too.

Elodie's breath caught.

Jimmy noticed the shift in her expression immediately. He followed her gaze and spotted Dante, Sienna, and the little girl.

He blinked, caught off guard.

There'd been rumors floating around recently. That Dante already had a kid. That he might even be married. But nothing was ever confirmed. Most people dismissed it as gossip.

Jimmy had too.

But now, seeing Dante out on Christmas with Sienna and a child? It made him wonder.

Still, just because they were together didn't necessarily mean the girl was Dante's daughter, right?

And Sienna was only about twenty-five. She'd been studying abroad for years. Could she really have had a baby during grad school? That didn't add up.

By the time Jimmy sorted through his thoughts, Dante, Sienna, and the little girl had disappeared into the crowd.

He looked back at Elodie.

She'd already turned away.

He remembered hearing that she and Sienna didn't get along. But the way Elodie had looked just now when she saw Dante and Sienna together... it wasn't just dislike. It was something else. Something deeper.

"Want to walk over there?" Jimmy asked carefully.

He meant toward the square. Where the fireworks would be.

Elodie had actually wanted to see the fireworks.

But now...

Seeing Dante and Sienna here made her want to avoid the whole thing. It felt like a lose-lose situation no matter what she did.

Still, she forced a smile. "Alright."

They walked toward the crowd gathering along the waterfront.

Just as they reached the railing, the first firework exploded overhead. It was bright, loud, impossible to ignore. The crowd gasped and cheered, the noise swallowed up almost immediately by the next boom.

People were pulling out their phones, recording, taking pictures, and making wishes.

Elodie just stood there, watching silently.

Jimmy noticed. "Want me to take a video for you?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm good just watching."

He didn't push it.

A few meters away, Sienna's gaze wandered through the crowd and landed on them.

Jimmy was tall, and his polished, put-together look made him easy to spot even in a crowd this size.

She'd met him a few times before. They weren't close, but she knew who he was.

She was about to mention it to Dante when she noticed who was standing next to Jimmy.

Elodie.

Her smile vanished.

What were they doing here together?

Events like this were for families. Couples. Not... whatever this was.

Elodie and Jimmy had barely interacted except for that one dance at the banquet. So why were they here? Together?

She looked again, just to be sure. Yep. Just the two of them.

"Aunt Sienna, look! It's so pretty!"

Liora tugged on her sleeve, eyes glued to the sky, not wanting her to miss a single burst of color.

Sienna blinked and looked back down at her. "Yes, sweetie. Auntie sees it."

Dante noticed Sienna seemed distracted. "Something wrong?"

"No," she said quickly. "Nothing."

Liora's attention was completely locked on the fireworks. She didn't glance around, didn't notice her mother standing just a few meters away.

As Dante turned to say something to Sienna, his gaze drifted and he saw Elodie.

Jimmy was saying something to her, so she was facing their direction.

Their eyes met across the crowd.

Elodie froze. Her lips pressed together. Then she looked away, fast.

Jimmy turned back toward the fireworks just then, and his profile came into Dante's line of sight.

Even from the side, Dante recognized him immediately.

Sienna noticed that Dante had spotted them too. She leaned in slightly. "They came here together to watch the fireworks..."

"Mm," Dante said, voice flat. He looked away.

Seeing how unbothered he seemed, Sienna smiled.

But then... Thinking about Jimmy and Elodie showing up here together, her smile faded. She turned her gaze back toward them, watching.

Jimmy happened to glance over at the same moment.

Noticing Sienna looking his way, he gave her a polite nod.

Sienna smiled and nodded back at him.

They knew each other well enough that Jimmy probably should've walked over to say hi.

But remembering the obvious bad blood between Sienna and Elodie, he decided against it.

Sienna's smile tightened. She turned back toward the fireworks.

After that one quick glance, Dante didn't look at Elodie again.

And Liora? She was completely in her own world... snapping photos, laughing, totally absorbed in the colorful explosions overhead. She had no idea her mother was standing just a few meters away.

"Miss, would you like to buy a hot dog?"

Elodie turned.

The smell hit her first. It was salty, smoky, exactly how she remembered. Her stomach did a little flip. Moon goddess, it had been forever since she'd had one of these.

Her eyes drifted over to Liora without thinking.

Sure enough, Liora was holding a hot dog, taking big happy bites, ketchup smeared on her fingers.

And Sienna, she had a bouquet of red roses now, tucked under one arm. She leaned into Dante, saying something that made him smile. Then Liora held up her hot dog, offering Sienna a bite.

Sienna took it, laughing. Then she handed it back to Liora, who immediately turned and offered it to Dante.

He shook his head, said something Elodie couldn't hear, and didn't take a bite.

Elodie tore her eyes away.

"I'll take one," she said to the vendor.

She was about to ask Jimmy if he wanted one too when he beat her to it.

"Let me get it."

He'd already pulled out his phone, paid, and taken the hot dog from the vendor before she could argue. He handed it to her with an easy smile.

It was like five bucks.

Elodie took it. "Thank you."

"No problem."

They were just talking. Casually. Neither of them noticed that Sienna and Dante were watching from across the crowd. They'd seen the whole thing, saw Jimmy paying, handing her the hot dog.

Dante's expression darkened slightly.

Sienna's smile disappeared.

But Elodie and Jimmy didn't notice.

The fireworks were still going. They turned back to watch.

Liora tugged on Sienna's sleeve. "Daddy, Aunt Sienna, what are you looking at?"

Dante glanced down at her. "Nothing, sweetheart."

Sienna smiled too, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

A few minutes later, the grand finale lit up the sky and the huge bursts of gold and silver that made the whole crowd cheer.

Then it was over.

Elodie turned to Jimmy. "Thanks for bringing me to see this. And for the hot dog."

"Heading home now?"

"Yeah. I still need to grab that plant, then I'll head back."

Jimmy didn't push. "Alright. Take care."

"You too. Bye."

"Bye."

Elodie turned and disappeared into the crowd.

Jimmy started walking toward the parking lot, following the flow of people. He'd barely gone a few steps when someone called out.

"Jim?"

Rex's voice.

Jimmy stopped and turned. "Rex. Hey."

Rex walked over, hands in his pockets. "What are you doing here?"

"Grabbed dinner with a friend earlier. You?"

Rex looked a little uncomfortable. "Same."

"I'm heading out. You?"

"I—"

Rex stopped mid-sentence. His eyes locked on something in the distance, and he went completely still.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 188[1,308 words]

Chapter 188: Chapter 188

Jimmy followed Rex's gaze and spotted Dante and Sienna heading into a coffee shop with a little girl between them. They didn't look like they were in any hurry to leave.

Rex stared, unblinking. "That girl... is she really Dante's daughter?"

Jimmy shrugged, not particularly interested. "Maybe."

Rex stood frozen, jaw tight.

If that little girl really was Dante's daughter, then Sienna was walking into a complicated situation. A messy one.

And there were rumors Dante had been married before. If that was true, he'd be tied to his ex-wife forever because of the kid. Wouldn't that just make everything harder for Sienna?

Jimmy's phone rang. He answered, talked for a minute, then hung up.

"I've got something I need to handle. You coming?"

Rex snapped out of it, his expression hard. "No. I'm waiting for someone. You go ahead. We'll catch up later."

"Alright."

Jimmy left.

Once he was gone, Rex walked straight toward the coffee shop.

He pushed open the door and nearly ran right into Sienna.

She was holding Liora's hand, clearly heading toward the restroom.

Both of them stopped.

Sienna blinked in surprise. "Mr. Hardin? What a coincidence."

"Yeah," Rex said, letting the door close behind him. His eyes swept the room and landed on Dante, who was sitting at a table, casually ordering something from a waiter.

Then Rex looked down at Liora.

One glance and he was almost sure. She looked like Dante. A lot. Same eyes, same shape to her face.

Still, he asked. "Is this...?"

Sienna looked down at Liora and said simply, "Dante's daughter."

Of course.

Rex felt something heavy settle in his chest.

Right then, Liora piped up. "Aunt Sienna, who's this handsome uncle?"

Sienna crouched down and gently tapped Liora's nose, smiling. "Auntie's friend."

"Oh..." Liora said, clearly uninterested now.

Sienna straightened and turned back to Rex. "Mr. Hardin, are you here to meet a friend—"

"Aunt Sienna, please, I really need to go!"

Liora tugged hard on Sienna's arm, cutting her off mid-sentence.

She'd had milk tea earlier and now she was about to burst.

Seeing that Sienna looked like she wanted to keep chatting, Liora couldn't hold back anymore. Her tone came out a little bossy, almost demanding.

Rex noticed.

Sienna was being so patient and sweet with Liora. But the kid? She was kind of ordering her around.

His brow furrowed.

But Sienna didn't seem bothered at all. She just looked down at Liora with the same gentle smile.

"Okay, sweetheart. I know. My fault. Let's go right now."

She glanced at Rex. "I'll catch up with you in a bit."

Rex's chest tightened even more.

But he didn't have the right to say anything. Not yet.

"I need to use the restroom too. Mind if I walk with you?"

Sienna smiled. "Sure."

Liora was really in a hurry now. She saw Sienna was still moving too slow, so she let go of her hand and bolted toward the restroom on her own.

"Liora, wait for me!" Sienna called, immediately rushing after her.

Rex watched, frowning. The kid was acting spoiled and willful.

Just as he was about to say something, Liora suddenly stopped running.

She turned her head, staring off to the side.

"Liora?"

Sienna had caught up. Seeing her frozen there, a thought flickered through her mind.

Elodie.

She glanced back at Rex, who was still following, and her eyes shifted. She tugged gently on Liora's hand.

"Liora, weren't we going to the restroom? Let's—"

"Yeah," Liora said, looking around one more time. She didn't see anyone familiar, so she shrugged it off and ran ahead.

But Elodie had been there. Right in the direction Liora had been looking. She'd just been blocked by the crowd, hidden behind a cluster of shoppers. She hadn't noticed them either.

A few minutes later, Sienna, Rex, and Liora came out of the restroom.

Liora was at that age where everything was interesting. She kept stopping to look at things like stuffed animals in a shop window, a display of sparkly jewelry, a guy making balloon animals.

She chattered nonstop, asking Sienna a million questions.

Sienna answered every single one with a smile.

Rex watched from the side, impressed by how patient she was. Taking care of a kid was hard. He could see that now.

When they got back to the café, Rex immediately looked over at Dante.

He was sitting there, perfectly relaxed, sipping his coffee and flipping through a magazine.

Like he didn't have a care in the world.

Rex paused.

On the way to the restroom, he'd mentioned he was meeting friends here.

Now, as they walked in, Sienna asked, "Has your friend shown up yet?"

Rex shook his head. "Not yet."

"Why don't you sit with us until they do?"

"You're on a date. I don't want to intrude."

Sienna smiled. "It's fine. Dante won't mind."

So Rex followed them over.

As they got closer, the first thing he noticed was a bouquet of deep red roses sitting on the seat next to Dante.

No need to guess. Those were obviously for Sienna.

Rex's earlier concerns started to ease a little.

Maybe Dante didn't think as poorly of Sienna as Rex had feared.

"Daddy, we're back!" Liora called out, running straight to Dante.

Dante looked up, then glanced at Sienna. That's when he noticed Rex standing behind her.

"Mr. Hardin?"

Rex nodded. "I ran into Miss Brown at the door. Saw you were here, thought I'd say hello."

Dante shook his hand, and exchanged a few pleasantries. Rex could see how comfortable the three of them looked together, like a family. He decided not to intrude.

"My friend should be here soon. I'll catch up with you another time."

Dante didn't push. "Sounds good."

Rex gave Sienna one last look before heading to an empty table nearby.

Dante's group talked quietly amongst themselves. Rex couldn't make out what they were saying.

About twenty minutes later, Dante stood, signaling they were getting ready to leave.

He walked over to Rex's table. "Heading out. See you around."

"Yeah. Take care."

Dante left, but Rex noticed Sienna and Liora hadn't moved yet.

"You're not leaving?"

Sienna smiled. "Dante's bringing the car around from the parking garage."

The café wasn't far from the curb, but the underground lot was huge. It was thoughtful of Dante to drive up and pick them up instead of making them walk.

Rex nodded, impressed despite himself.

Sienna's smile stayed in place. "Has your friend shown up yet?"

Rex shook his head. "Not yet."

Sienna's eyes flickered with something... understanding, maybe... but she didn't push. "Are you going to wait a bit longer?"

"Nah. I'm heading out."

They chatted for another minute or so before Sienna's phone buzzed. She glanced at it.

"Dante's outside. We should go."

"Alright."

As they headed toward the door, Liora suddenly pulled her hand free from Sienna's and turned, staring off to the side.

"Liora?"

Liora was sure she'd just seen her mom. She knew it. But there were too many people. And she was too short. She couldn't see past the crowd.

She tugged on Sienna's sleeve. "Aunt Sienna, I think I just saw—"

Sienna cut her off gently. "Your dad's waiting, sweetheart. Let's go."

Liora looked one more time, squinting through the crowd and saw nothing. She must've imagined it.

She sighed and followed Sienna out the door.

Rex watched them leave.

He was about to head out himself when something or someone caught his eye.

He turned and saw it was Elodie.

She was standing off to the side, half-hidden behind a display of potted plants.

His steps slowed.

He hesitated, debating whether to just leave and pretend he hadn't seen her.

But then he noticed where she was looking.

Straight at Sienna and Liora, walking away.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 189[1,222 words]

Chapter 189: Chapter 189

Elodie's expression was ice-cold. Distant. Almost detached.

Rex couldn't shake the feeling that the way she was looking at Sienna wasn't just dislike.

It was pure hostility. Like she was staring at an enemy.

For a second, he even wondered if Elodie might actually try to do something to Sienna.

He walked over.

Elodie was loaded down with stuff... two potted plants, a few home décor items. The décor was a last-minute grab. Since moving into her new place, she'd been so busy she hadn't had time to make it feel like home. It was still pretty bare.

She'd come out to buy plants, saw some cute stuff at the shop next door, and figured why not.

She was just about to leave when she'd spotted Sienna and Liora. Again.

Now that they were gone, she was ready to go too until Rex appeared in front of her.

"What are you trying to do?"

Elodie stopped, confused. "What do you mean?"

Rex's voice was cold. "She doesn't even care about you. You're nothing to her. And yet you're still holding a grudge. Does that make any sense?"

"She doesn't care about me?" Elodie's eyes went hard. "You really think that highly of her, huh?"

In Rex's eyes, Sienna could do no wrong.

Before he could respond, Elodie let out a bitter laugh.

"So what? Are you here to warn me? Tell me not to hurt her?"

So that was why he'd come over.

Elodie's smile turned mocking. "Dante hasn't said anything to me yet, but here you are, jumping in. What gives you the right? Are you her secret admirer or something?"

Rex didn't even try to hide it. He'd never been shy about his feelings for Sienna, at least not when talking to Elodie.

"So what you're saying," he said coldly, "is that I should go tell Dante? Warn him to keep an eye on you?"

He thought back to the banquet. When Dante had asked Elodie to dance. Rex and Jimmy had both figured that was Dante's way of subtly warning her, to stay away from Sienna.

"Or do you think Dante's warning wasn't clear enough?"

Elodie didn't answer. Just stared at him, her gaze sharp and cutting.

Rex felt the weight of her disdain.

Then she asked, voice flat, "Are you really Reed Hardin's son?"

She didn't have a ton of contact with Reed, but every time she did, he came across as warm, wise, authoritative. A real leader.

Looking at Rex now? She couldn't see a trace of that.

Then again, maybe his feelings for Sienna had completely clouded his judgment.

Rex hadn't expected her to bring up his father.

Her tone made it sound like she actually knew him.

But how could she?

His expression darkened. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Elodie ignored the question. "You want Dante to warn me? Fine. I'll wait."

She turned and walked away without looking back.

As soon as Dante and Liora got back to the villa, his phone rang.

He answered, listened for a moment, then hung up and grabbed his coat.

Liora was halfway up the stairs when he called out to her.

"Your great-grandmother fell. She's in the hospital. I'm going to see her. You should get some rest."

Liora's face fell. "I want to come too—"

"You have school tomorrow. We'll visit her after class."

"Okay..."

Dante left.

Liora stood there for a second, then pulled out her phone.

It buzzed. And she saw it was a notification.

She grabbed it fast, hoping it was....

But instead all she saw was a spam.

She pouted, disappointed.

On the way home, she'd tried calling her mom. Just to ask if that had really been her at the mall earlier.

But her mom hadn't picked up.

Now, seeing the notification, she'd thought maybe it was her mom finally calling back.

But no.

Then again... if her mom really had been out shopping on Christmas, she would've invited Liora to come along, right?

She must've just seen someone who looked like her.

An hour later, at the orthopedic hospital downtown, Dante had already spoken with the doctor.

Nonna's thigh bone was badly fractured. She'd need surgery to replace it.

But they couldn't operate right away. They had to monitor her condition first.

The rest of the Wilson family was still out of town.

The only people at the hospital were the housekeeper and Aunt Garner, Nonna's usual caretaker.

The housekeeper had already notified everyone else.

When Dante walked in, the housekeeper stood up quickly to greet him.

Nonna was lying on her side in the hospital bed. When she saw him, she closed her eyes and turned her face away.

Dante pulled up a chair and sat beside her. "Still mad at me?"

He was talking about the project he'd handed to the Brown and Green families at Wilson Corp a while back.

Ever since then, Nonna had refused to even take his calls.

Nonna stayed silent.

Dante waited a beat, then spoke again. "What do you want me to do?"

Nonna finally opened her eyes. "Don't you already know?"

He did.

"I'll take care of it tomorrow," he said evenly.

What he meant was: he'd pull the Brown and Green families off the Wilson Corp project. Take back everything he'd allocated to them.

"And what else?"

Dante knew exactly what she was asking. His jaw tightened. "Grandmother..."

Nonna closed her eyes again.

Dante didn't push it.

A moment passed. Then Nonna spoke again, her voice flat.

"You can go now."

Dante didn't leave. He adjusted the blanket around her, making sure she was covered properly.

A little while later, the doctor came in to check on her. He gave Dante a rundown of her condition and said the surgery could be scheduled for the day after tomorrow.

It wasn't super high-risk. If everything went smoothly, she'd be able to walk with a walker in about a month.

After the doctor left, the housekeeper pulled Dante aside in the hallway. She glanced back toward Nonna's room.

"The old madam really wants to see Mrs. Wilson," she said quietly. "But she won't let me call her."

What she meant was... Nonna felt guilty. Too guilty to ask Elodie to come, especially now that she was injured and vulnerable.

Dante nodded. "I understand."

The housekeeper didn't say anything else. She went back inside.

That night, Dante stayed at the hospital.

The next morning, his mother Stella and his sister Amber showed up, one after the other.

When they found out Dante had been there all night, they insisted he go home and rest.

Dante leaned over Nonna's bed. "I'll come back this evening."

Nonna didn't respond. He just left.

Outside, he pulled out his phone and made a call.

An hour later, the Brown and Green families got the news.

They'd been pulled from the Wilson Corp project. Effective immediately.

They called Sienna right away.

She picked up on the second ring. "It's Nonna's doing. She fell last night..."

The families were stunned.

Miles, Sienna's cousin, was the first to recover. His voice came through tight, anxious.

"So... is Nonna going to use this to pressure Dante? Make him break up with you and stay married to Elodie?"

Sienna's lips pressed into a thin line.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 190 [1,027 words]

Chapter 190: Chapter 190

After a few more back-and-forths, Sienna ended the call.

Right then, someone knocked and poked their head in. "Director Brown, the meeting's about to start."

"Got it."

Sienna set her phone down and headed out. On her way to the conference room, she spotted Elodie talking to Mr. Kim about some work thing.

Sienna knew Cole and Wilson Corp had an ongoing partnership. Cole's tech staff came by regularly for system maintenance. But she hadn't expected to run into Elodie here today.

Elodie felt someone watching her. She glanced up, saw it was Sienna, and immediately looked away.

No hesitation. Just done.

Around ten in the morning, Elodie excused herself to use the restroom.

As she stepped into the hallway, she saw Dante.

He was leaning against the wall like he'd been waiting. For her, probably.

She didn't slow down. She was just going to walk right past him. Then he spoke.

"Nonna fell last night. Fractured her thigh. She needs surgery to replace the bone."

Elodie stopped dead.

She turned to face him.

Dante told her which hospital. Which room. Then added, "She really wants to see you."

Elodie didn't say anything. She was about to walk away when Sienna came out from one of the offices.

She looked surprised to see Dante there.

She hadn't known he'd come to Wilson Corp today.

And now he was talking to her... Sienna stopped, her lips pressed tight.

Elodie didn't spare either of them a second glance. She turned and headed straight for the restroom.

By the time she came back, Dante and Sienna were gone.

She went back to work.

Around eleven, after wrapping up the system maintenance, she and the rest of the Cole team packed up and left.

At lunch, Elodie told her grandmother about Nonna's fall.

Old Madam Miller's face went pale. "We're going to see her tonight."

No matter what was going on between Elodie and Dante, Nonna had been there for the Miller family when they'd needed it most. Back when things were at their worst.

If it hadn't been for Nonna's help, the Miller family wouldn't exist today.

That kind of debt? You didn't forget it.

"Okay," Elodie said.

That afternoon, Elodie left work early and went to the Miller house for dinner. Then she picked up her grandmother and they drove to the orthopedic hospital together.

When they got to Nonna's room, Elodie wasn't surprised to see Liora there.

She reached out and gently patted her daughter's head. "You came right after school, huh?"

"Yeah!" Liora's whole face lit up when she saw her. Then she turned to Nonna. "Great-grandma, look who's here!"

Old Madam Miller stepped forward. "Hello, dear."

Before Nonna could respond, Dante walked out of the room.

He saw them and gave a polite nod.

Old Madam Miller's expression went cold, but she didn't say anything.

Elodie barely glanced at him before looking away.

She noticed Liora shifting on her feet, clearly wanting to say something. So she spoke first.

"Mom and your great-grandma are going inside to visit now, okay?"

"Okay..." Liora's face fell a little, but she held back whatever she'd been about to say. She reached out and took Elodie's hand as they walked into the room together.

Dante picked up the flowers and fruit basket Elodie and Old Madam Miller had brought and followed them in.

When Nonna saw them, her face lit up. "Oh! What are you doing here?"

Old Madam Miller rushed over, gently pressing Nonna back down before she could try to sit up. "How could you not tell us about something this serious?"

Nonna's smile faded. She glanced over at Dante, who was already pouring water for Elodie and Old Madam Miller like the perfect host.

"I didn't have the face to call you," Nonna said quietly.

Elodie and Old Madam Miller both accepted the glasses Dante handed them.

Old Madam Miller shook her head firmly. "This is between them. None of it is your fault."

"But I—"

Nonna stopped herself, glancing at Liora, who was standing right there listening.

Old Madam Miller patted her hand gently. "I know."

After a few more polite exchanges, Nonna turned her attention to Elodie.

Liora, meanwhile, had been glued to Elodie's side since they walked in. She was pressed up against her leg now, trying to climb into her lap.

Elodie sighed softly, set down her cup, and lifted Liora up onto her lap.

Old Madam Miller glanced over at them. Liora beamed and called out, "Great-grandma!"

"Hello, sweetheart," Nonna said warmly.

With Liora right there, they couldn't really get into the heavy stuff, about the divorce, and the mess between Elodie and Dante.

So Old Madam Miller kept the conversation light, asking about Nonna's condition, how she was feeling, and what the doctors had said.

Nonna explained that her surgery was scheduled for tomorrow.

"Then I'll come stay with you," Old Madam Miller said immediately.

"You don't have to do that. It's too much trouble."

"Nonsense. I want to."

Having Old Madam Miller there to chat with would help pass the time. Keep her spirits up.

A little while later, Nonna seemed to remember something.

"You haven't eaten yet, have you? Dante, why don't you—"

"We already ate," Old Madam Miller cut her off. "Before we came."

Then she turned to Dante, her tone noticeably colder. "If you and Liora haven't eaten, you should go do that."

Liora had been waiting for a chance like this. She wrapped her arms around Elodie's neck and looked up at her with big, hopeful eyes.

"Mom, I really miss you. Come eat with us. Please?"

Elodie thought about last night. Seeing Liora with Dante and Sienna at the mall, holding hands, laughing together like a perfect little family.

Hearing her say she missed her now... it stung.

Elodie looked down, smiled faintly, and gently shook her head.

"I'm tired from work, sweetheart. I don't really feel like going out. You two go ahead."

Liora's face fell. She knew better than to push. But she didn't let go. Just stayed curled up in Elodie's lap, holding on tight.