

Chapter 716 Vied For Her Attention

Jeff, smarting from being roughly shoved aside by Cole, was a ball of pure defiance. He puffed up and took a bold step toward Elliana, only for Jason to grab the back of his shirt and yank him back.

"Hey, easy there, Jeff," Jason said, his voice warm but not giving an inch. "You have to be careful. Elliana is pregnant. You wouldn't want to hurt her, would you?"

The weight of Jason's words finally reached Jeff, making him still. He stopped fighting his way forward, though his jaw set stubbornly, every inch of him radiating frustration.

Cole looked like he hadn't moved an inch, all composed strength, but underneath that mask, he was being childish. He soaked in the thrill of seeing Jeff defeated. He would never let anyone see that side of him, of course.

Cole hadn't forgotten what Jeff had once said about marrying Elliana. Never mind that Jeff was only eight—Cole held a grudge. Anyone trying to win Elliana's favor, whether as a friend or anything else, became the enemy. Even the idea of someone else holding a corner of her heart got under his skin.

But before Cole could fully savor his win, a tidal wave of voices crashed through the room as the other members of the Evans family rushed to Elliana.

"Elliana! You're finally back! We missed you like crazy!"

"I can't believe it's really you! Turns out you're not ugly at all! You're absolutely stunning!"

"And you are actually the Stellara! I've followed you forever! I admire you way more than Taylor!"

"Elliana, I'm a huge fan! Over here, please!"

"Don't forget about me! I'm your number one fanboy!"

The crowd nearly swallowed Elliana whole. Someone grabbed her hands. Another tugged at her dress. Arms wrapped around her shoulders. Their excitement matched, maybe even outshone, Jeff's.

Even Lance, three years older than Elliana, was acting like a starstruck teenager, jostling for a position where she might see him, terrified of being pushed to the back of the pack.

Cole, who was usually the center of every room, found himself shoved to the sidelines, ignored for the first time in his life. He stood there and exhaled. So, it wasn't just Jeff he had to watch out for; he was up against a whole houseful of Elliana's fans.

The peaceful living room had transformed into a riot of laughter and shouts.

Cole felt a headache brewing. All he wanted was to whisk Elliana upstairs. But he couldn't even cut through the crowd, much less take her hand. "You bunch of pests," he muttered, voice swallowed by the noise.

Jeff, somehow right next to Cole, caught the muttered insult. A smug grin spread across his face. He stuck out his tongue at Cole before barreling into the crowd with even more determination. He might have been small, but that didn't stop him from being the fastest and most stubborn one in the bunch. While the others were too slow to react, he darted left and then veered right, slipping through the maze of legs until he popped out at the very front. Flashing a smug grin, he grabbed Elliana's arm and slid right into the place as the one closest to her.

Cole could only stand back, stewing, powerless to do anything but glare.

Jason watched the gathering from afar, amusement flickering across his face.

Wherever Elliana went, it seemed impossible not to be swept up by her. She had a knack for becoming the heart of every room, no matter how she tried to downplay her presence. Back when she'd first joined the Evans family, most of them had dismissed her. But slowly, they had all started to circle her, drawn in by her warmth and the way she lit up any

space.

"You must be tired, Elliana! Sit with us and take a break."

"Yeah, come on! You're expecting twins; you really shouldn't be standing this long. Here, sit down!"

With gentle persistence, the group guided Elliana to the sofa.

One person slipped a steaming mug into her hands. Someone else piled her lap with plates of sliced fruit and glasses of milk. If a national treasure had walked in, they couldn't have been more attentive.

Cole faded into the background, invisible now that Elliana was home. It was as if the entire family had forgotten the mighty leader existed.

Elliana couldn't turn away their affection. She accepted their treats, tasting fruit and sipping tea, all while fielding a dozen questions at once.

If anyone had peeked in, they'd have seen a living room full of people doting on their favorite star.

Even Taylor, a superstar in his own right, watched Elliana with an adoration that outshone everyone else's.

Meanwhile, storm clouds gathered on Cole's face. He slumped onto a sofa in the corner, arms crossed tight, his silence louder than any outburst. Too many admirers of Elliana crowded the room. There was no way he could compete with all of them. All he could do was watch as they vied for her attention.

Cole told himself none of it mattered. No matter how many people worshipped the ground Elliana walked on, she belonged to him. The rest were just hopelessly infatuated.

If anyone had overheard his silent pep talk, they might have felt sorry for the usually unshakeable Cole, forced to cling to childish comfort.

After half an hour of chatting, Elliana finally set down her fork, shaking her head with a laugh. "I'm really done. If I eat anything else, I'll burst."

Only then did the stream of treats finally stop. The crowd, though, showed no signs of moving away. They lingered close, eager for another moment with her.

Cole's patience hit its limit. He jumped up, his presence casting a shadow over the group as he cut through the noise with a commanding voice, "That's enough. Elliana needs to rest now."

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