

Chapter 27: Lion in Winter

Chapter 27: Lion in Winter depicts a poignant and deeply personal chapter in the life of Congressman John Lewis, exploring his battle with cancer and the unwavering dedication he exhibited to his work and ideals. The chapter highlights the enduring relationship between Lewis and his longtime aide, Michael Collins, who had been a pillar of support for two decades, managing not just his professional commitments but also offering vital personal assistance. As fall 2019 set in, Collins became increasingly concerned about Lewis's deteriorating health, noticing drastic changes in his appearance and energy levels, such as significant weight loss and exhaustion. This raised red flags, prompting him to gently encourage Lewis to seek medical attention, although both had hoped the issue would resolve with some simple dietary changes.

When Lewis confided in his former scheduler Jacob Gillison about not feeling well, Gillison immediately expressed his concerns and urged Lewis to undergo a medical examination. Despite Lewis's initial resistance, he agreed to the tests, and Dr. Brian Monahan was soon brought in to conduct further assessments. The hope was that the issue could be addressed easily with changes to his lifestyle, but unfortunately, the results proved far graver than anyone could have imagined. The diagnosis of Stage 4 pancreatic cancer was a devastating blow to both Lewis and Collins, but Lewis's strength and determination to remain active in his work remained unshaken. Even as he learned of his condition, he resolved to continue his congressional duties, giving impassioned speeches on key issues such as civil rights, justice, and impeachment proceedings.

Throughout this challenging period, Lewis remained an indomitable force in politics and social justice, and his resilience served as an inspiration to everyone around him. As the holiday season arrived, Lewis, despite his declining health, still found joy in creative outlets such as painting, using art as a form of therapy to cope with the emotional weight of his diagnosis. However, breaking the news to his colleagues, friends, and family proved to be a deeply emotional experience. The outpouring of love, support, and admiration for his life's work was overwhelming, demonstrating how deeply connected he was to the people he had fought for and worked alongside throughout his career.

With the new year came the commencement of chemotherapy, which significantly impacted his physical well-being but not his commitment to the causes he had always championed. Despite his personal struggles, Lewis remained actively engaged in political discourse, offering his support for Joe Biden's presidential campaign and participating in vital public conversations. He celebrated significant milestones, including his 80th birthday and the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, though his declining health required assistance for participation. His ability to keep his spirit alive, even in these physically challenging times, showcased his deep dedication to the legacy of his activism and his mission to bring about social change.

Even as his health continued to decline, with hospital visits becoming more frequent and interruptions from chemotherapy treatments impacting his daily routine, Lewis's concern for others never wavered. His empathy remained one of his defining characteristics, as he continued to ask about the well-being of his visitors, even as he himself fought a fierce battle against cancer. The chapter offers a deep reflection on the life of a man who, despite facing terminal illness, maintained his commitment to his work and legacy. Lewis's battle with cancer serves as a powerful testament to his lifelong pursuit of justice and equality, reminding readers of the remarkable resilience he exhibited in the face of life's harshest trials. His unwavering spirit, focus on community, and tireless advocacy for civil rights endure as part of his profound impact on the world.