



Chapter 19



Monday morning I walk into Fenris Law Group with my head high and my armor locked tight. Saturday night should have been a wake-up call for both of them—I'm not property, not a prize, not something to be won.

Instead, it apparently declared war.

My desk phone rings before I've even set down my coffee. Kieran's assistant, voice professionally neutral: "Mr. Fenris needs you in his office. He's reassigning the Martins case and wants you on the Addams merger instead."

The Addams merger. Sixty-million-dollar tech acquisition, high stakes, complex jurisdictional issues. Also requires constant one-on-one meetings in Kieran's office, late nights reviewing contracts, the kind of proximity that's either career-making or a trap.

I'm still processing when my cell buzzes. Text from Lysander: *Need you on the Herwis acquisition. Your specific expertise required. Come to my office when you get in.*

The Herwis acquisition that directly conflicts with the Addams timeline. That would pull me off Kieran's project and onto Lysander's team.

I stare at both messages and something cold settles in my chest. They're weaponizing work. Turning my career into a battlefield where they fight for proximity, for time, for whatever this is between us.

Fury burns through the cold.

I ignore both messages and dive into the Martins case I'm already assigned to. If they want to play power games, they can do it without my

cooperation.

That lasts exactly forty-five minutes before Kieran's assistant appears at my desk. "Mr. Fenris is expecting you. The Addams files are already in his office."

"I'm working on Martins."

"Which has been reassigned to Collins." Her smile is professionally bland. "You're on Addams now. Mr. Fenris insisted."

Translation: Alpha heir issued a command and expects obedience.

I'm gathering files to march into Kieran's office and tell him exactly where he can shove his insistence when Lysander appears, leaning against my cubicle wall with calculated casualness.

"Got your text?" He says it loud enough for nearby associates to hear. "The Herwis acquisition really does need your expertise. Think you can spare an hour this afternoon?"

Every head in the vicinity turns. I feel their attention, their speculation, the whispers that will start the second we're out of earshot.

"I'm on Addams," I say flatly.

"According to who?"

"Kieran reassigned me this morning."

Something flashes across Lysander's face. "Did he. How convenient." He straightens. "Well, Herwis takes priority. Corporate directive. I'll expect you at two."

He walks away before I can respond, leaving me standing there with a dozen associates watching the show.

By Tuesday's staff meeting, the entire office knows something's happening. I feel it in the sideways glances, the conversations that stop when I enter the break room, the way people position themselves to observe.

The conference room is packed—senior associates, paralegals, both co-CEOs at opposite ends of the massive table. I'm stuck in the middle, literally and figuratively, while they conduct what should be a routine case review.

Kieran leads the meeting with his usual controlled efficiency. Until he gets to my cases.

"Martins is progressing?" He looks directly at me, ignoring the fact that Collins is now lead counsel.

"I've been reassigned," I remind him. "Collins can answer that."

"But you developed the initial strategy. What's your assessment?"

It's a trap. Anything I say undermines Collins or makes me look like I'm questioning the reassignment I didn't ask for.

"My assessment is that Collins is more than capable of handling it." I keep my voice level. "As I would have been, had I remained assigned to the case."

The subtext lands. Several associates glance between us, reading the tension.

Lysander jumps in, ostensibly defending me. "Thalia's expertise is better utilized on Herwis anyway. The jurisdictional overlap with California law plays to her strengths."

Except it sounds less like defense and more like posturing. Like he's

claiming territory, marking boundaries.

Kieran's jaw tightens. "The Addams merger requires someone with her specific background in corporate acquisitions. That takes precedence."

"Herwis has a tighter timeline."

"Addams has higher stakes."

They're arguing over me in front of the entire office. Not about case load or proper resource allocation. About who gets access to me, my time, my proximity.

I'm staring at my notes, face burning, while they debate my schedule like I'm not sitting right here.

After the meeting, whispers follow me down the hallway. I catch fragments—"both of them," "never seen them compete like this," "poor thing doesn't know which way to look."

By Wednesday I've had enough.

I march into Kieran's office without knocking, shut the door behind me with enough force to rattle the frame. "Stop using work to get to me."

He looks up from his computer, expression unreadable. "I'm assigning cases based on skill set and availability."

"Bullshit." I plant my hands on his desk. "You're assigning cases based on who gets more face time. You and Lysander are turning my career into a pissing contest and I'm done."

"Then maybe you should stop playing both sides." His voice stays level but his eyes are dark. "You walked out Saturday night. Fine. But showing up to work Monday pretending nothing happened? That's not choosing yourself, Thalia. That's avoiding the choice."

"I shouldn't have to choose at work. This is supposed to be professional—"

"Nothing about us is professional." He stands, moves around the desk. "You know that. I know that. Lysander definitely knows that."

The door opens. Lysander walks in without knocking, apparently summoned by whatever brotherly instinct tells him when he's being discussed.

"Convenient timing," Kieran says dryly.

"I was coming to discuss the Herwis timeline." Lysander's eyes find mine. "But I see we're having a different conversation."

I turn on both of them, fury finally breaking free. "You want to have a conversation? Fine. Let's talk about how you're both making it impossible for me to do my job. How I can't walk into a meeting without everyone watching to see which one of you I look at first. How you're assigning me conflicting cases to compete for my time like I'm a fucking prize instead of a professional."

"You are a prize," Kieran says, completely unapologetic. "The only one that matters."

"Jesus Christ—"

"And I play to win." He moves into my space, forcing me to look up at him. "Always have. You want me to stop competing for you? Stop being worth competing for." His voice drops, goes rough. "But we both know that's not happening."

The possessiveness in his voice should enrage me. Does enrage me. But something in my body responds to the raw certainty, the way he's looking at me like I'm the only thing that matters in his entire world.

Lysander's voice cuts through the tension. "We can't keep doing this."

Commented [Ma1]:

Both Kieran and I turn to look at him.

"This—" He gestures between the three of us. "—destroys everything. The office is gossiping. Cases are suffering. And Thalia's caught in the middle of something that's not fair to her." He meets my eyes. "She has to choose."

The words hang in the air like a death sentence.

"Choose," Kieran repeats, turning back to me. "Him or me. Safe or fire. Comfortable or consuming. Make the choice, Thalia, because this limbo is killing all of us."

My throat closes. They're both staring at me, waiting for an answer I don't have. Waiting for me to decide which brother gets me, like I'm the disputed territory in their war instead of a person trying to survive.

"You think that's what this is about?" My voice comes out shaking. "Choosing between you two? You're both so focused on winning that you can't see what you're actually doing."

"Which is?" Lysander asks quietly.

"Proving you're exactly like everyone else who's ever treated me like property." I grab my bag, my files, everything I need to walk out of this office and not come back. "When you figure out how to see me as a person instead of a prize, maybe we can have this conversation. Until then?"

I head for the door, pause with my hand on the handle.

"Stay the fuck out of my case assignments."

I walk out leaving them standing there, the weight of their demand—

property." I grab my bag, my files, everything I need to walk out of this office and not come back. "When you figure out how to see me as a person instead of a prize, maybe we can have this conversation. Until then?"

I head for the door, pause with my hand on the handle.

"Stay the fuck out of my case assignments."

I walk out leaving them standing there, the weight of their demand—choose, choose, choose—echoing in my skull like a curse I can't escape.

End of *The* Chapter

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Comments

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Gifts

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