

A Broken Alpha Heiress' Revenge

[751 words]

Chapter 251

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“Isn’t it?” Selene spat back, her eyes burning with spite.

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“Not a chance. I just want you to see how good my mate is now. Stop gilding your own lies,” Jace growled, voice low and rough as a wolf’s warning.

“You-” Selene’s face flushed red and then pale in rapid waves. She bit her lip hard, tears welling, voice trembling with wounded pride. “Mortimer, look at him-he’s bullying me.”

Mortimer clicked his tongue, shooting Jace a sharp glare. “Jace, you’re crossing the line. I told you before- if I lose, Selene’s yours. You don’t want her? That’s spitting in my face.”

“I never said I wanted her. Are you crazy? Let’s go,” Jace snarled, impatient.

Jace grabbed Carmen’s arm, pulling her and two of his pack brothers to leave.

“Think you’re allowed to walk away?” Mortimer’s eyes narrowed into slits, warning sharp as claws.

“Do I need your permission to move?” Jace shot back, eyes flashing steel.

Mortimer’s expression darkened instantly. With a sudden roar, he raised his hand, and several burly wolves stepped forward, fanning out to block Jace’s path like a living barrier.

“Jace Hale, you don’t leave without Selene. Nobody moves. His voice was hard, laced with menace.

For weeks, Mortimer had been the one bowing under Jace’s shadow. Finally, he’d stolen Selene-his prize. his release-and savored his triumph. Losing today stung deeply.

Worse still, Jace had rejected his 'gift' like it was trash. Mortimer had assumed Jace cared for Selene; only to learn she was nothing more than a broken toy in Jace's eyes.

Anger blazed in Mortimer's eyes, flames licking from his gaze.

Jace's brows knit into a fierce scowl, his patience snapping. With a savage jerk, he shoved Mortimer's blocking hand aside. "Step back.

Mortimer staggered, caught off guard by the force, nearly toppling

"You dare push me?" Mortimer snarled, rage flaring. He lunged.

Jace twisted aside the attack, countering with a solid punch to Mortimer's shoulder.

Fangs bared and fists flying, the two tangled in a brutal scrap-muscle and fury clashing in raw combat.

Chaos erupted as pack members swarmed, drawn into the brawl, the air thick with snarls and growls.

Seizing the moment amid the chaos, Selene slithered through the crowd to Carmen's side.

Gone was the fragile white lotus facade; instead, a predator's sneer curled her lips, eyes alight with venomous challenge.

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"The leftover toy you're clinging to," she hissed, voice dripping poison

Carmen glanced at her coldly, indifferent. Her gaze returned to the fight, unconcerned.

Selene's face twisted in fury at the dismissal. "I'm talking to you"

Carmen remained unmoved, expression unreadable.

19 Free Coins

"Damn bitch," Selene spat. "Because of you, Jace humiliated me just now. You're nothing but a poor little student playing innocent."

She despised purity-the kind that shone like moonlight amid the muck she waded in.

With a sudden, vicious swing, Selene's palm cracked sharply against Carmen's cheek.

Cold steel ignited in Carmen's eyes—two piercing blades of frost. Instinctively, her hand dove into her cloak pocket, fingers closing around the butterfly knife's familiar cold grip.

Dare strike me without cause? I'll pierce you through.

Just as Carmen prepared to draw her blade, a screeching halt shattered the tension.

A sleek black Midnight Wolf – Duke's armored cruiser rolled smoothly to a stop at the roadside.

The window slid down, revealing Duke's composed, sharp-featured face.

Carmen? It really is you," Duke said quietly.

Her heart slammed like a war drum.

Frozen in place, hand still clutching the knife, she found herself suddenly powerless.

Duke had seen her—would he tell Mia? Or worse, Riley?

Before she could react, Selene's slap rang out, striking Carmen so hard she staggered.

Pain flared fierce and burning, but Carmen barely registered it—her eyes darted to Duke.

His gaze tightened, urgency flashing.

He leapt from the cruiser, shoving Selene aside and moving swiftly to Carmen.

"You okay?" he asked, concern threading his voice.

Carmen tried to speak, lips moving, but no words formed.

Duke glanced at the snarling pack brawl behind them, then at the red mark on Carmen's face.

Without hesitation, he grabbed her arm, guiding her away from the chaos.

Her steps faltered as he pulled her along, the cruiser's engine growling as it roared off.

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Jace, distracted by the fight, bellowed after the Maybach, voice filled with raw possessiveness:

“Stop the damn car! She’s mine!”

+5 Free Coins

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8:17 pm D

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[820 words]

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Carmen sat in the passenger seat, her head bowed, dark strands of hair falling in disarray along her cheeks. Beneath them, the raw red imprint of a hand burned against her skin—an ugly mark stark against her pale complexion.

Her fingers twisted together in her lap, knuckles whitening with the tension. Every so often she dared a glance at Duke, hands steady on the wheel, eyes fixed on the road ahead. She parted her lips to speak more than once but closed them again, the words crumbling in her throat.

The car was so silent she could hear the hum of the engine and the faint whisper of tires against asphalt. For a wolf used to the chatter of a pack, this stillness felt suffocating. Each second seemed to stretch into an eternity. Her mind whirred, grasping for a lie—something believable—but Duke asked nothing.

And that, somehow, made the knot in her gut worse.

Finally, the vehicle rolled to a stop. Duke unfastened his belt, stepped out, and moved toward the house without a word.

Carmen drew a deep breath and followed him inside, her steps instinctively lighter, as if she were intruding on the Alpha's den.

Duke settled onto the sofa, long legs braced, forearms resting on his knees, his gaze steady and unreadable. There was an edge of appraisal in his eyes—an assessing weight that made her shift on her feet.

After a long pause, he broke the silence. "Sit. I'll get the med kit."

His voice was level, controlled, but there was something in it—an undertone of command that resonated in her bones, the way an Alpha's voice would.

She hesitated before lowering herself to the couch. It was her second time in Duke's home, and it was as spotless as she remembered—sharp lines, clean surfaces, everything in its place.

Of course it is, she thought, forcing down an awkward flicker of amusement. The man was precise in every move, every word. It fit.

But another thought intruded, sharp and inappropriate—memories of him, the faintest hint of soap and steel on his skin. She shifted uncomfortably. For Moon's

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sake, she needed to focus.

+5 Free Coins

Duke returned, kneeling in front of her with the med kit. He uncapped the salve, the faint herbal scent of wolfsbane and mint curling into the air. His fingers were careful as they brushed her hair aside and began applying the balm.

The closeness rattled her. Carmen could hear his heartbeat—slow, steady, strong. The scent of him wrapped around her: clean, masculine, touched with the faint wildness that no wolf could ever mask.

She tried to ease the tension by speaking, her voice a careful murmur. "About what happened today... please don't tell my mother or Riley."

His hands stilled for the briefest moment. Then his gaze lifted to hers, sharp as a blade. "Were you threatened?"

Her breath caught. “What? No.”

“The biker,” Duke said, eyes narrowing, “the same male who tried to get you to serve drinks at the Silverfang Den. If you weren’t under pressure, why are you with someone like that again?”

“I—” The words faltered.

“If he’s threatening you, I can make sure he never does it again.”

Her pulse stumbled at the cold promise in his tone. She shook her head quickly. “No. He didn’t threaten me.”

Truth was, she still had her own plans for Jace Hale. Plans that required him breathing and owing her.

Duke studied her in silence, the weight of his stare making her shift back slightly. Then she pulled a small black card from her pocket and held it out to him.

“Your money. I’m returning it.”

He didn’t take it immediately, eyes narrowing. “I don’t want coin. What is it you think I want? You?” His voice dipped, rich and dangerous. “Or do you think I’d threaten to bare to the pack what happened between us?”

The moment he said the words, something traitorous inside her stirred. She liked his face—liked it far too much. The lean, refined lines, the hint of danger in his

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eyes. At Ashmoor Academy, males with beauty and strength were everywhere, but she’d never cared. Yet with Duke... she had cared from the first moment she’d seen him, even if she later learned he preferred the company of males.

She set the card firmly in his hand. “No. I don’t want you, and I won’t tell anyone what happened. But I need you to promise me the same—especially with Riley. Her health is fragile, and I won’t have her worrying about me.”

Their eyes locked. Duke's gaze was a storm-controlled but deep, carrying the weight of someone used to holding secrets and power alike. The longer she looked, the more unsteady her pulse became, each beat echoing like a drum in her ears.

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Carmen turned her face away, rising from her seat with every intention of leaving.

But before she could take a step, Duke's hand shot out like a striking hawk, fingers wrapping firmly around her wrist. His grip was warm, unyielding, the way an Beta's warning might feel before the bite.

She froze mid-stride, glancing back at him in question.

'Are you in some kind of trouble?' His voice was low, edged with something more than casual curiosity. "If you are, you can tell me. For the sake of Mia and Miss Riley, I'll help you."

He tilted his head as he spoke, the pale column of his neck catching the light, Adam's apple shifting with each measured word. There was an understated power

in that movement, an awareness of his own presence-predator calm, but ready to strike.

Carmen's gaze lingered a fraction too long before she forced herself to look away, locking down the restless pull in her chest. He was beautiful, yes—but that didn't change the fact that he preferred men. She wasn't that desperate.

A sharp, humorless laugh slipped past her lips as she wrenched her hand free.

'What trouble could I possibly have? Worry about yourself first. My business doesn't need your meddling.'

Her sudden shift from soft compliance to snapping defiance made Duke's brows lift slightly. A moment ago, she'd been pliant as a kitten; now she was showing her claws. Strangely enough, he found the change... amusing.

Rising to his full height, Duke stepped forward. His tall, broad-shouldered frame threw a shadow that swallowed her whole,

Carmen's instincts flared at the proximity-this was too close, too much. She stepped back automatically.

But he followed,

"Why are you backing away?"

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"I'm not. I just don't like people standing too close."

+5 Free Coins

"Really?" His laugh was low, more like the rumble of a wolf testing the air. "That's not what it looked like in the East Outskirts when you had your arms wrapped tight around that man's waist."

The words were sharpened with something almost like jealousy, though Carmen told herself she imagined it. Duke didn't care who she touched-why would he?

"That has nothing to do with you," she said flatly.

"No?" His tone cooled to a dangerous softness. "First time we met, I pulled you out of trouble. Second time, I nearly took you for myself. Now you think you can just walk away?"

Step by step, he pressed her back until her spine met the wall.

She narrowed her eyes. "What the hell are you doing?"

For a fleeting moment, she wondered if she'd misjudged him entirely-if maybe the man wasn't as indifferent to her as she thought.

But before she could decide, a sudden pounding rattled the door.

Bang. Bang, Bang.

A voice, fierce with worry, broke through.

“Carmen! Are you in there? Did that bastard lay a hand on you?!”

It was Jace Hale.

Her pulse jumped. Seizing the distraction, she shoved Duke back and rushed to the door, pulling it open.

Jace stood there, eyes wild, his scent bristling with protective instinct. He grabbed her arm, scanning her quickly from head to toe.

“You’re not hurt?”

“I’m fine. Let’s just go.” Carmen’s words were clipped; she turned to leave, tugging him along.

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Behind them came Duke’s voice, cold enough to freeze the air.

“Carmen.”

The sound made her shoulders stiffen. She didn’t turn.

Then his hand caught hers again. His grip was like iron.

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“You’re a top scholar at Ashmoor Academy. You’re really going to waste yourself running with this kind of company?”

Jace bristled instantly, stepping forward.

“What’s that supposed to mean? I’m her boyfriend. Whatever’s between us is none of your business.”

Duke’s gaze snapped back to Carmen.

‘He’s your boyfriend?’

She hesitated for a heartbeat, then nodded. “Yes. Now let go.”

He didn't. His fingers tightened instead.

'If he's really your boyfriend, why did he make you work the Silverfang Den? Why come to me for help?'

"That's my business," she bit out.

"Carmen-

"You don't believe me?" Her voice sharpened. "Fine. I'll prove it."

In one swift movement, she caught Jace's collar and pulled him down until their noses brushed.

Jace froze, startled, every muscle gone taut. From Duke's angle, it looked like a kiss - too close, too intimate to be mistaken for anything else.

Duke's jaw clenched. His hands balled into fists, knuckles whitening.

Carmen stepped back, meeting his gaze. "Now do you believe me?"

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The darkness in Duke's expression deepened. His eyes had gone cold, but beneath the frost there was something volatile, something that looked an awful lot like a wolf's barely leashed rage.

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Carmen avoided Duke's gaze, her fingers tightening around Jace Hale's wrist as she pulled him toward the exit with long, decisive strides.

Behind them, Duke's eyes narrowed, tracking the way their hands remained clasped. The sight sent a surge of heat and fury rushing through his chest, the beast inside him clawing for release.

Bang!

His fist slammed into the doorframe with enough force to splinter the wood.

"Carmen," his voice was low, edged with a growl, "you've got some nerve."

Jace rode his motorcycle in brooding silence, jaw locked, the wind whipping against his face. He could still feel the ghost of Carmen's closeness back in that room—how she'd leaned in as though to kiss him, but their lips had never actually touched.

He'd realized in that instant: she had only used him as a prop, a tool to rile that other male.

The thought made his chest feel heavy, like a stone lodged behind his ribs.

Without a word, Jace pulled the bike to a halt in front of the Silverfang Den. He didn't bother asking if she wanted to return to Ashmoor Academy—his mood was too dark for that.

He dismounted, caught her wrist in a firm grip, and all but dragged her inside.

The Silverfang Den pulsed with low, predatory energy. Blood-red lights flashed over writhing bodies, the air thick with the mingled scents of sweat, musk, and liquor. The bass of the music throbbed like a heartbeat, primal and unrestrained.

Jace pushed Carmen into a shadowed booth in the corner, his presence looming over her.

Her reaction was instant—her boot shot up, pressing firmly against his chest, halting him in place. Her gaze was glacial, her voice sharp as a claw's edge.

"Looking for a fight?"

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+5 Free Coins

The strobe lights flickered over her features, revealing a beauty edged with danger, an Alpha's challenge in every line of her body.

Whatever wolfish bravado Jace had gathered vanished under that stare. He exhaled heavily, shoulders loosening, and slumped down beside her, letting his head fall against her shoulder.

*Carmen," he murmured, voice softer now, "I really do like you."

Her lips curved in something that was not quite a smile. "Affection doesn't put meat on the table."

'It can," he said quickly, desperation seeping into his tone. "If you'd just give me a chance, I'd take care of you for the rest of my life."

She laughed, short and cold.

The phrase was one she'd heard before—from Maddox—back when he'd sworn to protect Riley forever, promising that once he became a warrior, he'd hunt down anyone who hurt her.

Those words had turned to ash. The man had turned into a monster.

Carmen had long since learned: a male's promise of protection was the biggest lie in the pack.

She stood, straightening her jacket. "Jace, lines like that might fool a naïve pup. Not me."

"Entertain yourself. I'm leaving."

But before she could take a second step, a figure lurched into her path and dropped to his knees.

The reek of strong liquor hit her nose first. Then his arms locked around her waist in a desperate grip.

Her eyes sharpened. The drunken wolf clutching her was none other than Ronan Duskcliff.

His pupils were blown wide, breath ragged, voice hoarse with some tangled mix of sorrow and longing.

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+5 Free Coins

“Riley...” he rasped, using a name that didn’t belong to her. “I can’t... I can’t stand this anymore. Please forgive me.”

His voice cracked, a sound raw enough to scrape bone. “I’ll change, I swear it. Just come back to me. Don’t give your heart to Lucien Duskgrave-give it to me. I need you, Riley. I can’t live without you.”

Tears streaked his cheeks, and his grip tightened like iron.

Carmen’s expression went icy, the steel in her voice making the nearby wolves pause mid-step. “Let. Go.”

“No!” he cried, almost snarling. “I’ll never let go again. Please... just one more chance.”

Her patience snapped. One hand fisted in his hair, she yanked his head back and struck him across the face with a sharp crack.

“Now you regret it?” she spat. “Where was this when Riley was broken by your hands and your pack’s treachery? When you left her crippled for life?”

Her boot drove into his chest, sending him sprawling onto the sticky floorboards. She stepped forward, planting her heel over his heart.

“Look closely, Ronan,” she said, voice low and lethal. “I’m not Riley. But hear this— Riley will never forgive you.”

“If you truly feel remorse...” she leaned her weight into the heel pressing against him, “...then do the only thing that might matter. Die.”

He was too far gone in drink to heed the danger, his hands still scrabbling to grab her ankle.

“Riley... please... I can make it right...”

Carmen tore her foot free, leaving a reddened mark on his skin where her boot had scraped him.

“Make it right?” she hissed. “You think a few empty words and a tear-stained plea can erase what you did?”

Riley had been light itself-gentle, untainted. And yet the Ebonclaw Pack, the Duskcliffs, and Maddox had torn her life to pieces.

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“When you joined in to destroy her,” Carmen’s voice was a whipcrack in the music- thick air, “did you ever stop to think this day would come? She was pure, she was trusting- how did you stomach shattering her?”

8:18 pm DD

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Carmen’s vision burned red, her mind flashing with the image of Riley limping, her once-bright ears dulled to silence. It was like a hundred silver-tipped needles stabbing straight into her heart.

She inhaled sharply, forcing her wolf back under control. Her voice was like ice cracking across a frozen river.

“Do you think your words change anything now? If you truly knew what you did, you’d be dead already. Death is the only real atonement.”

Without warning, she drove her boot hard into Ronan Duskcliff’s ribs, sending him sprawling. Her movements were sharp, precise—predator’s fury barely contained—before she turned and walked away without a flicker of hesitation.

From the shadows of the booth, Jace Hale finally rose to his feet. He stalked toward Ronan, his golden wolf's gaze cold and merciless.

"If you claim to love someone and still destroy them... you deserve exactly what you got."

He didn't spare another glance before striding after Carmen.

"Carmen-where are you going?" he called, catching the faint trace of her scent in the air.

"Not your concern. Don't follow me." She didn't slow, didn't turn.

"It's not safe at night. Let me-"

She spun on him, her eyes gleaming with a feral warning. "I'm in no mood, Jace. Stay away unless you're looking to bleed. Tomorrow, I'll pretend to be your girlfriend again."

Then she stepped out into the Silverfang Den's entrance, the night wind cutting across her face, cold and sharp as her own detachment.

A sleek black luxury car rolled to a halt at the curb, its purr deep and expensive. The doors opened, and a man and woman stepped out. The male's sharp, commanding features marked him as one of the Blackmaw Pack's power-holders

-Ronan's father. At his side was a refined woman with anxious eyes, Ronan's

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mother.

+5 Free Coins

They moved quickly toward the bar, but before they could reach the entrance, a lone figure stepped out of the shadows, blocking their way.

"Move," the Alpha male growled, his tone steeped in impatience.

The woman didn't budge. Instead, she smiled without warmth, her eyes dark with something feral. "Alpha Duskliff... Forgotten me so soon? Strange. I've been counting the days since I got out, just to see your face again."

A flicker of recognition froze his expression. He took in her features—a woman in her mid-thirties, dressed plainly, but a jagged scar carved down one side of her face, making her presence all the more brutal. Her scent carried the weight of blood and old violence.

“It seems you do remember me,” she said coldly.

Ronan’s father and mother exchanged a look, their faces draining of color. Harper.

She’d entered prison around the same time as Riley. Back then, Harper’s claws were already bloodstained—business rivalries had turned to street attacks, and one fight ended with her driving a blade into a rival’s ribs, even taking a hatchet to him in broad daylight. Twenty years was her sentence.

She should still be rotting in a cell.

But once she was inside, the Duskcliffs had approached her. Their offer was simple - make Riley’s life in prison hell, and they would shorten her sentence.

Harper had accepted without hesitation. From then on, Riley’s days had been nothing but agony—beatings, humiliation, a predator’s torment without respite. She wasn’t the only one. Alaric of the Ebonclaw Pack, Dean Elira Blackthorn, and Scarlett had also sent their own wolves to break Riley,

And now Harper stood here, free.

The Alpha Duskcliff of the Blackmaw Pack stepped back, instinctively treating her like a threat—his wolf recognizing the danger. His mate covered her mouth, fear sharpening her scent. “What... what do you want?”

Harper’s lips curled into a smirk that didn’t reach her eyes. She stepped closer, the air between them thickening with killing intent.

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+5 Free Coins

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“What do I want? You truly have forgotten, haven’t you, Alpha?” She jabbed a claw-tipped finger into his chest. “I did your dirty work in the pit. Now, I’m out. I want my payment.”

His jaw tightened. “We gave you your payment-your sentence was reduced.”

Harper’s laugh was sharp and cruel, the scar on her face twisting with the motion. “That? That’s nothing. I’m out now, with nothing in my hands. I’m not greedy. One hundred thousand moon-coins, and I vanish from Mooncrest forever.”

Once, the Blackmaw Pack could have paid that without blinking. But now, after Lucien Duskgrave’s relentless dismantling of their holdings, they were bleeding out-pack coffers empty, the family on the brink.

His mate snapped, her voice trembling with both fear and defiance. “This is extortion. We could call the Enforcers.”

Harper’s smirk widened. “Do it. And when they lock me up again, I’ll tell them everything about our deal. Every. Single. Thing.”

The Alpha male’s wolf stiffened-he knew she wasn’t bluffing. Exposure would mean disgrace, ruin, and possibly his own cell in the dungeons beneath the Council’s Hall.

He stood silent for a long moment, then finally bared his teeth in a grimace. “Fine. I’ll get you the money. But when you leave Mooncrest, you stay gone.”

Harper’s eyes glinted. “Don’t worry. I’ve no interest in wasting my second life here.”

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+5 Free Coins

Carmen’s fists clenched so tight her claws nearly pierced her own skin. Her nails dug deep into her palms as she stood in the shadows, listening to every word.

Riley’s life-her future-had been shattered beyond repair, and the one who had helped destroy it now dared to talk about “enjoying her second chance”?

Had Harper ever asked Riley if she agreed?

A shard of frost flashed through Carmen's amber eyes, sharp as a winter moon over a frozen tundra.

She turned without a word and strode into the dim-lit net café beside the Silverfang Den.

Inside, the air was thick with the hum of old machines and the faint scent of burnt coffee. Screens glowed faintly, casting cold blue light over the rows of hunched patrons. Carmen scanned the room with a predator's quick, precise gaze, then slipped into an empty seat.

Her fingers danced over the keyboard with supernatural speed, each keystroke a calculated strike. Lines of code streamed across the screen like flowing silver runes, the monitor's light carving her profile in sharp relief—predatory, unyielding.

Minutes later, she stopped.

Every surveillance feed within a kilometer radius had frozen, the signal scrambled, frames locked as if time itself had stuttered. The disruption would vanish in exactly one hour—long enough for her to finish what she came to do.

Carmen rose and walked back into the night.

By now, Ronan Duskcliff's parents had already fled in their sleek black car, its engine growling like a caged beast as it vanished into Mooncrest's sprawling shadows.

Only Harper remained at the Den's entrance, her scarred face lit with the gleam of greed and self-satisfaction.

Her laughter—high, jagged, and edged with madness—split the quiet night like claws on glass.

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+5 Free Coins

Carmen's gaze narrowed, her stare as cold and weighty as the winter stars. She studied the woman the way a wolf studies prey—marking every weakness, every point to strike.

"Never thought it'd be this easy," Harper gloated to herself, her voice grating and smug. "Just roughing up some useless little thing in prison, and now I've got more coin than I

ever made running my business. Back then, I could barely scrape a few hundred a month. This? This is a hundred thousand moons in one go.”

Her grin stretched, wolfish and feral. “Shame that little wretch got out before me. If she hadn’t, I might’ve gone back in just for the fun of it-and earned even more. Still... this’ll last me a long time. When it runs out? I’ll just squeeze the Dusks again.”

“You sound very proud of yourself.”

The voice behind her was low, carrying the kind of pressure that curled around the spine like an alpha’s growl.

Harper stiffened, her mirth cut short. She whipped around, eyes narrowing. “The hell-”

Carmen stood there, framed by moonlight, her stance loose but predatory, her gaze unflinching.

Harper sneered, trying to shake off the unease prickling at her skin. “What, you think staring’s gonna scare me? Keep looking at me like that and I’ll gouge your

eyes out.”

Carmen’s lips curved-not into a smile, but into something sharper, hungrier. In the shadowed street, it was an expression that could freeze the marrow.

Harper had spent her life preying on others-before prison, in prison, after prison. She was used to fear. But this... this wasn’t fear she saw in Carmen’s eyes. This was the look of a predator who had already decided how she was going to take you apart.

“You’re looking for death,” Harper snarled, raising her hand, claws curling, ready to strike across Carmen’s face.

But Carmen didn’t move. She didn’t even blink.

Then-flash of steel.

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A narrow blade slipped into her palm, and before Harper’s hand could land, Carmen drove the knife straight through the center of her palm.

Schhhk.

+5 Free Coins

The sound was wet and final. Blood welled and spilled hot against the night air.

Harper screamed-a raw, high sound that echoed down the street, her knees hitting the ground hard.

Carmen's expression didn't change. She twisted the blade slowly, deliberately, until Harper's scream broke into a choked sob.

Bending down, Carmen's voice was a low, silken whisper by her ear. "Feels good, doesn't it? Hitting someone who can't fight back. You should know."

Harper shook her head wildly, her face ghost-pale. "Please... please, stop... I-I was wrong-"

Carmen tilted her head, her wolf's grin sharp and merciless. "Stop? Why? When you were pounding your fists into Riley's ribs, when you made her bleed, when you broke her bones-did you stop?"

Harper whimpered.

"No," Carmen said, her tone colder than the Mooncrest winds. "Now you want mercy? That's not how the world works, little scavenger. That's called double standards."

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Carmen wrenched the blade free. Blood sprayed in a hot arc, the scent of iron thick in the damp night air. Harper's body convulsed violently, her knees buckling as she sagged toward the grimy ground, nearly losing consciousness.

With a grip like steel, Carmen fisted Harper's hair and dragged her step by deliberate step into the shadowed depths of the alley. The darkness there was heavy-like tar, swallowing the pale sliver of moonlight whole.

Harper's entire frame trembled as though she'd been plunged into ice water. The arrogance and gloating she'd worn moments earlier had evaporated, leaving only raw fear.

So she could feel fear, Carmen thought coldly.

Not so long ago, Harper had strutted about, bragging about how she had tormented Riley behind prison walls.

Now the tables had turned. The predator was prey, and her bravado had rotted away into pitiful pleading.

Pathetic.

The sound of Harper's ragged breathing filled the narrow space.

"What do you want from me?" Harper choked out, her voice shaking.

"Oh, nothing much," Carmen replied, her tone almost playful. "Just your eyes. Your tongue. Your hearing. And maybe I'll take the tendons in your hands and feet while I'm at it." She smiled faintly, the curve of her lips making Harper's stomach knot. "That's all."

Each word made Harper shake her head harder. "No! I don't want that! I've never done anything to you-why would you—"

"Who said I need a reason?" Carmen tilted her head in mock curiosity.

"Please... let me go... I can pay you—"

The offer made Carmen laugh-low, sharp, and humorless. "I don't want your coin, Harper. I just want you broken."

1/3

8:18 pm DD

Chapter 257

+5 Free Coins

Harper collapsed fully, a sobbing heap on the ground. Tears and snot streaked her face, her breath coming in shallow gasps.

The butterfly knife spun smoothly between Carmen's fingers, the sound of the blade clicking and locking echoing off the alley walls. Harper's eyes went wide with panic as she tried to crawl backward, but Carmen's hand shot out, seizing her ankle in a bruising grip.

"No! Let me go—"

Carmen's gaze chilled to ice. "Didn't you say you'd take my eyes? Let's see how you like it."

The blade flashed. She drove it into Harper's left eye, swift and merciless. Harper's scream split the night. Carmen twisted the knife, then withdrew it only to plunge it into the other eye, crimson spilling down Harper's cheeks in hot rivulets.

The sound of Harper's body thrashing against the filth of the alley floor barely registered to Carmen. Her focus was razor-sharp, her anger a steady, burning

current.

"Your tongue, next."

Forcing Harper's mouth open, Carmen slid the blade inside. A practiced jerk severed the muscle, and Harper's screams dissolved into wet, choking gurgles as blood poured from her mouth.

Then Carmen stooped to pick up a jagged piece of stone. "The ears, Harper. You remember what you did to Riley? You'll know it now."

One swing. Two. The cartilage gave way under the unrelenting blows, blood splattering across the cobblestones. The world fell silent for Harper—not from mercy, but from the damage done.

She was drifting toward unconsciousness when Carmen cut the tendons in her wrists and ankles. The moment the steel sliced through, Harper's body seized and shuddered violently, dragging her back to awareness with another strangled cry.

Even then, Carmen wasn't done. She brought the stone down again and again on Harper's ruined limbs until bone gave way with a sickening crack. Flesh tore, blood pooling thick around the broken wreck that had once been a wolf.

Only then did Carmen stand.

2/3

8:18 pm

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+5 Free Coins

Her hands were soaked scarlet, blood dripping from her claws-because somewhere during the frenzy, her human form had given way to her wolf. Midnight fur rippled under the moonlight, her golden eyes burning with vengeance. Her breath came in slow, controlled exhales, steam curling from her muzzle.

“This,” she growled, her voice a guttural rumble through sharp fangs, “is the justice you earned. And it’s still far less than what Riley endured.”

She turned to leave the alley-only to halt.

A figure stood at the mouth of the passage, the pale glow of a distant streetlamp outlining the breadth of his shoulders.

Carmen’s wolf stilled. Her hackles rose-not from threat, but from something older, deeper.

Her chest tightened. The bond snapped taut.

Her wolf snarled inside her mind, the sound both wild and reverent.

Mate.

3/3

8:18 pmSDD

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[896 words]

Chapter 258

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+5 Free Coins

The man caught the shift in her stance, his voice breaking through the tension like a blade.

“It’s me.”

Carmen froze. The dagger in her hand lowered, its tip dripping crimson.

“Duke?”

A faint nod. His amber eyes held something unreadable—an emotion caught between warning and something far deeper.

“You saw everything?” Her voice came out raw, rasped from the weight of adrenaline and rage.

“Yes.” He didn’t look away. Didn’t flinch. Just stood there, his gaze steady and impossible to read.

For a long moment, silence pressed down between them. The wind curled through the narrow alley, carrying the copper tang of fresh blood.

Finally, Duke broke it.

“Carmen... what you just did is a crime.”

Her lips twisted. “What? Going to call the Stormridge enforcers on me?”

“No.” His answer came without hesitation.

“Then move.” She shoved at his chest, but his hand shot out, gripping her wrist.

The strength in his hold was Beta-born-unyielding. No matter how she twisted, she couldn’t break free.

“Come with me.” His voice left no room for refusal.

“And why would I?” she bit back.

His gaze flicked to her bloodstained shirt. “Unless you want to stroll back into Ashmoor Academy looking like you’ve just come from a slaughterhouse...”

1/4

8:18 pm DD

Chapter 258

+5 Free Coins

Her eyes darted down. The streetlight made the splatters on her clothes blaze scarlet.

She stilled. Didn't fight when he pulled her toward the black SUV waiting at the alley's mouth.

The engine roared, and they sped through Mooncrest's neon-drenched streets. Streetlights and Pack banners bled together in the glass, painting Carmen's profile in cold light.

When they reached Duke's apartment, he opened the door, motioning her inside.

"Shower. Now." His tone was calm, but there was an undertone-command, but not Pack command. Mate command.

She said nothing, just stalked past him into the bathroom.

Water hissed behind the closed door. Duke lowered himself into the chair by the floor-to-ceiling windows, poured himself a glass of deep red wine, and let it roll slowly in the crystal. The city's nightscape stretched beyond the glass, but his thoughts weren't on the view. They were on the woman behind the bathroom door -and the bond burning at the edges of his restraint.

When she emerged, Carmen was in a white robe, hair damp and clinging to her cheeks, drops sliding down skin too pale under the warm light. She looked like a shard of moonlight-cold, untouchable.

Duke's gaze darkened, lingering a beat too long.

Carmen didn't seem to notice. She crossed the room, snatched the wine from his hand, and tipped it back in one swallow. Then she took the bottle and drained it without pause.

Her cheeks flushed quickly, her eyes unfocusing.

"More?" she asked, voice husky.

"No."

"You're lying."

He stayed silent.

2/4

8:18 pm DD

Chapter 258

+5 Free Coins

She turned, heading for the kitchen, yanking open his liquor cabinet to pull out a bottle of white spirit. She twisted the cap, but his shadow was already there, cutting her off.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m done thinking. Give me the damn bottle.”

“Alcohol destroys the body.” His eyes narrowed.

“My heart’s already destroyed. What’s one more thing?” Her voice broke, and her eyes rimmed red.

“Do you even know who that was back there?” she demanded. “She’s the one who beat Riley in prison-shattered her eardrum, broke her legs. Riley’s life ended in that cell, and yet that piece of filth walks free.”

Her voice trembled with rage. “She took a hundred thousand from Ronan Duskliff’s ‘s parents, swore she’d live out her ‘new life. You tell me, Duke, is that fair?”

“I gave her what she gave Riley-worse than that. Deaf. Crippled. Blinded. Tongue shattered. Hands and feet useless. If she survives, she’ll be nothing. Nothing.”

Her laugh was sharp, high-splintering. But the tears cut through it, shining tracks down her cheeks.

“No matter what I do, Riley will never be the same. Why does the Moon Goddess let good wolves suffer like that?”

Duke already knew Riley’s history-he’d investigated it himself-but hearing Carmen say it, tasting the grief under her rage, made his chest tighten.

“She was still top of her class at Mooncrest High, working two jobs, feeding the vultures of the Ebonclaw Pack, paying Maddox’s tuition, tutoring me. All while they bled her dry.”

His voice softened, almost a vow. “It will get better.”

“It won’t.” Her tone was flat, final. “That’s why I’ll take everything from the ones who hurt her. Tenfold. A hundredfold. If the law won’t touch them, I will.”

“Carmen-”

3/4

>>

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Chapter 258

+5 Free Coins

“Don’t you ‘Carmen’ me.” She tried to drink again, but he caught the bottle and set it aside.

“Enough. Bed.”

She grabbed his shirt collar, dragging him down into her unsteady breath. “Who do you think you are?”

His eyes locked on hers, something primal flickering there.

‘Duke. Your mate.’

Her drunken lips fumbled over it. “Duke...? What kind of name is that?” She squinted, swaying in his grip. “Sounds like ‘Dick. I hate it. Disgusting.”

The bond between them flared, hot and undeniable. Duke’s jaw clenched. She might fight it—might hate him for what fate had bound between them—but he would not let her walk away.

Not now. Not ever.

1474

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[760 words]

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Duke's temple throbbed at the drunken, slurred word.

"Dick."

+5 Free Coins

The sound made his wolf bristle. With a growl curling low in his throat, he seized Carmen's wrist and pinned her to the cold tile wall. His eyes burned gold, the mate-bond thrumming between them like a live wire.

His Adam's apple shifted twice before he ground out, each word edged in Beta authority.

"Not Dick. Duke."

Carmen scowled at the sudden confinement, twisting against him. Her movements were fast, sharp-yet the contact between their skin only sent another jolt of that cursed, magnetic pull straight to her core.

"I don't care if it's Dick or Duke..." she muttered, yanking her arm free and snatching the bottle from the counter.

Before he could stop her, she tilted her head back and poured a mouthful of liquor down her throat.

It didn't make it far. Duke's hands clamped down on her shoulders, his voice dark with command.

"Stop. Spit it out. Now."

She shook her head, fighting him, the scent of alcohol hot on her breath.

The kitchen was too small for both their tempers. They shoved against each other -two forces neither willing to yield. Then her footing slipped.

In a heartbeat, she crashed against him, sending them both into the counter.

And suddenly-her lips were on his.

The liquor in her mouth spilled into his, the burn chasing down his throat before his mind caught up. Shock widened his eyes, but his wolf surged in savage triumph at the taste of her.

1/3

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Heat pooled in his chest. His pulse thundered.

+5 Free Coins

Duke pushed her back as if distance could smother the fire licking at his restraint. His finger trembled as it pointed at her.

“What... what the hell was that?”

A cough tore from his chest, but her reaction made him falter.

Her wide eyes filled with tears, her voice breaking.

“You hate me. Just like everyone else.”

Her words came in a tumble-Kael Vale’s venomous rumors at Ashmoor Academy, the sneers, the insults; Riley’s silent suffering and stubborn bravery; every betrayal layered on her shoulders until they weighed her down like chains.

“Now even you,” she whispered, “my own mate...”

The last word was a knife to his gut.

The bond between them pulsed hard enough to steal his breath. It clawed at his will, whispering protect her, claim her, never let her go.

He took a step toward her, but she lifted her head, her tear-bright eyes locking with his-wolf to wolf.

“You know... from the first moment I saw you, I liked you-hic-”

The hiccup cut off her words, but Duke’s heart slammed against his ribs. From the first moment?

His chest felt too tight. The air between them grew heavy, scented with her-warm skin, salt tears, sharp liquor.

“I don’t-” he began, but she broke over his voice with a sobbing murmur.

“I’m a woman. Why won’t you?”

His brows pulled together, confusion and heat battling inside him. “What are you talking about?”

He reached out, brushing a hand over her hair in a rare, gentle touch. "Enough. Let

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me get you water."

She didn't seem to hear. Her gaze slid down his throat, pupils darkening.

+5 Free Coins

Before he could react, her hands shot out, gripping his neck with surprising, feral strength. He stumbled back, his spine hitting the counter.

And then-her mouth was on his throat.

Her lips grazed his Adam's apple, followed by the sharp press of teeth.

A growl ripped from deep in his chest, half warning, half something darker. The mate-bond roared to life, flooding him with heat, strength, want. Every nerve lit up under her touch, every instinct screaming to answer in kind.

His control snapped like dry kindling. With a swift, instinctive motion, he reversed their positions, caging her against the counter, the predator in him demanding dominance.

Her fingers skimmed his neck, dragging fire in their wake.

Duke's breathing grew ragged, chest rising and falling in hard pulls, his wolf clawing just beneath his skin.

Then-sanity clawed its way back.

He forced himself to straighten, dragging in sharp breaths. If he stayed too close, he'd give in. And she was drunk.

Carmen, flushed and wild-haired against the counter, looked at him with accusation in her eyes.

"Why won't you... with me?"

The bond snapped taut between them, hungry and impatient. His wolf wanted to answer her with action, but Duke's jaw clenched.

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[828 words]

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+5 Free Coins

Under the silver wash of moonlight spilling in through the kitchen window, Carmen's drunken tears glittered like dew.

She had found a face that fit every detail of her aesthetic, a presence that made her wolf perk up and her heart tighten in her chest-and yet, this male, her mate, Duke, seemed to have no interest in women.

What Carmen meant to say was, Why can't you respond to a woman-why do you only prefer men?

But the liquor dulled her tongue and tangled her words. All she managed to repeat, over and over, was, "You can't."

Those two words hit Duke like silver to the gut.

For a male wolf, for an Beta-blooded man, it was a goad to his pride, a claw at his core.

Even with his legendary self-control, every repetition scraped at his patience until it snapped. His amber gaze darkened, the faint golden ring of his wolf flashing.

"You've never even tried," he growled, voice low and edged, "so how exactly do you know I can't?"

"I saw it with my own eyes," she muttered stubbornly, her tone thick with wine. "When it's a woman, you just... can't."

“You saw-?” His lips curled in a humorless laugh, a dangerous sound. “You saw nothing, Carmen.”

Her lower lip trembled, her eyes glistening with wounded defiance. “You can’t... you just can’t...”

Something inside Duke gave way with a deep, resonant crack, like a tree trunk splitting under a storm. His wolf pushed forward, close to the surface, the Mate Bond between them thrumming with tension.

“You want proof?” His voice dropped into a gravelly rumble, every syllable vibrating with dominance. “Then I’ll make sure you feel exactly how wrong you are.”

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+5 Free Coins

In one fluid motion, he hoisted her over his shoulder, ignoring her startled gasp. His strides were purposeful, heavy with intent, until he reached the bedroom. With little gentleness, he tossed her onto the mattress.

Her robe, already loosened from their earlier struggle, gaped open; the hem had ridden up to bare the pale, smooth length of her thighs. The air between them thickened with the scent of her-ripe with wine, tears, and the faint sweetness of arousal that called to his wolf like a beacon.

Duke’s eyes darkened further, the gold burning bright in the depths. He caged her beneath him, his voice a dangerous murmur.

“Beg me, and I’ll let you go.”

But instead of yielding, Carmen looped her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to the vulnerable hollow of his throat. She sucked hard on the skin above his pounding pulse, marking him with a bruised crescent before pulling back, breathless.

The Bond snapped taut between them, heat surging through every nerve in his body. Duke’s control shattered.

“This,” he rasped, tearing the robe from her shoulders, “is what you wanted.”

He pinned her to the bed, breath fanning her cheek, his lips skimming down the curve of her jaw to her ear. His wolf's low growl rumbled in his chest as he tasted her, each kiss deepening the pull of the Bond.

The night turned molten, their heartbeats pounding in time like war drums. The Mate Bond sang in both of them-wild, inexorable, primal.

By the time sunlight filtered through the curtains, painting the sheets in gold and shadow, Carmen's body ached as though she'd been run through the grueling gauntlet of a pack challenge. Every muscle protested.

Worse, the deep, tender ache between her thighs made her hiss in a sharp breath.

Her head pounded, and when she finally managed to peel her eyes open, the first thing she saw was Duke's sleeping face-sharp, elegant features softened in repose, lashes casting shadows across his cheekbones.

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Her mind lagged several seconds behind before panic hit.

This wasn't her bed. This wasn't her room.

+5 Free Coins

The events of the night were a blur, but the soreness was evidence enough. Her gaze swept lower, catching on the bruises and bites marring his neck and chest- her work, every one of them. The wolf inside her stirred with satisfaction, recognizing its claim.

She swallowed hard and lifted the edge of the blanket, her face flaming as her eyes locked onto the unmistakable sign of what had transpired between them.

They'd mated.

Her mate.

Duke.

The Bond's echo pulsed faintly at the edge of her consciousness, still warm from the night before.

Heart hammering, she moved slowly, praying not to wake him. Her clothes, torn and blood-specked, lay discarded. She grabbed his shirt-too big, smelling unmistakably of him—and slipped it over her head.

Without a sound, she slipped from the room.

Half an hour later, Duke stirred, the absence of her scent by his side pulling him instantly from sleep. His wolf bristled at the emptiness.

She was gone.

And the Mate Bond thrummed, restless and unfinished.

3/3

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[825 words]

Chapter 261

With a careless flick, Duke threw back the blanket-and froze.

That vivid splash of crimson, blooming against the stark white sheets like winter plum blossoms on snow, made his eyes narrow.

His mind betrayed him instantly, dragging him back into the fevered haze of the night before. The taste of her breath, the desperate way her nails raked down his back, the primal claim in every gasp-Carmen beneath him, the bond between them thrumming until it burned through bone and blood.

The corner of his mouth curled into a slow, dangerous smile.

Reaching for his phone, he dialed her number, already imagining the ways he might tease her, coax her, push at the edges of her composure until she snapped and said his name like a plea.

But the call didn't go through.

He tried again. And again.

Still nothing.

His smile thinned into a sharp line. A cold laugh rumbled in his chest.

Carmen, you're bold-using me and then vanishing like the wind? Do you think your mate is someone you can just discard?

His wolf bristled, pacing behind his ribs. She's ours. She can run, but she can't hide.

"Mia's at the Duskgrave estate," he murmured darkly. "Let's see where you think you can run now,"

At the same time, life at the Duskgrave estate had been unusually quiet-and blissful-for Riley,

Most days were spent in the sunlit sitting room, embroidery hoop in hand, her thoughts full of the piece she was determined to finish soon.

At first, she would wake early, eager to prepare breakfast for Lucien-especially the

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+5 Free Coins

cilantro-laden broth noodles he favored. But Lucien, ever protective of her, forbade her from rising so early, his voice firm but his gaze full of warmth that melted her resolve every time.

So, Riley had surrendered to his will, allowing herself the luxury of sleeping until the sunlight woke her.

This morning, Lucien had already left for his duties, the Alpha prince's scent still faint in the air. She sat at the table alone, eating her breakfast when Mia approached with a gentle smile.

Miss Riley, I'll be taking a day off tomorrow," Mia announced.

Riley tilted her head. "Where are you going?"

It's Garmen's birthday," Mia said fondly. "It's been too long since we've sat down together, just the two of us."

At the mention of Carmen, Riley's eyes lit up. "Then let's celebrate together! We should have longevity noodles. When she's done with her classes tonight, let's go pick her up."

Mia's smile warmed. "Alright." She reached for her phone. "I'll message her now."

Carmen was sprawled across her dorm bed, staring at the ceiling.

Moon and stars above-how had she ended up tangling with Duke?

Yes, he was devastatingly handsome, but that didn't excuse her from losing every shred of self-control. The memory of her drunken self clinging to him, taunting him-it made her want to bury herself in a hole.

Her phone chimed.

It was a message from Riley:

[Carmen, we'll pick you up after class tonight]

Carmen frowned. Why the sudden escort? Surely they weren't bringing her to the Duskgrave estate-if she ran into Duke there, she'd die of embarrassment.

[Pick me up for what? Where are we going?] she typed back.

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Chapter 261

[To a restaurant. Longevity noodles.] came the reply.

She blinked. [Longevity noodles? Riley, your birthday already passed.]

Across the estate, Riley let out a laugh, showing Mia the message.

+5 Free Coins

"This girl's been so buried in her studies she forgot her own birthday," Riley said.

Mia chuckled. "She takes after you-quiet, disciplined, never giving me trouble. Always focused, always determined."

Riley nodded. Carmen's beauty was matched only by her heart, and she had worked hard ever since she'd been admitted to Ashmoor University. Riley only wished she'd never be taken advantage of for her kindness.

[Silly girl, it's your birthday tomorrow. You forgot?] Riley sent back.

Carmen stared at the screen. Oh. She had forgotten.

Well, spending her birthday with Riley sounded perfect. She typed back: [Alright, see you tonight.]

The thought lifted her mood instantly, pushing away the awkward memories of last night. So she'd slept with her "gay" mate-so what? It wasn't as though he'd been passive; in fact, Duke had been more relentless than her. Her body still ached from it.

No one took advantage of anyone, she told herself. If anything, I was generous enough not to reject a stir-stick like him.

But even thinking of him sent an odd shiver down her spine-not disgust exactly, but a raw awareness, like the echo of his scent tangled with hers. The mate-bond pulsed faintly under her skin.

Scowling, she sprang off the bed and grabbed her toiletries. She needed a shower. A long one. She would scrub away his scent.

She didn't notice that her wolf, deep inside, didn't want it gone at all.

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8:20 pm DD

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[744 words]

Chapter 262

Chapter 262

+5 Free Coins

Night had fallen over Mooncrest, the crisp autumn air carrying the faint tang pine and distant rain.

of

Riley had taken extra care with her appearance that evening, choosing a cream tweed jacket that hugged her frame, pale blue jeans, and spotless white sneakers. Her hair was swept into a playful bun, a touch of makeup brightening her already fresh features. Beside her, Mia adjusted her scarf as they stepped toward the door, ready to head out.

But before they could leave, the sound of a powerful engine rolled into the driveway. A sleek black Maybach eased to a stop. Lucien Duskgrave, Stormridge Pack's Alpha Prince, stepped out first, his gaze sharpening the instant it landed on Riley.

His eyes-wolf-sharp, commanding—lingered on her like a territorial claim.

“Where are you going?” His tone was cool but threaded with that quiet, possessive authority only an Alpha could wield.

Riley's lips curved. “Tomorrow is Carmen's birthday. Tonight Mia and I are taking her for longevity noodles.”

At that, Duke lifted a brow. “Miss Riley, Mia... why don't I drive you?”

The words were polite. The glint in his eyes was not.

Carmen, he thought, I wonder how you'll face me after last night.

At the gates of Ashmoor University, Carmen waited, the glow of the streetlamps painting her features in warm gold. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, scanning the road. Ten minutes passed before the Maybach appeared, sleek and imposing.

Her stomach tightened the moment she recognized it. Duke's car.

In an instant, heat bloomed under her skin as memories from the previous night surged—heat-slick skin, ragged breathing, the undeniable pull of their mate-bond snapping into place when neither of them had expected it. This morning, she'd stood in the shower until her skin flushed from the water, scrubbing at the marks Duke had left over her collarbone and down her ribs—scattered claims in the

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+5 Free Coins

shape of his hunger. At least he'd spared her neck; facing the world with a visible bite would've been unbearable.

She turned sharply on her heel, ready to flee back into the safety of the campus, but Riley's voice stopped her.

“Carmen!”

Her body went rigid. Slowly, she looked back to see the rear window rolled down. Riley and Mia sat inside, smiling warmly at her.

And in the driver's seat, Duke leaned back in a posture of deceptive ease, eyes locked on hers. The scent of him—pine smoke and something darker—seemed to cut through the autumn air, reaching for her wolf and tugging. His mouth curved in that slow, dangerous way she remembered from last night.

'So,' he said, voice a silken blade, "you're Mia's daughter. What a surprise."

Carmen's pulse skittered. She dropped her gaze, unable to meet the heat in his eyes. The bond thrummed between them, alive, insistent—her wolf bristling, torn between retreat and the urge to press closer.

Mia, oblivious, called out, "Come on, Carmen! Don't just stand there."

She swallowed hard, fighting the instinct to refuse. But when she opened the rear door, she found the back already full—Riley, Mia, and Lucien taking up the space. Lucien's gaze flicked over her once, unreadable, before he closed his eyes and settled back.

"Up front," Riley and Mia said together.

The moment Carmen opened the passenger door, her eyes landed on a bouquet of blood-red roses, still dewy, the scent rich and intoxicating.

Duke's smile deepened. "Heard it's your birthday tomorrow. On the way here, I thought you might like these. For you, Carmen." He put deliberate weight on for you, letting the bond hum through every syllable.

The heat that surged to her ears was instant and impossible to hide. She gathered the roses into her arms, using them as a shield against his gaze.

"...I like them," she managed, her voice low, before staring determinedly out the window.

2/3

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+5 Free Coins

The Maybach glided into motion, the silence between them thick as the night outside. But Duke's attention never wavered, his wolf prowling just beneath his skin. Every

flicker of her scent, every restless shift in her seat fed that primal satisfaction—she might pretend otherwise, but the bond was there, burning in both of them.

And he intended to see how far she could run before she realized there was no outrunning a mate.

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+5 Free Coins

Duke's fingers tapped lightly on the steering wheel, the rhythm casual, yet there was nothing casual about the tension simmering inside the car.

Beside him, Carmen clutched the bouquet of deep crimson roses against her chest as if it were a shield, their scent mingling with the intoxicating pull of Duke's scent that seemed to fill every corner of the vehicle. She kept her gaze fixed out the window, but the awareness between them was a living, breathing thing—raw, electric, undeniable. The bond thrummed in the air, tugging at her wolf, reminding her who sat only inches away.

Just when she thought she could endure the ride in strained silence, Duke moved. His right arm slid onto the center console with lazy precision, but the shift was deliberate. In the next heartbeat, his palm found the curve of her waist—her soft, delicate waist his wolf had already claimed as his—and his fingers pressed into the hollow of her back. A slow, teasing knead sent a jolt of heat tearing through her body.

A breathless sound escaped her before she could stop it, low and unguarded.

Her head snapped toward him, eyes wide, but Duke's gaze stayed trained on the road, his face the picture of innocence. Only the faintest curve at the corner of his mouth betrayed him, and his hand remained exactly where it was—possessive, unyielding, infuriating.

Carmen's heart raced, her wolf straining toward him even as her mind screamed for space. She bit down hard on her lip, fighting to keep her breathing steady. She couldn't let Riley or Mia, seated in the back with Lucien Duskgrave, notice anything amiss.

But Mia's voice still cut into the moment.

"Carmen, are you alright?"

"I'm fine-just... the roses, a thorn pricked me," Carmen blurted, tilting the flowers so they hid Duke's hand from view.

He gave a soft, private chuckle, his eyes glinting with the kind of mischief only a mate could get away with.

The rest of the ride stretched on like an eternity, each second a battle against the

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pull of the bond and the heat in her blood. By the time they reached the restaurant, Carmen's skin was damp with a fine sheen of sweat.

+10 Free Coins

The moment the car stopped, she was out the door, her movements quick and almost frantic.

"Carmen, slow down," Mia called after her, but Carmen only tossed over her shoulder, "I'll just... be in the restroom."

Inside, she splashed cold water over her face, gripping the sink and watching her reflection-flushed cheeks, wild eyes, and that traitorous tremor in her hands.

Get a grip, she told herself. He's just a wolf. Your mate. The one whose scent is under your skin. The one who-damn it—shouldn't be able to rattle you like this.

When she finally stepped out, she didn't get far before colliding with a solid wall of heat and muscle.

Duke.

His arm came around her instantly, locking her against him as if he'd been waiting there just for this. "Well now," he murmured, his voice a low rumble against her ear, "throwing yourself into my arms already, little wolf?"

His breath slid over the sensitive skin of her neck, and Carmen's wolf shivered at the intimate burn of it. She shoved at his chest, but his hold only tightened.

"You just can't leave me alone, can you?" she hissed, her voice trembling with equal parts fury and something far more dangerous.

He didn't answer. Instead, with the kind of effortless strength that only an Beta- blooded wolf could wield, he backed her into the nearest restroom stall. The door clicked shut behind them, sealing them in a small, charged space that felt far too

warm.

"Duke!" she snapped, her chest rising and falling sharply. "This is the women's restroom-"

"No one's here," he said smoothly, his nose brushing through her hair, inhaling deeply as if he were starved for her scent. His wolf pushed forward, sending a pulse down the bond that curled hot in her belly.

Her hands pressed against him, but he caught them easily, pinning them above her

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head against the stall wall. The proximity made the bond blaze to life, his heat seeping into her, his presence filling every inch of her awareness.

"What do you want?" she demanded, though her voice cracked under the weight of his nearness.

His lips curled into a slow, wicked smile. "What I want? You know damn well. Or did you think you could use me, take everything I gave you last night, and then walk away?" His voice was rough, a dangerous growl beneath the words, and his eyes glowed faintly with the feral light of his wolf.

“That-” she began, cheeks burning. “That was an accident. We can just... pretend nothing happened.”

His laugh was low and humorless. “An accident? No, little wolf. That was fate. That was the bond snapping into place. And I’m not letting you forget it.”

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DD

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[753 words]

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Under the dim lighting of the restaurant’s washroom, Duke’s voice was low and edged with a dangerous growl.

“Carmen, do I look like the kind of male who gets used and tossed aside?”

His words cut straight through her, leaving her momentarily speechless. The bond between them thrummed-hot, demanding, relentless-making it impossible to think clearly.

The truth stung. Last night, she had been the one insisting on drinking, pushing past her limits until the liquor burned away her inhibitions. Most of the night was a haze, blurred by alcohol, but one image stood in stark, humiliating clarity: herself, straddling him, moving with a hunger she couldn’t disguise.

She winced inwardly.

Spirits above... she’d been starving.

Starving enough to throw herself at a male she’d once assumed was completely uninterested in females-worse, her mate.

Heat scorched her cheeks, and she turned her head away, unable to meet Duke's piercing gaze.

"I... I didn't mean to."

Duke's lips curved in a humorless smile. He remembered all too well her slurred confession-how she'd told him she'd fallen for him the moment they met. No wonder she'd been so reckless in bed, no wonder she had tasted of pure, unrestrained desire.

Truth be told, last night had been unlike anything he'd ever experienced. The raw passion, the way their wolves had all but tangled in the bond-it had lodged in his mind and refused to leave.

And now? The female who had set his blood on fire wanted to pretend nothing happened.

Unacceptable.

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Without warning, Duke dipped his head and claimed her mouth in a hard, searing kiss.

Carmen froze, eyes going wide. She was about to push him away when footsteps and voices echoed from the washroom entrance. Her pulse spiked. She shot him a warning glance-someone was coming.

Duke didn't release her. In fact, his hand slid boldly beneath her shirt, fingers brushing heated skin as if daring her to react.

The footsteps came closer, accompanied by the shrill gossip of two unfamiliar female voices.

16

"...I swear I just saw Riley."

"Wasn't she locked up?"

“Looks like she’s out now.”

“Who would’ve thought the Mooncrest Academy’s star scholar would end up a killer? Guess you can’t judge by appearances. Back then, she acted all sweet and quiet. What a fraud.”

“Ha! Being smart doesn’t help now. She’s just another criminal. In high school, she was so full of herself-turned down the class heartthrob like he wasn’t worth her time. Bet she regrets it now.”

“You mean him? He’s doing great these days-he’s a sales manager at the

Duskgrave Corporation. I wonder how she’ll feel when she finds out at tomorrow’s reunion.”

“Oh, she’s not in the reunion group chat, so she probably doesn’t know. Should we invite her?”

“Yes! I want to see her face when she realizes what she missed out on.”

Their laughter rang sharp and cruel before fading as they walked away.

Every word had reached Carmen’s ears-and Duke’s.

Her wolf bristled, claws itching to rake into those two petty females. She would have stormed out right then and there if Duke’s arms hadn’t still been locked

around her.

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When the footsteps finally faded, she hissed through clenched teeth, “Let me go, Duke.”

He didn’t loosen his grip, his face buried against her hair, inhaling her scent like an addict feeding a craving.

Frustration flared, and she drove her knee sharply upward.

“Ungh!” He doubled over slightly with a low groan, the bond between them humming with his mix of pain and desire.

“Carmen, are you trying to murder your own mate?”

She ignored him, shoving the door open and storming out. Her voice was a snarl.

“Those two bitches talking behind someone’s back-stand the hell still and face me!”

But by the time she reached the hall, they were gone.

Still seething, she stalked toward the restaurant. As soon as she stepped in, she spotted them-two overpainted, smug-looking females-standing in front of Riley, their smiles dripping with venom.

Her hands curled into fists. Every instinct screamed at her to put them in their place, but with Riley and Mia watching, she forced herself to smooth her clothes and rein in her wolf.

By the time she crossed the floor, the pair had turned and walked away.

“Riley,” Carmen said, voice still tight with suppressed fury, “what did they just say to you?”

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[769 words]

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“They’re my old classmates from Mooncrest Academy,” Riley said softly, her gaze calm but distant. “They wanted to invite me to tomorrow’s reunion, but tomorrow is your birthday... so I refused.”

Carmen’s shoulders eased at once, the tension uncoiling from her chest.

She had been ready to tear someone apart if Riley had been bullied.

As long as she was around, no one in the Nine Realms could lay a finger on Riley without paying the price.

“Carmen...” Riley tilted her head, eyes narrowing slightly as they studied her lips.

“What?” Carmen asked, puzzled.

“Your mouth... it’s so red. A little swollen, too.”

Carmen froze.

The bond between her and Duke hummed faintly at the back of her mind, and she could almost feel his smugness through it. That damn wolf...

It had to be from when Duke had kissed her in the restroom earlier.

She wanted to say she’d been bitten by a stray mutt, but she knew Riley wouldn’t believe it.

“...Got bitten by a mosquito,” she said instead, tone flat.

Duke, of course, chose that exact moment to stroll past, his voice a lazy drawl. “Guess that mosquito’s got taste... managed to bite your upper and lower lips evenly. Perfectly symmetrical.”

Carmen’s jaw twitched. She didn’t dignify him with a response.

A stifled laugh escaped Riley, and even Mia covered her mouth to hide her grin.

Lucien Duskgrave raised a brow at Duke but didn’t say a word—those storm-dark Alpha eyes said enough. He’d already pieced the truth together.

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The five of them settled at the table.

Soon, steaming bowls of long-life noodles were placed before them. Carmen pushed the noodles around with her chopsticks, but each mouthful tasted like ash. Her appetite was gone.

They were halfway through the meal when Lucien spoke, his voice smooth but commanding. “After dinner, Duke will take Miss Carmen back to her dorm.”

Carmen’s head shot up, eyes wide. “Alpha Lucien... and you?”

“I’ve already called for the driver. He’ll take the rest of us.”

Her pulse kicked into overdrive. This was a trap.

They had all arrived together—so why in the Moon’s name was she suddenly being singled out to leave with her mate?

She tried for diplomacy. “I can call a cab myself. Duke should take you all instead - you’re more than one person.”

Before Lucien could reply, Riley’s voice cut in gently. “Carmen, last night there was a brutal assault near the Silverfang Den. The victim’s eyes were gouged, tongue cut out, limbs destroyed... Found at dawn. Doctors tried to save her, but she didn’t survive.”

Her tone was calm, but her eyes brimmed with worry. “It’s not safe at night. Let Duke take you then we’ll all feel better.”

Mia nodded in firm agreement. “She’s right. I know you don’t like troubling others, but your safety matters most.”

Carmen forced a faint smile. If only they knew... the “brutal killer” they spoke of was sitting right at their table, quietly sipping tea.

She hadn’t meant to kill her outright last night-she’d wanted her to live in agony. Shame she hadn’t lasted till morning.

She kept her head lowered, fingers moving under the table to send a quick message to Jace Hale.

Fifteen minutes later, a reply lit her screen-he was already outside.

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Setting down her chopsticks, she said, “Mia, Riley, I’m done. You keep eating, but I have to get back before curfew.”

Riley’s smile was warm. “Alright. Tomorrow, after class, we’re celebrating your birthday at the Silverfang Den.”

Carmen nodded, rising from her seat and striding toward the door.

Duke was on his feet instantly, following her scent trail.

But when he stepped out of the private room, Carmen was already sliding onto the back of Jace's motorcycle.

His wolf growled low, a flash of fury surging through the bond. "Carmen! Stop!"

She didn't even glance back, only gripping Jace's waist and saying, "Drive."

Jace smirked over his shoulder at Duke, eyes gleaming with challenge, before lifting one hand to flip him off. Then the bike's engine roared, and they vanished into the night like a streak of silver lightning.

Duke's lips curled into a cold smile. "Run, little wolf. You won't get far from me."

The motorcycle tore through the streets, night wind whipping past. Carmen pressed closer to Jace's back, her body moving with the lean of the bike.

"Hey, Carmen," Jace shouted over the wind, "if you're feeling better tonight, want me to take you to a bar?"

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Carmen's reply was ice-cold.

"Not interested."

"Then where do you want to go?"

"Take me back to Mooncrest Academy."

Jace Hale's jaw tightened. "It's still early. How about-"

He didn't get to finish.

A sudden, blinding glare burst from behind them, followed by the deep, predatory growl of a powerful engine-low and guttural, like the snarl of a Beta on the hunt.

The vehicle was fast-too fast-closing the distance in mere heartbeats until it ran neck and neck with Jace's bike.

Carmen turned her head, and her gaze locked with Duke's.

The mate-bond snapped taut between them, a sharp, invisible tether that yanked at her chest. Her wolf stirred restlessly under her skin, heart pounding against her ribs. She could almost taste his scent on the wind-oak, smoke, and something darkly electric that made her want to lean in even as she cursed herself.

Damn it. Was he some kind of cursed shadow? Why couldn't she shake him off?

"Faster," she urged, voice sharp with urgency but laced with something she hated to admit-fear, and not entirely of him catching up. "Just don't let him catch us. I don't care where we go."

Jace twisted the throttle, and the bike roared, surging forward toward the outer ring road.

But Duke's black Maybach was relentless, its speed rivaling the bike's with the same predatory precision she'd felt in their bond-a Beta bearing down on his

mate.

Even through the glare of his headlights, she felt his gaze like claws down her spine, the weight of his claim pressing into her soul. The tether between them

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burned hotter, pulling, demanding.

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In one fluid, aggressive motion, Duke swung the Maybach into a sweeping arc, tires screaming against asphalt, sparks spitting from the friction.

The car slid into their path, blocking them entirely, forcing Jace to a halt.

Jace yanked off his helmet and strode toward the car, fury in every step.

“What the hell is your problem?” he snarled.

Duke didn't waste words. He stepped out, swung, and his fist connected with Jace's jaw, sending the rider sprawling.

Before Jace could recover, Duke's boot drove into his ribs with a thud that made Carmen flinch. The mate-bond flared in her chest at the violence, her wolf baring its teeth in a confused snarl—half anger, half primal satisfaction at seeing another male bested.

Without another glance, Duke stalked toward her.

She glared, amber eyes burning.

“What the hell do you want? I told you already—last night was an accident. We pretend it never happened, and I'm fine with that. You're a grown man; stop being so damn petty!”

Her words came fast, defensive, but the bond didn't care. The air between them was thick with his scent, with the low thrum of their connection.

He stopped in front of her, reached out, and caught the back of her head in a grip that was all Beta—unyielding, certain. The mate-bond surged like lightning down her spine.

His mouth crashed onto hers.

The taste of him hit her like a drug, her wolf pushing forward with a sharp, needy growl in her chest. She wrenched away, slapping him hard.

“Enough! What the hell is wrong with you?”

Duke's head turned from the blow, but a slow smirk curved his mouth. His pupils were blown wide, the bond sparking like a wildfire between them.

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He bent, scooping her up over his shoulder with ease.

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“Put me down! You lunatic!” she shouted, pounding her fists against his back. Her wolf was a traitor, clawing to get closer even as she fought him.

The Maybach's headlights cast them in harsh white light-Duke's tailored suit catching the gleam, Carmen's hair and skirt whipping wildly in the wind, her scent tangling with his until it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began.

The rest of the world blurred into nothing. The bond had no room for anyone else.

Duke reached the car, yanked open the back door, and tossed her inside.

Before she could scramble away, he was there, bracing over her, the heat of his body caging her in. The locks clicked shut, final as a mate-mark.

Carmen's breaths came quick, shallow, her pulse echoing in her ears.

"What... what do you want from me?"

His eyes burned into hers. "What I want? You can't feel it?"

His voice was low and rough, the growl of a wolf barely holding himself back. The bond between them pulsed, alive, urging her to submit, to stop fighting what they

were.

She turned her head, refusing to meet his gaze.

A cold laugh rumbled from him.

"Still defiant? Then I'll make you listen."

His hand slid along her side, and her wolf shivered at the contact even as her mind screamed no.

"Stop! You're insane-Jace is still outside."

Duke's gaze darkened, the Beta edge in his voice sharpening.

"Perfect," he murmured, his scent wrapping around her like chains. "Let him watch. Let him see you're mine."

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Carmen's amber eyes blazed with defiance, her voice sharp as a fang's edge. "You've got no shame. I still have mine."

Duke's low chuckle was a dangerous sound, carrying the weight of a predator who knew exactly where the prey's escape routes were. "Afraid?" he drawled.

His fingers brushed along her cheek, the warmth of his touch sliding down to the hollow of her collarbone. The contact carried the faint crackle of the bond between them—an electric hum that no amount of denial could sever. It thrummed in her veins, hot and dizzying, as if her wolf was betraying her by leaning into it.

Color flooded her face, spreading down her neck. Her breathing stuttered, much to Duke's satisfaction.

"Want me?" His smirk was a dark, knowing slash against his face.

She cursed him in her heart. She had thought Duke was the composed, polished Beta who served the Stormridge Pack's Alpha Prince. But beneath the crisp suit and the refined manners was a wolf who didn't care for rules—a wolf who would take what he claimed.

Grinding her teeth, she spat, "You need to stop. I'm not even a man—why do you hound me like this?"

That actually made him blink, caught off guard. "You're not a man, no," he said slowly, his tone dipping lower. "If you were, I wouldn't want you."

Carmen narrowed her eyes, recalling what she'd seen before. "Don't lie. I saw you with that pretty-boy male wolf from another pack, all cozy. You still want to claim you're not into men? Or are you both ways? Do you just... eat whatever you can catch?"

Her disgust was sharp enough to cut. "Ancestors, you're sick."

Duke actually laughed—rich and dangerous. "We've already been together, Carmen. You still can't tell I'm a straight wolf?"

His smirk turned sharper. "Looks like I wasn't thorough enough last night. Maybe I should fix that—" His hand slipped boldly under the hem of her skirt.

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She gasped, grabbing his wrist. "Stop. Please."

+10 Free Coins

Before Duke could reply, the pounding of fists against the car window shattered the moment." Duke! Let her go!" Jace Hale's voice was raw, desperate. "If you touch her, I swear-

Duke's hand stilled, but his attention didn't shift to Jace. Instead, he leaned closer to Carmen, his voice a low growl meant for her wolf's ears alone."You don't like it here? Then we'll go home. Finish this properly."

In one smooth motion, he ripped his silk tie from his collar and bound her wrists. The bond's pull only intensified with her struggle, the mate-thread tightening like a living thing between them.

"Behave," he murmured, his breath warm against her ear. "Or I'll take you right here. And your little knight outside will get a front-row seat."

Carmen turned her face away, refusing to look at him. The mate bond might have been burning molten through her, but she clung to Riley's story-how believing in a mate had nearly destroyed her. She would not fall into that trap.

Duke's hand ruffled her hair in mock affection. "Good girl."

Then he straightened, pushed open the door, and stepped out.

Jace was there instantly, eyes bloodshot, fists clenched. "What did you do to her?"

Duke's gaze was cold steel. "She's my mate. My woman. What I do with her is none of your business."

The word mate hit Jace like a punch, his wolf snarling in protest. He swung, but Duke's look froze him mid-step. It was the kind of look that came from a wolf who had fought, killed, and walked away without a scratch.

"Still sore from the beating I gave you earlier?" Duke's voice was a lethal purr.

Jace didn't move as Duke slid back into the driver's seat. The Maybach's engine growled to life, and moments later the car was nothing but a streak in the night.

Inside, Carmen sat up as best she could, wrists still bound. "Take me back to Ashmoor Academy."

"Home," Duke corrected, eyes never leaving the road. "Where we'll finish what was

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started."

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Carmen's jaw clenched, the mate-bond thrumming between them like a chain she wanted to break, even as her wolf refused to let go.

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[1,380 words]

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Chapter 268

Riley's POV

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I walked side by side with Lucien along the quiet street, the night air cool against my skin. Mia had already been sent home by the driver, and for once I allowed myself the luxury of breathing freely, of pretending that I could simply be a she-wolf taking a stroll rather than someone whose world had been torn apart.

Neither of us spoke, yet the silence wasn't uncomfortable. It lingered between us like the soft brush of fur against fur, steady and grounding. We walked until the road carried us to a bridge, and there my steps faltered.

The breeze teased strands of hair across my face as I leaned against the railing, eyes drawn to the dark river below. The sound of the water brought memories crashing back—memories of the night when despair had nearly claimed me. I had stood in this very spot, ready to let the current swallow me whole.

“Lucien,” I whispered, my voice carrying the weight of that moment, “do you remember this place? If I hadn’t met you here that night... I would have been gone.”

I turned to him, earnest gratitude in my gaze. “You’re my savior. My fated turning point. My... benefactor.”

The Stormridge Alpha prince’s usually cold expression softened, his tone gentled like a wolf brushing its mate with his muzzle. “Do you recall what I told you that night?”

I furrowed my brow, remembering. “You said life is like a stage play. That sometimes all it takes is one more witness for the story to change. You said you wanted to see how the play would unfold if I chose to live.”

My throat tightened. “At the time, I didn’t believe you. I said my play was already ruined, not worth watching.”

Lucien’s lips curved into a rare smile, a warmth that cut through the night like fire in a den of shadows. “And yet here you stand. The darkest part has already passed. The best acts are always saved for last, Riley. You’ve endured the worst—now it’s time to claim the happiness that waits.”

His words should have soothed me, but a sharp pang twisted in my chest. If only

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my body weren’t broken. If only time hadn’t been stolen from me. The truth—my truth—was that my life was measured in grains of sand slipping far too quickly through an hourglass.

I lowered my head to hide the ache in my eyes.

Lucien’s senses were razor sharp. I felt his attention on me, the way an Alpha always perceives the smallest shift in another’s emotions. His lips parted, as if he would speak comfort-

“Riley?”

The sound of that voice froze me. My head snapped up, and my gaze collided with Maddox.

He sat in a wheelchair, a blanket draped across useless legs, a file clutched in his hands. His hair was slicked back neatly, his face groomed, his frame wrapped in a black suit. It was almost impossible to reconcile this polished man with the broken wolf I had once seen digging scraps from a trash bin.

Lucien’s eyes narrowed dangerously. He, too, remembered the disgrace Maddox had fallen into.

But Maddox’s gaze was fixed on me alone. Possessiveness burned in his eyes, the same suffocating claim he’d always tried to have on me. “Riley,” he breathed, relief and hunger twining in his tone. “You don’t know how I’ve searched for you.”

The fragile peace of my evening shattered. Disgust curdled in my gut. Of all wolves to cross paths with, it had to be him.

I seized Lucien’s hand, fingers tightening around his warmth, and turned to leave.

But Maddox shoved his chair forward, blocking my path with predatory speed despite his crippled body. “Riley, are you not glad to see me?”

My laugh was sharp, bitter. “Maddox, you framed me. You let me rot in Wolf dungeons for five years to protect Scarlett. You destroyed me, Glad? No, I despise you.”

His smile twitched, faltered, but then smoothed over with practiced charm. “That was the past. I didn’t know the truth back then, I swear it. We used to be mated, you and I. You know how deeply I cared for you.”

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“Cared?” I spat. “If I hadn't been blinded by bonds, I'd have seen the rot under your skin long ago. You were never worth the time, the coin, or the devotion I gave you.”

The rejection twisted his expression into something ugly. For all his polished surface, Maddox's soul had already warped beyond recognition.

His gaze slid to Lucien, towering and unyielding at my side. Hatred flared. "So that's it. You won't accept me because of him?"

His voice rose, venom dripping with every word. "When did you become so faithless, Riley? I saw another male take you to the healers for a pregnancy test not long ago. And now this? Did you cast him aside along with the bastard pup, only to crawl into this Alpha's arms? Is that who you are now?"

A growl rumbled low in Lucien's chest, the Stormridge prince's eyes flashing with a deadly glint. His hand twitched, ready to strike.

I stopped him with a touch, slipping my arm around him, pressing close in silent claim. Shaking my head, I met Maddox's fury with calm, almost serene defiance. "If that's what you want to believe, then yes. Think whatever you like."

I watched the words land. He had expected me to shrink, to defend myself, to deny. Instead, I smiled-light, content, as though his accusations meant nothing. As though I had chosen another male and never looked back.

That smile drove him mad. Rage blazed across his features, trembling through his crippled frame. His fingers clawed at the wheelchair's arms until the metal creaked under his grip.

But I no longer cared. Maddox was nothing more than a ghost of my past, a broken wolf gnashing his teeth at shadows. My heart, my loyalty, my fragile hope for the future-those belonged elsewhere now.

And I had no intention of ever giving him another piece of me.

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[954 words]

Chapter 269

Chapter 269

Third Person's POV

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Maddox forced himself to swallow down the storm of rage clawing inside his chest. His hands tightened around the worn leather of his wheelchair, but when he finally spoke, his voice was deceptively calm-almost coaxing.

“Riley,” he said, his tone heavy with a false patience, “you’ll never find happiness with a man like him. You’ve never fought in the real world, never bled in its shadows. You don’t understand how vicious men of his kind can be. Alphas born into power-especially one like Lucien Duskgrave-don’t see women as mates, but as passing playthings.”

His gaze swept over her with deliberate contempt, pausing on the faint scars that told the story of her suffering. The corners of his mouth curled into a sneer. “Look at you. A branded criminal, a cripple cast out by the world. Do you truly believe an Alpha Prince would see you as anything more than a novelty? You’re nothing but a fleeting curiosity to him. Once the shine wears off, he’ll discard you like spoiled meat.”

Maddox’s voice softened as he leaned forward, eyes gleaming with a twisted hunger disguised as tenderness. “But me, Riley-we were raised in the same shadows. You limp, I’ve lost my legs. We are the same. We were meant for each other. Have you forgotten the years I stood beside you? The devotion I gave you?”

His words dripped with the poisoned sweetness of manipulation, meant to bind her in chains of guilt and memory.

Riley’s laugh cut through the night like the snap of a wolf’s jaws. It was cold, merciless, and sharp enough to bleed him. “Devotion? You call it devotion to throw me to the dungeons of Wolf’s justice system, to let me rot for five years while you played loyal dog to Scarlett?”

Her silver eyes glinted under the moonlight, the disdain in her gaze as sharp as a blade. “You knew me, Maddox. You knew who I was, yet you turned your back, poured filth over my name, and chose her lies over my truth. That is not devotion. That is betrayal.”

She stepped closer, her voice low, laced with venom. “And don’t you dare compare yourself to me. I may limp, but my spirit isn’t crippled. You? You’re a wolf who chewed off his own leg to save himself, then expects others to worship his

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cowardice. I wouldn’t lower myself to call you a mate.”

+10 Free Coins

The words hit Maddox like claws raking across raw flesh. His blood surged, his vision darkened at the edges, and his breath grew ragged. His body trembled violently, as though his fury might rip him from his chair.

“Riley,” he hissed, his mask of patience cracking. “You’re ungrateful. Everything I said, everything I’ve done-it was for your sake! If it were anyone else, I wouldn’t waste a breath.”

Riley’s eyes narrowed, and a cruel smile tugged at her lips. She looked at him as though he were nothing more than a pitiful, broken wolf howling into the void.

‘If it were anyone else, Maddox, they’d have already ripped your throat out for daring to spit such poison. The only reason I don’t dirty my hands is because you’re not worth the bloodstain.’

Her voice dropped, laced with venomous finality. “Let this be the last time we cross paths. If fate throws us together again, don’t speak to me. Even hearing your voice nakes my skin crawl. You sicken me to my very bones. Believe me when I say this: I despise you. I despise you so much that even a single glance in your direction Feels like filth on my eyes.”

Without another word, Riley turned, her hand slipping into Lucien Duskgrave’s. The Alpha Prince towered over her with an aura of storm-forged steel, his presence radiating silent menace toward the crippled wolf in the chair. Together, they walked away into the night, their silhouettes merging into the shadows of Stormridge’s streets.

Maddox sat frozen, his fingers crushing the armrests of his wheelchair until his knuckles blanched bone-white. His chest heaved as he watched Riley vanish with another male, his heart bleeding with bitter rage.

She was gone. The girl who once gave him everything-her loyalty, her devotion, her heart-had slipped from his grasp as though she had never belonged to him at all. And worse still, she had given the pieces of herself that once belonged to Maddox... to Lucien.

The thought gnawed at him like carrion crows feasting on a corpse. He couldn’t accept it. He wouldn’t. Even if Riley carried the stain of another’s child, even if her body and soul were no longer untouched, Maddox’s obsession had sunk too deep to ever let go.

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+10 Free Coins

His jaw clenched until his teeth ground together, and he gripped the thick envelope on his lap with such violence that the paper nearly tore. Within it lay his key to clawing his way back into power-an ugly divorce case, his client a sales manager under the mighty Duskgrave conglomerate. If Maddox won, the client would devour his wife's fortune, leaving Maddox with over a million in reward... and a foothold within the pack's corporate empire.

His lips twisted into a snarl, the madness in his voice a growl not meant for mortal

ears.

"Riley... you won't walk away from me. Not into his arms. Not into anyone's. If I can't have you, I'll burn the very world around you until you have nowhere left to run."

The night carried his whispered vow away, but the madness in his eyes burned brighter than the moon overhead.

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[706 words]

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Chapter 270

Lucien's POV

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The night air was cool, heavy with the lingering scent of asphalt and city smoke. Riley walked beside me, her shadow stretching long under the streetlamps, thin and fragile like she might disappear if I looked away too long.

I halted, my instincts screaming that if I didn't make her see the truth now, I might lose her to the poison Maddox had tried to pour into her head.

I turned her gently by the shoulders, forcing her to face me. The light caught her profile, gilding her soft features in gold. She looked too breakable for this world, too pure for the venom of a man like him. My chest ached with the need to protect her.

“Don’t listen to him,” I said, voice low but steady. “To me, you’ve always been more than enough. I’m not here to play games with you, Riley.”

The words burned my throat, because I remembered the truth: at first, I had approached her because my grandmother favored her, because I was sick of women clawing at me for status and power. Keeping Riley close had been... convenient.

But somewhere along the way, convenience had turned into something else. Being with her soothed the restless storm inside me. Her quiet, her gentleness, her unshakable honesty—every movement, every smile, carried a pull I couldn’t resist.

Her amber eyes widened faintly at my words. She smiled, but it was thin, strained. “I didn’t take Maddox’s words to heart.”

I didn’t believe her. She’d endured years of scorn, branded a cripple, a convict, less than worthy of anyone’s regard. She wore her scars like armor, but I could see the crack beneath.

And I hated it. I hated that she still thought she wasn’t worthy of me.

Her lashes lowered, hiding her eyes, and my wolf growled deep inside me. That look—the way she folded into herself—meant she was planning something. Distance, Escape.

No.

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Not from me.

“Your leg must hurt after walking this long,” I said softly, crouching without hesitation. “Get on. I’ll carry you.”

She froze. The silence stretched between us, thick with her unshed tears.

+10 Free Coins

Her family had never cared for her pain. Not Kael Vale, who mocked her limp on the day she was freed. Not Alpha Alaric, who cast her out of Ebonclaw Pack as if her blood meant nothing.

It had always been my family-the Stormridge Pack, my grandmother Matriarch Duskgrave, Mrs. Beck in our kitchens-who saw her, who tried to ease her suffering.

And still, she tried to deny herself even the smallest comfort.

Her voice cracked as she whispered, "Lucien, I—"

"Don't," I cut her off, sharper than I intended, but I couldn't let her speak the words I feared. Words of farewell. "Just... get on."

After a heartbeat's hesitation, she did. She leaned into me, light but trembling, her arms settling around my shoulders.

I rose easily, her weight no burden at all. To me, she was precious, not fragile. My wolf pressed closer to the surface, satisfied with the contact, possessive of the way she melted against my back.

The cedar scent of my own skin wrapped around her, and I felt her breathing slow. Her body loosened, sinking into me like she finally trusted the strength that held her.

I carried her down the long stretch of road, step after steady step, and the silence between us was thick but not uncomfortable. She fell asleep against me, her breaths even, her heart beating in rhythm with mine.

By the time Caelum Knox pulled up with the Rolls Royce, Riley was gone to dreams.

I lowered her into the back seat as if she were spun glass, adjusting her until she looked comfortable. My fingers lingered on her cheek longer than they should have, tracing the warmth of her skin.

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Mine. My wolf rumbled in approval.

+10 Free Coins

But even as I closed the door quietly, a knot coiled tighter in my chest. Because I knew-Riley was already planning to leave me.

And the thought of that... made something primal inside me snarl with defiance.

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[1,063 words]

Chapter 271

Chapter 271

Riley's POV

+10 Free Coins

The next morning, sunlight poured through the windows, warm and bright.

Today was Carmen's birthday. Mia and I had woken early and climbed into Lucien's sleek black car, headed for the grand Silverfang Den.

The Den wasn't just any place-it was the most luxurious hotel in all of Mooncrest, a stronghold where only the most powerful of Stormridge Pack's allies and elites gathered. Its very walls carried an air of dominance, as if even the stone recognized the wolves who passed through.

When we arrived, Lucien leaned down to me, his voice low but firm. "Riley, you and Mia go ahead to private room 101. I have a client here I must see first. When I'm done, I'll join you."

I nodded. "Go on, Lucien. Don't worry about us. It's still early, we'll wait in 101."

He gave me one last look, as if reluctant to leave me even for a breath, then strode off with the silent confidence only an Alpha Prince could wear.

Mia and I followed the attendant down a long corridor lined with crimson carpets soft enough to swallow each step. The walls glittered with gilded sconces, and the air smelled faintly of oak and amber-a scent that screamed wealth and old power.

When the attendant pushed open the door to 101, my breath caught.

A massive redwood table gleamed under the light, polished smooth as still water, its surface adorned with arrangements of fresh roses and delicately placed silverware. Every detail whispered of refinement. On the walls hung paintings I was certain cost more than I had earned in my entire life, their strokes powerful and commanding. Above us, a crystal chandelier rained soft light down, turning the entire space into something out of a palace.

Even Mia, who had spent decades serving in the Ebonclaw Pack's manor, froze at the sight. Her hands fidgeted nervously. "This place... it's too fine. I almost don't dare sit."

I smiled gently at her. "Don't worry, Mia. Lucien chose this for us. We'll sit, as he intended."

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have set foot in a place like this. Wolves like me weren't meant to breathe air this the strange weight in my chest. If not for him, I would never rarefied.

We sat quietly, waiting for Lucien to return. Barely five minutes passed before I caught the echo of footsteps outside, too loud, too many, the careless shuffle of wolves who had no respect for silence. Voices followed, brash and mocking.

"Was it 101 or 107?"

"No, definitely 101. The 'class idol' booked it. He's already a sales manager for Duskgrave Holdings right after graduating-can you imagine?"

"Duskgrave Holdings! The capital's most feared Alpha line. For him to already hold such a title-gods, his power must be something else."

Laughter followed, smug and sharp. "He even secured a Stormridge Super-VIP room. That's not something just anyone can touch."

I stiffened. Stormridge Pack's most exclusive rooms didn't open for outsiders. Whoever this wolf was, he was either bluffing—or had made himself useful to the Duskgraves.

The door burst open without so much as a knock. A crowd spilled inside—men in slick suits or carefully pressed casual clothes, hair greased and shining like wet fur. Heavy chains swung at their throats and watches gleamed on their wrists. The women trailed in after them, their dresses low-cut and glittering, shoulders bare, the air thick with their perfume. The scents clashed together—jasmine, musk, rose, synthetic sweetness—so heavy it clawed at my nose until I felt faint.

I blinked, caught between shock and disbelief. Why were they here—in our room?

They froze, too, when they saw me and Mia seated at the table.

The pause didn't last long. A woman in a scarlet dress sneered, her lips curling. "Riley? What are you doing here? Last night you turned down our invitation, said you were busy. And now you're already here before us?"

My stomach dropped. Recognition hit-the same wolf who had mocked me in the washroom yesterday.

Before I could answer, another in yellow chimed in, her voice dripping venom. "Some people love to pretend they're too pure for us, but the truth shows, doesn't

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+10 Free Coins

it? The moment she learned the idol was hosting at the Silverfang Den, she came running."

Her eyes rolled, her disdain sharp as claws. The others joined in, their gazes crawling over me with that same contempt.

The men, though-their stares were different. They drank me in, eyes flashing with the same hungry glint I had seen too many times before. Back in Mooncrest High, they used to whisper about me when they thought I couldn't hear-too thin, too pale, but still the prettiest in class. The kind of beauty that made them restless.

Now, after months of healing in Stormridge, my body had regained strength, my skin carried the glow of health again. My hair, black as raven feathers, flowed down my shoulders like silk. No jewelry, no heavy paints on my face-just me. But still, I felt the weight of their gaze, predatory and unashamed.

"Riley, you've only grown more beautiful since school," one murmured.

A scoff cut him off. "What good is beauty when she's a convict?"

That set the others off, cruel grins flashing.

"Ha! A female wolf doesn't need brains or honor. Even if she's crippled, or broken, there will always be males eager to breed her."

Laughter erupted, sharp and jeering, a sound that scraped against my bones.

Mia shot up from her seat, fury radiating off her small frame. “Enough! Get out! This room is not for the likes of you!”

The laughter faltered for a moment before turning meaner. They stared at her, eyes gleaming with scorn.

“Your room?” one man echoed, chuckling darkly. “This is a Stormridge Super-VIP suite. Not even the Alphas of smaller packs can book these. And you expect us to believe you two nobodies belong here?”

Another sneered at me, his words sharp as knives. “Riley Vale-always the pauper. In school you couldn’t even afford lunch. You’d sip cold water like a starved pup. We offered you leftovers, and you turned up your nose, like you were better than us. Always pretending.”

Their laughter returned, louder this time, filling the room like a pack of jackals

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circling blood.

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[750 words]

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Chapter 272

Riley’s POV

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The venom in their voices coiled around me like a nest of snakes.

“She’s always been filth. Now she dares strut in here like she belongs?” one of them sneered, spitting on the polished floor as though the very air I breathed offended him.

“Riley, just admit you crawled here to fawn over our golden boy. Stop pretending you’re above it. You’ve always been a fraud-playing saint while rotting underneath.”

“Brains don’t save a wolf with a blackened heart. Top of Mooncrest High or not— you ended up caged, a criminal. A disgrace.”

Their jeers swarmed like gnats, buzzing around me, relentless, insidious. They circled the table and, without hesitation, claimed the seats as if the space was theirs.

One swaggering brute, the reek of cheap cologne clinging to him like rot, dropped into the chair beside me. His hand slithered across my shoulder, fingers digging in like claws. His grin was a mask-lecherous, foul.

“Tell me, Riley. What do you crave? Steak, wine? I’ll buy you whatever you want. You look starved. After prison food, surely your pretty mouth hasn’t tasted anything fine.”

The dominance in his touch stung like an insult. My wolf snarled inside me. I whipped my arm, snapping his hand away with a force that made him stumble. My voice came low, cold, carrying the bite of steel:

“Keep your hands off me.”

The man’s face darkened instantly, rage boiling. He surged to his feet, jabbing a sausage-like finger inches from my face.

“You dare shame me in front of everyone? You should be grateful I even acknowledge you. Without me, you’ll never set foot in the Stormridge’s finest hall again!”

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A chorus rose in his defense.

+10 Free Coins

“Yeah! When Zao offers you favor, you kneel and thank him. You’re lucky he even looks at you.”

“Don’t forget—he may have scraped the bottom in Mooncrest’s exams, but he’s a foreman now. He commands wolves on sites, rakes in hundreds of thousands a year. More than you’ll ever see.”

Zao-the bloated fool, drunk on his own ego-preened under their praise. His hands flashed before me, heavy with gaudy gold rings. He shoved them under my nose like trophies, the gems catching the chandelier's light, as if their gleam could blind me into submission. Then, with a flourish, he slammed down his phone and a ring of keys—the BMW emblem winking like he'd just flung down the crown of a kingdom.

Mia sat stiff beside me, her discomfort rolling off her in waves, her hands twisting in her lap. My own disgust simmered hotter, tighter. Their noise was nothing but the clamor of carrion crows.

I pulled out my phone. Lucien's number sat pinned at the very top of my contacts, my one lifeline, my tether to strength. I was seconds from calling him when the brute moved fast.

Zao's hand shot out, snatching the device from me.

"What's this? A scrap of metal?" He sneered and, before I could react, he hurled it to the ground. The sound of shattering plastic and glass cracked through the air.

Pieces scattered across the plush carpet like bones picked clean.

The phone Lucien had given me.

A gift. A link to him. Precious. Sacred. And now, reduced to debris at the feet of jackals.

"Oh look at that-worthless junk. Breaks with a flick. What, did you drag it out of a scrapyard?" Zao's laughter was joined by the hyena howls of the others, their cruelty feeding off each other.

Something inside me snapped.

The wolf surged.

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10 Free Coins

My hand moved before thought. The slap rang sharp, echoing like a whip-crack across the chamber. His head snapped sideways, the bloom of my strike reddening his flesh instantly.

“You filthy swine,” I hissed, every word laced with venom. “Look at you. A pig parading in gold, stinking of arrogance. You think I’d take your cast-off scraps? Pathetic.”

Again and again, my palm met his face, each strike fueled by fury, by insult, by the sight of my shattered phone on the ground. His skin went scarlet under my blows, swelling, puffed and raw like some grotesque mask.

Gasps rippled through the room. The pack of jackals froze, their laughter strangled in their throats. Eyes wide, mouths slack, they stared in disbelief.

They hadn’t expected me to bite back.

But I was no one’s prey.

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Chapter 273

Riley’s POV

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In their memories, I had always been the quiet one—the shadow in the corner, the lone wolf no one cared to approach.

Back in Mooncrest High, every hour of my life was consumed by study. Even when the others went out during holidays, laughing and drinking under the neon lights of Mooncrest, I kept to myself.

Three years of silence. Three years of solitude.

If my face had been plain, if my grades hadn’t stood so far above theirs, perhaps I truly would’ve been invisible. But because I was beautiful and because I excelled, my refusal to blend in only marked me as more of an outcast. A wolf walking alone will always be noticed.

By the time my classmates snapped out of their shock, my hand had already struck across Zao's bloated face six times in quick succession. The sound of each slap cracked through the air like claws against bone.

Zao finally came to his senses, his piggish eyes bulging with fury.

"You filthy bitch," he roared, jowls shaking, "you dare lay a hand on me? You're asking for death!"

He raised his thick arm, ready to strike me down.

And then the door to the private room burst open.

"Who is Miss Carmen?" A woman's gentle voice carried into the space.

Every head turned. A hotel server stood there with a polished smile, pushing a silver cart. Atop it rested a cake so pristine it looked almost holy under the dim lights.

"Excuse me, who is Miss Carmen?" she asked again, her voice sweet but careful.

Kaman, dressed in blood-red silk, stepped forward at once, the pronunciations of 'Carmen' and 'Kaman' were so similar that she thought it was calling her name.. "That would be me."

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Her brow furrowed with confusion. "Is there some mistake?"

+10 Free Coins

The server glanced her over-her bright dress, her heavy perfume, the smug tilt of her chin-and clearly decided she must be the one. After all, the President of the Duskgrave Corporation himself had ordered the exclusive 101 suite for Miss Carmen's birthday.

No ordinary woman would dare turn away such honor.

The server's smile grew warmer, and she pushed the cake toward Kaman. "Miss Carmen, this is a gift from Silverfang Den, prepared especially for you. We wish you a happy birthday."

Kaman froze. Birthday? Hers wasn't for another two weeks.

But then her painted lips curled into a triumphant grin. Of course. It had to be the “class idol” from back in school-now a so-called rising star in the Duskgrave Corporation-who arranged this to impress her.

Yes. That had to be it.

Lifting her chin, Kaman pretended to accept the gesture graciously. “Thank your manager for me, then.”

The server bowed slightly, her tone unfalteringly polite. “It’s our pleasure.” And with that, she wheeled her cart away, leaving the air heavy with envy as all eyes turned toward Kaman.

But before the bitter taste of their flattery could fade, Zao’s rage boiled over. His meaty hand seized a platter from the table, and with a guttural snarl, he hurled it toward my head.

“Ungrateful whore! You dare humiliate me? I’ll smash you into the floor!”

My wolf reacted instantly. I reached for the fork on the table, ready to drive it into his arm if he came close enough. But before I could strike, Mia-my loyal Mia- threw herself between us.

The sound of shattering porcelain ripped through the room as the plate broke across her skull.

“Mia!” I cried out, my heart stuttering.

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+10 Free Coins

She staggered but held her ground, shielding me with her frail body. Blood trickled down her temple, yet she whispered fiercely, “Young Miss, I’m fine. Go. Find Alpha Lucien.”

Laughter erupted around us-cruel, mocking, the sound of carrion crows circling a wounded wolf.

“Did you hear that? She thinks she knows Alpha Lucien Duskgrave!” one of them jeered.

“Know him? Ha! The Alpha Prince of the Stormridge Pack? The man who stormed into Mooncrest half a year ago and claimed the East Expanse with a billion-gold investment? He’s Mooncrest’s most powerful wolf now. And she thinks she could be anywhere near him?”

“Pathetic. But if she begs Zao prettily enough, maybe our ‘class idol’ will let her watch Alpha Lucien from a distance.”

“Please. Our idol wouldn’t even waste a glance on trash like her.”

And then-

“I wouldn’t waste a glance on what kind of trash?”

The words cut through the room like a blade, cold and sharp.

The door swung open again, and a man stepped inside.

Dressed in a white plaid suit, his presence filled the room effortlessly. His features were striking, undeniably handsome-handsomer than any other man here. No wonder they had once called him the golden boy of Mooncrest High.

But my wolf bristled. His charm was surface-deep, like polished silver hiding rust beneath.

And I could already sense-the night was only just beginning.

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Chapter 274

Third Person’s POV

Aaron’s looks might have been above average, but nothing more.

+10 Free Coins

Mooncrest High was five years behind them now. Back then, even if his arrogance had already been budding, there had been a trace of youthful clarity in his eyes. Now, after stepping into the world of adults, his gaze was filled with cunning calculation. He wore the scent of a petty wolf who thought himself Alpha, radiating the smug air of a jackal that had tasted scraps of power.

“Aaron, you’ve finally arrived.”

Instantly, the group shifted, a pack of sycophants swarming toward him as if he were some crowned Alpha. Their voices dripped with flattery, tails metaphorically wagging.

Aaron played the part, his mouth forming humble phrases like “Everyone is too polite,” but his chin tilted skyward, pride swelling in every line of his posture.

“Aaron, why so late? We’ve been waiting forever.”

He smirked, savoring the moment. “I was speaking with Alpha Lucien about business.”

The claim was only half-true. He had indeed crossed paths with Lucien, but “speaking of business” was nothing more than standing on the fringes, fetching tea like a servant pup. He had merely lingered at the edges of Lucien’s meeting over the East District project until the Alpha had dismissed him without a second glance.

Yet fortune-or so he believed-had shifted. As Aaron left, he stumbled across a young she-wolf pushing an empty service cart.

He had asked, with all the pomp of self-importance, “Have my guests arrived?”

The girl had replied with dutiful respect, “Sir, are your friends the group of wolves in their twenties? There is a Miss Carmen among them?”

Aaron’s ears had pricked, and he’d nodded eagerly. “Yes, that’s them.”

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“Your friends are in Private Room 101.”

Aaron had blinked. Room 101? He had reserved 107.

“Not 107?”

+10 Free Coins

“Sir,” she explained patiently, “Alpha Lucien reserved 101. Your friends were moved there.”

The words struck him like a thunderclap. Alpha Lucien—reserving a suite for him? Aaron’s chest swelled, every nerve alight with giddy triumph. Lucien had noticed him. Lucien had cleared the way, granting him the Super VIP chamber in the heart of the Mooncrest’s most prestigious hotel.

Aaron didn’t question it. Why would he? His vanity devoured the thought whole. He strode toward 101 with head high, only to find his classmates already gathered there.

Their flattery rained on him like honey, feeding his ego until he could barely keep his paws on the ground.

“Everyone, sit. Let’s begin,” he announced, basking in the glow of his false authority.

His gaze locked on Riley the moment she moved.

The she-wolf he had chased for years in high school, his unattainable goddess. No amount of courting or displays of bravado had swayed her then. She had always been untouchable, her wolf’s dignity sharp as steel, her spirit beyond the reach of petty suitors.

And yet—here she was, sitting before him once again.

His eyes lingered too long, his wolf stirring with hunger. Time had only honed her beauty, her face carved sharper than memory, her aura fierce and unyielding. Desire clawed at him, the same itch he had carried since youth.

Yes, he was married now—but what did that matter? His mate was nothing more than a brood sow, an heiress with clumsy paws and dull eyes. Sleeping beside her was like curling next to livestock. He had already planned her ruin: take every coin of her inheritance, leave her stripped of fortune, and then return to chase women like Riley, women who matched the fantasies of his wolf.

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+10 Free Coins

He smirked openly, gaze crawling across Riley as though undressing her with his eyes. Every wolf in the room caught the heat of it, the stink of lust rolling from him like a rutting beast.

“Riley Vale,” one of the classmates jeered, emboldened by Aaron’s presence. “You came here uninvited, wasn’t it for the chance to finally greet our mighty ‘class idol’? Now that you’ve seen him, shouldn’t you go over and pay your respects?”

Riley’s lip curled. She felt the weight of Aaron’s stare, a look that sought to peel flesh from bone, leaving her spirit raw. The revulsion in her chest rose like bile.

She narrowed her eyes. “Aaron... are you certain you booked this room?”

Aaron raised his brows, smirking with confidence. “Of course. I booked it myself. You think I’d forget?”

Riley’s silence deepened. Doubt crept at the edges. Could Alpha Lucien have misremembered? No. It didn’t matter. She needed to leave-now. She had to find Lucien and clarify before this charade rotted further.

She tugged at Mia’s arm, turning toward the door.

But the others moved, wolves forming a wall of bodies, blocking her exit with smirks and taunts.

“You’re already here, don’t run.”

“What’s wrong? Dropping the pure act already?”

“Enough with the pretense. You’re only making it worse.”

A hand shoved Riley’s shoulder. She staggered, off-balance, the urn of rage inside her threatening to burst.

Her body tilted, momentum driving her forward-straight into Aaron’s waiting arms.

And the bastard smiled, his arms closing around her like a trap snapping shut.

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The taunts cut through the air like poisoned daggers.

“See? I told you she came here tonight just to throw herself at Aaron.”

+10 Free Coins

“Tsk, tsk. So many of us watching, and she doesn’t even blush. Her face must be thicker than a fortress wall.”

“Back in Mooncrest High, Aaron pursued her, and she refused him again and again. But now that he’s got money, she’s crawling back, desperate as a bitch in heat.”

“Say less. If Aaron wants her, then let him play. She’s practically begging for it— would be a waste not to.”

“Exactly. She’s an ex-con, a stain on her pack’s honor. With a record, no decent work will ever take her. Selling her body might be the only way she survives.”

The words dripped venom, tearing at the air around Riley.

Mia, trembling with rage, snapped, “Shut your filthy mouths! My lady isn’t what you say she is!”

“Lady?” someone sneered. “Ha! More like working lady. Don’t dress her shame in silks.”

Riley writhed in Aaron’s iron grip, desperate to free herself, but his arms only tightened around her. His strength pressed in like a cage, and for the first time in years, she felt truly cornered.

For Aaron, it was intoxicating. The moment Riley’s body collided with his, heat surged through his veins like wildfire. She smelled of wild rain on stone, an earthy, primal scent that made his wolf stir restlessly. She was softer than he remembered, dangerously soft. And the lure of her scent was worse than any intoxicant—it stripped him of reason, leaving only hunger.

He smirked, lips brushing the shell of her ear. “Riley,” his voice was a low growl, meant for her alone, “all these years, and you’re still this tempting. Since you’re here, why rush off? Stay. Indulge me.”

His breath, hot against her neck, sent a violent shudder down Riley's spine. Every

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instinct in her screamed to shift, to claw her way free, but she forced herself to stay in control. Her stomach roiled; nausea clawed at her throat. The predator in him was too close.

She thrashed, but Aaron's hold was merciless. His wolf had tasted her nearness, and he would not release his prey so easily.

The door creaked open.

All eyes turned as a figure appeared-sleek black hair falling like a curtain over a pale face, a white dress swaying with each deliberate step. Selene Ashford.

Her gaze swept the room with icy disdain, then froze on the sight of Aaron holding Riley. The expression that spread across her face was pure venom-shock, fury, disbelief.

"Selene?" Aaron's voice cracked into the silence. For a moment, he faltered. But then, regaining his composure, he loosened his hold on Riley and stepped toward the newcomer, lips curving into a practiced smile. "You're finally here. We've all been waiting for you."

Selene didn't even glance at him. Her eyes, cold and sharpened like a blade, locked solely on Riley.

Since being abandoned by Mortimer and Jace Hale, she had clawed for security, for another male strong enough to shield her. Aaron was supposed to be that step -a rung on the ladder she had chosen with care.

He wasn't the strongest yet, no. A sales manager under the mighty Duskgrave banner was still small compared to the wolves she had once clung to. But he had promise, connections. He was divorcing his wealthy mate, a Mooncrest heiress. With her gone, Aaron would be free-and rich. A perfect stepping stone.

Selene had already woven the threads of her future: once tethered to Aaron, she would gain proximity to Lucien Duskgrave himself, Stormridge's Alpha prince. With her beauty and her manipulative charm, she was confident she could lure his attention. If she could not marry into a bloodline as ancient as the Duskgraves, then she would at least feed

from their table. Even crumbs from the high table of Stormridge were worth more than all her years of struggle combined.

But now? Now that Riley stood in her way-pressed against Aaron's chest, drawing his wolf's hunger as though by instinct-her vision of that future cracked like glass.

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Her lips peeled back in a snarl. "You little whore," she spat, voice thick with hatred. "You dare seduce my man? Do you want to die tonight?"

Riley's stomach sank. So this was Aaron's woman. She shook her head quickly, her voice cutting through the chaos, "You're mistaken. I didn't seduce him. He was the one who-" She pointed sharply at Aaron, "If you're his mate, then leash him. Don't accuse me."

But Selene wasn't listening. To her ears, Riley's words were nothing but provocation.

With a scream, she lunged, swinging her handbag like a weapon, eyes blazing with madness. "Slut! I'll tear your face off! Dare touch what's mine and you won't live to regret it!"

The blow arced through the air, aimed straight for Riley's skull.

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Riley's first instinct was to raise her arm, shielding herself from the blow. The sharp crack of Selene Ashford's jeweled clutch striking her forearm sent pain shooting up her bones, but she refused to cry out.

Mia surged forward, her fury palpable, only to be seized and slammed down against the table, her arm pinned cruelly beneath someone's hand.

"Stop this madness!" Mia cried, her voice trembling with rage. "My Lady is betrothed-she has a rightful mate. She would never debase herself by chasing another male!"

Selene's lips curled into a venomous sneer. "Betrothed? And yet she clings to my Aaron like a heat-starved wench. Tell me, Riley-does your mate not satisfy you? Or do you simply crave every male's touch?"

The venom in her words dripped like acid, her insults sharp enough to flay skin.

Riley's claws itched to tear free, to shred Selene where she stood. But before she could summon her strength, Zao-his bloated frame reeking of ale and sweat— latched onto her wrist. His piggish eyes glittered with spiteful satisfaction, the memory of her earlier defiance still burning his pride.

He had wealth. Influence. A thousand reasons, in his mind, to believe Riley should have fallen at his feet. That she hadn't-that she had struck him-had turned his lust into vindictive malice.

With Zao's bulk pinning her, Riley couldn't evade the next onslaught. Selene's blows rained down, her clutch scraping Riley's skin until crimson welts appeared across her cheek.

Mia's eyes went bloodshot, her voice hoarse as she screamed, "Her betrothed is Lucien Duskgrave, Prince of the Stormridge Pack! Harm her, and none of you will live to regret it!"

The name cracked across the room like a whip. For a heartbeat, silence reigned.

Then-laughter.

Wild, mocking, unrestrained laughter that shook the very walls of the Silverfang

Den.

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“The Alpha Prince of Stormridge, betrothed to a convict bitch?” one sneered.

“If that’s true, then I’ll eat wolf scat with a smile,” another jeered.

“Riley, stop playing the goddess. You’re nothing but filth dressed in white.”

The derision spread like wildfire, the pack of former peers howling at her expense.

Aaron coughed, feigning restraint, though his eyes shone with malice. “Enough. We’re all packmates from Mooncrest High once. No need to kill her.”

Selene turned sharply, suspicion flashing in her eyes. “Aaron. Do you like her? Is that why you’re shielding her?”

He paled, shaking his head so fast it was almost pitiful. “No-never. She’s nothing to me. If you want to break her, Selene... do it. I won’t interfere.”

A cruel satisfaction curved Selene’s lips. She raised her hand again, but another woman stopped her, grinning wickedly.

“Don’t waste your claws on her. Look at this cake. Wouldn’t it be more fitting to smear this little fraud in sugar and cream?”

The room erupted with savage agreement. Hands reached for plates and slices, hurling them with vicious glee.

Thick frosting struck Riley’s face, smothering her nose and mouth. She gasped, choking as cream clogged her throat and the tang of fruit syrup stung her eyes. More cakes followed, splattering her hair, her white dress, her skin until she was drenched in sticky humiliation.

Still-Riley did not break. Her body shook, but not from surrender. Beneath her skin, her wolf clawed and snarled, demanding she fight, demanding she tear their throats out for every ounce of shame they cast upon her,

Mia’s face was crushed against the table, her tears falling helplessly as she screamed, “Stop! Stop, you monsters!”

The mob only laughed harder, their jeers filling the air.

“Look at her now! The proud Ebonclaw princess, reduced to a frosted mutt!”

“Maybe this will remind her not to act so pure.”

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her veins, hot as molten iron.

And then-

)

The last restraint inside Riley snapped.

A guttural growl tore from her throat, low and resonant, shaking the air itself. Her bones cracked and lengthened, fur bristling as her frame exploded into the sleek, lethal form of her wolf.

Silver streaked through her midnight coat, her eyes blazing molten gold.

The room fell silent-then erupted in chaos.

“Sh-she shifted!” someone shrieked. ” White Wolf!”

Riley lunged.

Her claws raked across the table, splintering wood as she tore herself free from Zao’s grasp. With a savage snarl, she slammed into him, her weight pinning him to the ground. His scream was cut short by her fangs snapping inches from his arms.

Selene staggered back, face pale. “Y-you—”

Riley’s head whipped toward her, lips peeled back to reveal gleaming teeth. She stalked forward, each step a promise of blood. Selene’s bravado crumbled; she scrambled away, shrieking, clutch raised like it could shield her from a predator born to kill.

The others fared no better. Aaron tripped over himself in his haste to flee, while the red-dressed woman who’d offered the cake weapon was hurled into a wall, Riley’s paw swiping her aside like prey unworthy of attention. Plates shattered, bodies scrambled, panic reigned.

Only Mia stayed still, her eyes wide but full of desperate relief.

Riley prowled the ruined den, her growls reverberating through the air. These were no longer classmates-they were trespassers in her hunt, and she marked them with tooth and claw, driving them to the edges of the room until none dared

to move.

Her chest heaved. The copper taste of blood-hers and theirs-hung heavy in the

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air. Her wolf wanted more, demanded she finish it. End the threat.

But before she could strike again, the heavy oak door burst open.

The force of it silenced everything.

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Lucien Duskgrave stepped through, shadow and fury incarnate, his dominance slamming into the room like a stormfront. The cowards froze, their terror now shifting from Riley's wrath to his.

Riley's wolf turned at once, her golden eyes locking on him. A shiver of recognition passed through her-mate, Alpha, anchor.

And in that moment, her wolf relented.

The silver-furred predator dissolved back into flesh and blood. Bones cracked, fur receded, leaving Riley human once more, naked and trembling, her body streaked with frosting, blood, and sweat. She collapsed to her knees, her strength drained by the shift and the battle.

Lucien's gaze seared her. His fury was no less for finding her already victorious. If anything, the sight of her battered body—so defiant, so near breaking—ignited his rage to something unstoppable.

He moved with lethal precision. In three strides he reached her, his boot slamming into Zao's chest with a thunderous crack. The piggish man flew backward, hitting the ground in a heap, groaning in agony.

Lucien loomed over the room, his eyes a storm of midnight fire, daring anyone to move, daring anyone to breathe wrong.

And Riley, weak though she was, lifted her chin. Her body shook, but her eyes— wolf-bright and unyielding-met his.

She was bloodied. She was exhausted. But she was not broken.

She would never be prey.

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Riley stood amidst the wreckage of her pride, her body still smeared with frosting and blood. Yet even drenched in humiliation, her back remained straight, her wolf's fire flickering in her eyes.

Lucien Duskgrave swept into the Silverfang Den like a storm breaking through steel. He paid no heed to the cream coating her hair and skin. Instead, his arms wrapped around her with startling gentleness, shielding her battered frame. One hand stroked her trembling back, the other reaching to drape his jacket over her shoulders, cloaking her in his scent—an Alpha's mark of possession and protection.

Riley sagged against him, her fingers clutching the fabric at his chest as if grasping the last tether keeping her upright. She was weak from the earlier shift, her body straining against the aftermath of claws and fangs, but her spirit refused to bow.

Every gaze in the room locked on Lucien.

The men and women who only moments ago had reveled in Riley's degradation stood frozen. The Alpha Prince of Stormridge was no rumor, no distant figure of Legend—he was here, tall and unyielding, his tailored black suit sharpening the Lethal cut of his shoulders, his dark eyes blazing with dominance so potent it sucked the breath from their lungs.

For a beat, silence reigned. Then—defiance, desperate and brittle.

"You—who the hell are you to strike our classmate? Do you want to die here?" one male spat, voice shaking.

Another scoffed, clinging to bravado. "You look sharp in that suit, but do you know where you're standing? This is Silverfang Den's supreme VIP chamber. Our Aaron is favored by the company that runs this place—daring to cross him is daring to cross the whole pack of allies at his back."

A girl sneered, venom dripping from her words. "Are you Riley's friend? Then let me warn you-she's filth. She seduced Selene Ashford's mate, and she's nothing more than a convict. Touch her, and you'll be smeared with her disgrace."

Their voices overlapped, sharp, desperate, ugly.

Aaron, who had lingered smugly in the background, now stood pale and hollow-

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eyed. His triumph evaporated, replaced by a sheen of sweat across his brow as his gaze locked on Riley nestled against Lucien's chest.

It couldn't be real. Riley—the girl he'd sought to crush-was shielded by the Alpha Prince himself.

Lucien's cold eyes swept the room. Wherever his gaze landed, spines bowed, shoulders hunched, the air thick with instinctive submission. Wolves knew when a predator greater than themselves had arrived.

At last, his stare pinned Aaron. "You. Are you the one they call their top wolf?"

Aaron's legs trembled, but he forced a fawning smile. "I—I am. Alpha Prince, what brings you here?"

Lucien's voice was a blade of ice. "This chamber was reserved by me-for my pack's celebration. Tell me-why should I not ask why you're here?"

The words detonated like thunder.

Faces drained of color. Shock gave way to horror. The room full of posturing heirs and sycophants now understood—the man shielding Riley wasn't just another wolf with influence. He was the Alpha Prince of Stormridge.

And Riley... the woman they had smeared with cake and blood... was his betrothed.

Panic cracked through the crowd. The men bent their spines, forcing smiles of submission. The women's gazes shifted, greed and envy swirling as they took in the sight of Riley draped in Lucien's jacket.

Selene Ashford herself tried to adapt, her twisted expression smoothing into a saccharine smile. She stepped forward, voice honey-sweet. "Alpha Prince, we were only protecting you. This woman-Riley-she was shamelessly clinging to Aaron. We

couldn't stand by and allow her to dishonor your name, so we punished her." She flicked her hair, trying to draw his attention, her eyes shining with desperate

allure.

But Lucien's gaze did not flicker to her once. To him, Selene was nothing more than a shadow on the wall.

His attention remained fixed on Aaron, his tone low and lethal. "I asked again— who permitted you to claim this chamber? Who dared touch what belongs to me?"

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Aaron swallowed hard, his smile trembling. "Alpha Prince, I swear, I didn't know. I would never have trespassed if I knew this was yours. They—" He thrust a hand toward his classmates, desperation bleeding from every word. "They brought me here. They said it was free. I only followed."

The others flinched, betrayal burning like acid in their veins.

"You liar!" one spat. "It was you who told us this chamber was reserved for your pack!"

"You boasted you had the Alpha Prince's backing!" another howled.

"Don't turn on us now, Aaron—you dragged us here!"

Lucien watched their squabbling with cool disdain. Then his verdict fell like a death-knell. "You are finished. You are stripped of your post. Effective immediately."

Aaron's knees buckled. "Alpha Prince, please—I didn't mean—please, grant me another chance—"

Lucien's gaze turned glacial. "Did you grant my betrothed a chance to explain? Did you grant her mercy when you spat on her name?"

Aaron's breath stuttered. No answer came.

Lucien tilted his head toward his Beta, Caelum Knox. "Spread the word. Any company allied to Stormridge who dares employ you will be considered an enemy of my house."

Aaron's face drained of the last vestige of color. His wolf shrank into nothing. His future—obliterated in a single decree.

And Riley, trembling but unbroken, tightened her grip on Lucien's jacket. In her veins, humiliation burned alongside pride. She was no longer alone. No longer

prey.

The Alpha Prince had arrived—and the Stormridge Pack's shadow now covered them all.

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[1,087 words]

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Several of the students still trapped in the suffocating private box tried to raise their voices in protest, desperation tainting their words.

“Alpha Lucien, please... Riley already punished us herself—she turned, she became the White Wolf! We were humbled, beaten down. Isn't that enough?”

“She struck fear into us—none of us will dare cross her again,” another pleaded, clutching his swollen cheek where Riley's claws had raked. “She's... she's not the same girl. She's stronger. Fiercer. We learned our lesson.”

Their voices trembled, the scent of their fear rolling thick across the air, but beneath it lingered a trace of defiance—as if appealing to mercy would spare them the weight of Lucien Duskgrave's wrath.

But the Alpha Prince's expression did not soften. His voice, when it came, was a low growl that silenced every whimper.

Lucien Duskgrave turned sharply, his voice carrying the commanding weight of an Alpha as he addressed the Silverfang Hotel's manager.

‘They seem to enjoy cake so much. Then give them what they crave. Order a five-tiered cake for each of them-every day for a month. No one leaves until every last crumb is gone.’

With that decree, he swept Riley into his arms and strode from the suffocating air of the private box, leaving the pack of trembling parasites behind.

The command was no jest. Sweet as cake was, forcing it down day after day, layer upon layer, would rot their pride and bloat their bodies until they could barely look at themselves in the mirror. It was a punishment dressed in sugar, crueler than the bite of fangs.

At the entrance of the hotel, Lucien’s path crossed Duke and Carmen.

Carmen’s sharp eyes instantly fell on Riley. The young she-wolf’s hair was disheveled, her dress torn and stained, cream smeared across her cheek. Rage burned through Carmen’s chest.

“What happened to her?”

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Mia, still red-eyed with fury, explained in detail what had transpired within the private box.

Carmen’s fists clenched until her knuckles cracked. Riley-her Riley-seemed cursed to attract jackals and vermin wherever she went. Lucien’s punishment, though laced with Alpha authority, felt far too merciful in her eyes. These creatures deserved a torment that would etch itself into their bones forever.

Her gaze sharpened, a glint of killing intent flashing like moonlight on a blade.

Duke, standing beside her, caught the darkness in her expression. He had witnessed Carmen’s methods before-bloody, merciless, and more beast than human. He gripped her arm, his brow furrowed, shaking his head in silent warning.

But Carmen tore her arm free and strode toward the den of offenders, her steps echoing like war drums.

Inside, the atmosphere thickened with dread. Carmen’s butterfly knife spun gracefully between her fingers, catching the dim light, throwing shards of silver across her cold, expressionless face.

The hotel staff had already lined up the monstrous cakes. Five tiers each, white frosting gleaming, the sweetness cloying in the air like a death sentence.

‘Well?’ Carmen’s voice was low and chilling, slicing through the silence. “Eat.”

Aaron’s face drained of all color. His hands trembled as he tore away a hunk of cake, shoving it into his mouth. His cheeks bulged grotesquely, his throat straining as he gagged, the sickly sweetness clogging his senses. He nearly choked, eyes rolling back, the sound of his strangled swallow echoing pitifully.

He dared a glance at Carmen, pleading silently, but her gaze was an executioner’s -icy and merciless.

Before he could falter, her boot connected with his leg, forcing him to his knees. The cake fell from his hands.

“Pick it up,” she ordered, her blade now kissing the soft flesh of his neck, drawing a thin bead of blood.

Aaron’s body shook, but he obeyed, scooping the soiled, dust-caked slice from the floor and cramming it past his lips. His tears mixed with cream, dripping down his

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chin.

Selene Ashford, who had once strutted with arrogance, now faced a torment she had never imagined. She stared at Carmen—this viper of a woman who had stolen Jace Hale—and then at Riley, the she-wolf who had now claimed the protection of Lucien Duskgrave. Selene’s stomach twisted with bitter hatred. Both women had ruined her carefully laid plans, both had stolen what was hers.

But the sight of the towering cakes before her sent her already queasy gut into revolt. She forced a bite past her lips, the overwhelming sweetness coating her tongue. Within moments, her throat convulsed, and she gagged, bile rising.

“Ugh-” She doubled over, retching onto the floor.

Carmen’s gaze cut to her like a blade. “Did I permit you to waste it?”

Selene froze, eyes wide, as Carmen’s knife lifted in warning. The young woman’s obs shook her shoulders, but she bent down, trembling, scooping the filth she had disgorged back into her hands. And under Carmen’s unyielding stare, she forced it into her mouth, gagging on her own shame.

Around them, Zao and the others whimpered. Their stomachs bulged grotesquely beneath their fine clothes, skin stretched tight. With every bite, their bodies creamed, yet they did not dare stop.

P-please..." Aaron's voice broke, choked with cream and sobs. "We can't... we can't eat anymore..." His face was a grotesque mask of smeared frosting, his eyes swollen with tears.

Carmen's lips curled into a smile colder than winter. "Now you beg? Too late."

The blade flashed, slicing into Aaron's thigh with precision. He screamed, collapsing fully to the floor, his body quaking with pain. Yet even then, he continued to shovel cake into his mouth, desperate, broken.

The others followed suit, their faces twisted in silent horror, their tears carving lines through frosting and vomit. The air grew thick with sounds of choking, gagging, and muffled cries.

Carmen strolled among them like a predator through a slaughterhouse, the knife twirling between her fingers. Every time someone slowed, she carved another warning into their flesh.

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Duke stood at the doorway, staring. This was not the Carmen he had once known. That girl had smiled sweetly, feigned innocence. But this—this was her truest form: a serpent with fangs of steel, a she-wolf cloaked in vengeance.

Riley, though carried from the room by Lucien, left behind a scent that lingered like wildfire. It was her tormentors' fear that fed Carmen's cruelty. And though Riley had not needed to raise her claws this night, her silent defiance had sparked a reckoning none would forget.

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Carmen stood silently in the Silverfang Hotel's private box, her gaze fixed on the trembling figures before her as they devoured the towering cakes. To her, it was not a grotesque sight but a flawless performance—an execution of punishment wrapped in sugar.

Only when the last crumb vanished, when each parasite collapsed to the floor clutching their swollen stomachs, too weak to lift a finger, did Carmen incline her head ever so slightly. Satisfied, she turned and left without a word.

At the entrance, Duke fell into step beside her.

“Carmen, do you have classes this afternoon at Ashmoor Academy?” he asked softly.

Her tone was ice. “Why?”

He hesitated, then lowered his voice. “Your birthday hasn't come yet. If you're free... perhaps you could come to my home. I'd like to celebrate it with you.”

Carmen's sharp eyes met his. She saw only the raw sincerity in Duke's gaze. For a heartbeat, she faltered, but then her lashes lowered.

“No need,” she said flatly, stepping past him.

But Duke's hand shot out, clamping around her wrist with desperate strength.

Her brow furrowed, irritation flashing. “Something else?”

His voice cracked, the words spilling out with frustration. “Carmen, why must you always treat me so coldly? Before, you held me at a distance because you believed I was bound to others—misunderstanding me. But now? What excuse remains?”

Why?

The answer twisted bitterly inside her chest. Because there was never a future for them.

Soon, she would be leaving Stormridge with Riley and their mother, bound for lands far beyond the Ebonclaw Pack's reach. Carmen had long ago sworn never to give her heart recklessly, never to hand over her soul to a man. That was the

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weakness of fools, of love-drunk she-wolves.

She had watched Riley suffer, seen how blind devotion destroyed. Carmen would not fall into the same pit. Passion burned hot, yes, but it always cooled to ash.

And once she was abroad, surrounded by the allure of tall, golden-haired Alphas from foreign packs, Duke's familiar face would lose its power to stir her blood. A single tree was never worth forsaking an entire forest-she reminded herself of this with steely resolve.

But she would never say such things aloud.

Instead, her lips curved with cold dismissal. "Why take it seriously? It's only a game."

She let the words hang, then added with deliberate cruelty, "You'd best not tie yourself to me. Don't forget-I am no innocent. Blood already stains my hands. Perhaps soon the enforcers of the Pack Council will come knocking. Stay too close, and it will drag you under with me."

With that, she tore her wrist free. There was still work to be done.

Before she left Stormridge, every soul who had dared to harm Riley would be dealt with thoroughly and permanently. Even if chains or death awaited Carmen in the end, at least her sister would never again fear wolves dressed as men.

Duke stood rooted as she walked away, his chest tight with helpless anger. His voice rose, raw and pleading, though the wind threatened to carry it off.

Carmen, next year-on this very day-I swear I'll give you the grandest birthday you've ever known!"

Carmen's steps faltered. A strange, unwelcome warmth surged in her heart. Yet she did not look back.

From that day forward, life appeared to fall into rhythm again.

But for the offenders trapped in the Silverfang Hotel's private box, peace was an illusion.

Every evening after her lessons at Ashmoor Academy, Carmen arrived without fail, slipping into the shadows of the 101 VIP box. She was no guest but a warden-watching, calculating, ensuring every command of Lucien Duskgrave was obeyed.

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The suite was lavish, outfitted with dining hall, lounges, and washrooms. Without them, the prisoners' filth would have turned the chamber into a rotting den within days.

Even so, for Zao, Aaron, Selene Ashford, and the rest, this month was no less than the hellfire of the Moon Goddess's own judgment.

Day after day, the cakes were brought in. Towering. Gleaming white with frosting. Sweetness heavy as poison in the air. And day after day, they ate until their bodies trembled on the brink of collapse.

Their bellies distended, skin stretched, throats gagging on every mouthful. Yet Carmen's presence ensured none dared resist. Whenever one faltered, her cold eyes and the flash of her knife reminded them what failure cost.

If vomit rose, they swallowed it back in terror. The one time Aaron dared retch, Carmen had forced him to lap up the bile and frosting from the floor like a beaten dog, her boot pressing cruelly to his back.

So they learned. Better to choke down the sugar than face the she-wolf's wrath.

Each night, the Silverfang Den became their purgatory. And Carmen, the merciless sentinel, made certain their suffering never ended too soon.

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Each day, the captives were forced to devour an entire five-tier cake, one per person.

The torment twisted their bodies with grotesque speed, their frames swelling like balloons overfilled with air.

The women—once vainglorious and alluring—had been proud of their wasp-thin waists and seductive curves, never allowing their weight to creep beyond a hundred pounds.

Selene Ashford and the red-dressed girl had flaunted their beauty like weapons, knowing how easily men could be ensnared by it.

But after a month of relentless indulgence forced down their throats, their bodies betrayed them. Their weight surged past one hundred and fifty pounds, their flesh split with deep, jagged stretch marks, like centipedes crawling across their skin. The once-envied curves became grotesque bulges, their beauty rotted away by excess sugar and despair.

The men fared no better.

Aaron, once Mooncrest High's golden boy, had been lean and striking at one hundred and forty pounds. Now he staggered under the burden of two hundred, his face bloated, his former handsomeness dissolved into greasy ruin.

Zao, who had always been heavy, was reduced to a waddling heap of fat, so swollen he could barely stand, collapsing often like a mound of flesh without form.

Carmen stood before them, her amber eyes glinting with predatory satisfaction. The storm of rage that had burned inside her since Riley was wronged had begun to ease as she watched their transformation into grotesque shells of themselves.

A cold smile touched her lips.

"Consider this mercy," she said, her voice edged with Alpha steel. "Since none of you delivered true harm to Riley, I will let you crawl away with your lives. But if you dare touch her again—your lives are forfeit."

The broken pack of youths nodded frantically, cowed and trembling. They had tasted Carmen's cruelty and no one among them had the will to defy her again. All swore to behave, desperate to be rid of the nightmare.

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She dismissed them with a sharp gesture. "Get out of my sight."

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The captives stumbled away, reeking of fear and sweat, none daring to look back. Aaron, Zao, and the others were too crushed in spirit to even imagine revenge. They all knew Riley was now under Lucien Duskgrave's shadow. With the Stormridge Pack's Alpha Prince at her side, retaliation meant suicide.

But Selene Ashford was different.

Her heart was a cauldron of venom. Beauty had been her greatest weapon, her source of power. Now, stripped of it, she was nothing but a bloated shell. Her vanity lay in ruins, her pride scorched to ash. And so her hatred turned sharp, buried deep where no one could see.

That madwoman Carmen was untouchable for now. But Riley? Even she had a white-wolf, but she found her wolf was weak. Riley was a perfect target.

If she destroyed Riley, wouldn't both Lucien and Carmen taste despair? The thought slithered through her mind like a serpent, coiling tighter with every heartbeat.

Her lips curved in a silent snarl. Carmen. Riley. You bitches will choke on your arrogance. I will see to it.

Through all of this, Riley remained blissfully unaware. She had stayed within the safety of her home, quietly practicing embroidery, untouched by the storm Carmen had unleashed on her behalf.

But Maddox's fortune had soured.

He had been waiting to handle Aaron's divorce case, eager for the payout of a million in legal fees. But Aaron had vanished without a trace, Calls went unanswered, numbers shut off. Maddox, desperate to escape his own decline back into poverty, grew frantic. Without that case, his future looked as grim as the gutter he had once clawed his way out of.

Then, by chance, fate threw Aaron into his path.

At first, Maddox nearly passed him by, failing to recognize the swollen, wheezing man shuffling along the street. Aaron had grown so grotesquely bloated, his former charm buried under layers of fat. Yet the eyes were the same.

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Maddox stopped dead, disbelief flashing across his features.

+10 Free Coins

"Aaron? Moon above-what happened to you? In a single month, you've... you've become this?"

Aaron's gaze flickered with shame. Once proud of his reflection, he now avoided mirrors, despising the man he saw. He had lost everything-his looks, his job, his pride. All that remained was his wife and the hollow shell of his former life.

He muttered without strength, "Don't concern yourself with me." His voice was faint, his breath labored, as though each word weighed as much as his swollen body.

But Maddox pressed on, desperation sharpening his tone.

"We had an agreement! The divorce case-you wanted your wife's estate. Without proof of her infidelity, we have nothing to work with. Do you think you can just disappear and leave me with nothing?"

Aaron's shoulders sagged, but his silence was louder than words.

Maddox's frustration burned. He saw in Aaron not only a ruined man, but the ruin of his own ambitions. And he was not prepared to let go so easily.

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- in Vengeance 281

[1,107 words]

Chapter 281

Aaron was seething with frustration.

+10 Free Coins

In his current pitiful state, if he truly divorced, not a single she-wolf of beauty or worth would ever look at him twice.

Worse, Lucien Duskgrave-the ruthless Stormridge prince-had already made it known that any company allied with the Duskgrave name would never employ him.

Aaron was finished in Mooncrest.

No, he couldn't divorce his wife now. Not yet.

Drawing a ragged breath, Aaron growled, "I'm not divorcing. Now get out of my sight."

Maddox's heart sank the moment he heard those words.

"What do you mean you're not divorcing? We had a deal! I would win you that divorce in court, strip your mate of her wealth, and you'd pay me a million. How dare you go back on your word!"

Aaron's temper, already frayed, snapped. He longed only to drag his heavy body home, collapse into bed, and force his wife to take him to a healer once his strength returned. But Maddox clung like a parasite, needling him endlessly.

Fury surged through him, his wolf thrashing inside his broken shell. His face twisted with rage as he roared:

"Are you deaf, cripple? Whether I divorce or not is none of your damned business!"

Maddox's own life had long soured, leaving him bitter, twisted.

To be cursed and spat on in public by this bloated excuse of a male-this disgraced wolf who once strutted with pride-was more than he could stomach.

“It was you, you disgusting pig, who begged me to free you from your mate-bond. And now you blame me? Look at yourself! In a single moon cycle you’ve eaten yourself into ruin. Don’t tell me you haven’t been rutting around, catching the filth

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of rogues. That’s the only way a wolf ends up in your condition.”

+10 Free Coins

The insult clawed deep into Aaron’s pride. With a snarl, he launched himself at Maddox.

Maddox, crippled but venomous, struck back.

A swollen, breathless wolf, and a legless cripple.

The clash was grotesque-yet for a moment, strangely even.

Onlookers-wolves and humans alike-formed a loose ring, amused murmurs rippling as they watched the once-respected descend into savagery.

But neither had the stamina for true combat. Their blows grew sluggish; their lungs-burned.

Moments later, both staggered apart, bruised and swollen, more pathetic than victorious.

Aaron spat blood, gave a bitter snort, and lumbered away, his heavy frame dragging.

Maddox collapsed into the dirt, struggling with every ounce of his ruined body to claw himself back onto his chair. Finally seated, he wheeled himself forward-only to be blocked by a shadow.

A woman.

No-a wolf. Heavy-set, broad, with eyes glittering like molten amber.

Selene Ashford.

"I heard you desire Riley Vale," she purred, lips curling into a sly smile. "Do you want her? I can help you."

Maddox narrowed his eyes, suspicion prickling his spine. "Who in the hells are you? And why would you help me?"

Selene's smirk deepened, her voice dripping with venomous intent. "My name is Selene Ashford. I'll help you claim Riley... because I desire Lucien Duskgrave."

Maddox's gaze slid over her, and his mind flashed with a darkly gleeful image-

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10 Free Coins

Lucien, tormented by this wolf-woman's obsession, his regal composure shattered before the eyes of every pack.

The thought filled Maddox with grim satisfaction. If Lucien dared cross him, then let him rot in ridicule, tangled in Selene's snare.

Yes. Let the Alpha Prince choke on his own downfall.

Time blurred. Half a year slipped by.

For six moons, Selene Ashford and Maddox schemed in secret, hungry to break Riley Vale. Yet the she-wolf remained hidden within the Duskgrave estate, veiled and protected. Their ploys could find no purchase.

Meanwhile, Riley's health declined, her body growing frail. But her heart was steeled toward one thing alone-the completion of her embroidery.

The masterpiece was her escape, her salvation. Once finished, it would grant her passage to flee, to take Carmen and Mia with her beyond Mooncrest's borders.

And at last, after half a year of tireless labor, the work was complete. Her heart trembled with pride and grief-but she told no one. Not Lucien. Not Matriarch Duskgrave.

They would see it only after she was gone.

Her hands lingered on the silk threads, fingers trembling. The embroidery was her legacy, her farewell to a life that had never embraced her.

She knew what she had to do next-reclaim the kidney that had been stolen from her. The urgency of it gnawed at her; her body weakened with each passing day. Yet even as that truth burned in her, the fire of survival flickered low.

Because she had discovered something far crueler than theft: a slow-working wolf-poison had been sown into her very veins. No healer could draw it out. No remedy could cleanse it.

Death was inevitable.

And with each moonrise, her desire to cling to life withered.

She would take back what was hers-the organ, the dignity-but she would not chain herself to false hope. The poison would claim her, whether in a week or in a

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year.

Better, then, to leave.

S

+10 Free Coins

Better to go before the wolves of Stormridge mourned her too deeply. Before Lucien's piercing eyes softened. Before those who truly loved her-Carmen, Mia, even Caelum in his silent way-were shattered by her decay.

She would give them distance. She would leave them memories instead of grief.

Now that her task was done, Riley turned to her final resolve.

The first place she would go-before her escape-was the asylum where her mother was caged.

Scarlett had conspired. Kael Vale had betrayed. But her mother... her mother had abandoned her first.

For half a year, the woman had been locked away. Riley needed to see her. She needed to witness what became of a mother who had cast aside her blood.

Only when every wound-giver met their ruin could Riley rest in peace-even in death.

When Riley prepared to leave the manor, Caelum Knox, her appointed shadow, was unyielding. He would accompany her, whether she wished it or not.

The black-armored warrior ignited the car's engine, steering through Mooncrest's sprawling streets toward the asylum.

Outside, the world rushed by in a blur of lights and motion. Within, Riley sat silent, her gaze fixed beyond the glass. Her thoughts tangled-vengeance, sorrow, the bitter anticipation of facing her mother's fallen form.

At the asylum, guided by white-clad healers, Riley Vale and Caelum Knox walked the narrow halls, each step echoing like a drumbeat toward fate.

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[762 words]

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+10 Free Coins

The corridor stretched long and narrow, iron-barred yards flanking either side.

Inside those cages, the broken remnants of wolves lingered in their madness.

Some sat lifelessly on benches, eyes glazed, lips moving with ceaseless whispers to phantoms only they could see.

Others trudged in slow, mechanical loops, heavy steps dragging them through an endless cycle, as though chained to an invisible wheel of torment.

And some fought shadows—snarling, swinging their arms at empty air—faces contorted with terror and fury, as if forever trapped in battle against unseen enemies.

Riley Vale followed the white-clad healers down the corridor until they emerged into a garden, a bleak courtyard where the moonlight itself seemed to recoil.

And there, at the far edge, sat a woman.

Her hair, once rich and dark, was now streaked with silver and tangled. Her skin sagged and coarsened, robbed of all the refinement she had once flaunted as the Luna of the Ebonclaw Pack. She looked a decade older than her years, a specter of ruin.

In her arms, she cradled a doll-no more than a crude facsimile of a child. Rocking it gently, she hummed a tune of no name, her voice cracked but tender, as though the rest of the world had been erased and only that false babe remained.

Luna Zara.

Riley's breath stilled in her throat. Her amber eyes, sharpened by both grief and vengeance, fixed upon the pathetic figure.

Zara... Have you ever thought-because you chose a wretched male, because you rushed into marriage with Alpha Alaric-you dragged your bloodline into the abyss?

A son, Kael Vale, left rotting in prison. A daughter, Riley herself, maimed and scarred for life. And Zara-half-blind, spirit shattered, reduced to rocking a doll in

a madhouse.

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It might have been a life of brilliance. Instead, it was ashes.

+10 Free Coins

You deserve it, Riley thought coldly, lips curling into a humorless smile. You deserve every shard of ruin that found you.

Her chest seethed with scorn. To have such a mother was her life's greatest shame.

She loathed Alpha Alaric. But she loathed Zara just as deeply.

Riley's gaze cut like steel as she watched Zara kiss the doll's cracked porcelain cheek, murmuring words that dripped with delusion.

"My precious pup... my sweet Riley. Mama will always protect you. No one will ever take you away again. You must believe me, pup. Mama loves you... more than anything."

She kissed the doll again, as though it were Riley herself-the child she had forsaken.

Riley's sneer deepened. Too late.

Too late to cherish what she had thrown away. Too late to repent for abandoning her daughter when she was swallowed by the dark.

Riley had not come here for comfort, nor forgiveness. She had come to watch. To see the wolf who had wounded her brought low.

She had seen enough.

Just as she turned to leave, the air broke with sudden violence.

A mad wolf lunged at Zara, claws swiping the doll from her arms. He tore away, shrieking laughter as he bolted through the yard.

The moment Zara's arms emptied, her composure detonated.

"No! My daughter-stop! Give her back! Give my pup back!"

Her voice ripped through the asylum, feral and raw, shaking with the full force of maternal hysteria.

She surged after him, blind to reason, blind to the weakness of her body. But the crippled wolf ran swift, fueled by mania, and Zara's stumbling chase fell short.

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"My daughter! My Riley!" she howled, voice cracking into blood.

The lunatic turned, grinning with jagged teeth at the sight of her anguish.

"She cries! She cries! How fun, how fun!"

+10 Free Coins

He lifted the doll high, then smashed it to the ground with savage glee. Porcelain cracked, limbs shattered.

Each impact echoed like a hammer on Zara's soul.

Her eyes flooded red. "I'll kill you! I'll tear you apart, you filth!"

She hurled herself forward again, but the mad wolf scooped up the broken doll and fled anew, his cackles ringing like carrion-birds in the night.

Zara chased, wild and desperate, until her path staggered—and she froze.

Her one good eye locked upon the figure standing beyond the madness.

Riley Vale.

Her daughter.

Not the porcelain mockery, not the false comfort in her arms. The real one-flesh and blood, gaze of molten gold, standing in the moonlit garden like judgment itself.

Zara's lips parted, her chest heaving with torn breath. The doll slipped from her shaking fingers.

“Riley...”

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When Luna Zara's gaze fell upon Riley, she froze where she stood.

+10 Free Coins

Her eyes locked on Riley's figure, flickering with recognition, confusion, and a fleeting haze, before finally settling into a sharp, startling clarity. Tears spilled down her weathered cheeks, yet her lips curved into a trembling smile.

She reached out a trembling hand.

“Riley... my little Riley, you've finally come to see me?”

Riley's face remained cold, her gaze as detached as frost upon stone. She looked at Zara as though she were nothing more than a stranger.

Stumbling forward, Luna Zara muttered desperately, her voice fractured yet full of yearning:

“Riley, my daughter, my sweet girl... stay with me, don't leave me again. Please, don't leave your mother.”

But as she lurched closer, the pack healers stationed nearby intercepted her, barring her path.

“Let me go!” Zara shrieked, thrashing violently with the strength of a cornered wolf. “That is my daughter—you cannot keep her from me!”

Her hands clawed the air, her entire body convulsing with wild resistance.

Riley, however, stood in silence, watching with cold detachment. Once, she had longed for this love—for the warm shelter of a mother's arms. But standing here now, she saw clearly: all of it was empty. Hollow.

A bitter smile ghosted across her lips as she whispered, her voice like a shard of ice:

“Luna Zara... from this day forth, we shall never meet again.”

She turned to Caelum Knox, her voice steady.

“Let's go.”

Zara's broken mind still grasped the meaning of those words. Her head snapped

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back and forth, shaking violently as she cried out:

“No—don't leave! I will protect you! I'll never lose you again, my child!”

+10 Free Coins

But Riley did not so much as flinch. She walked away, her back unyielding, her figure receding into the light of freedom.

Zara's screams grew feral, the ragged cries of a beast in despair. Her throat tore with the effort, her voice hoarse, guttural, almost inhuman.

‘Don't go! Don't leave me—!’

It took several healers to restrain her. Even then, her raw strength nearly broke their hold. Finally, a physician plunged a sedative needle into her arm.

Zara's body jerked violently, her breath faltering. Consciousness slipped away, yet her fading gaze clung to Riley's retreating back-eyes brimming with a love that came far too late.

'She's too unstable,' one of the healers muttered. "Restrain her to the bed. If she wakes like this again, none of us will be able to contain her."

The others nodded grimly, dragging her away without tenderness, leaving only the echoes of her guttural cries behind.

Outside the asylum, Riley inhaled deeply, tasting the clean bite of free air.

'Where to now, Miss Riley?' Caelum Knox asked quietly.

Her eyes turned sharp, glinting like the edge of a blade.

"Tomorrow... I will see Alpha Alaric and Scarlett. My blood has remained in her body far too long. It is time I took back what was stolen."

Later, back within the halls of the Duskgrave estate, Riley returned to her chambers with heavy steps.

Though she had walked only a little more than usual, her legs trembled, every muscle weak and trembling. Her body screamed with fatigue, each step a reminder that her time was running out.

A soft, humorless smile curved her lips.

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So little strength remained. So little time.

At least, the embroidery was complete. One final promise fulfilled.

+10 Free Coins

She had lived in silence for nearly a year now, robbed of her hearing. The silence had eroded her speech as well-too many times, words failed her, trapped on her tongue, unsaid.

Riley knew she could not stay in the Duskgrave household much longer.

Tomorrow, once she reclaimed her kidney from Scarlett, she would leave. Her path was nearing its end.

Exhausted, she drifted into sleep.

In the study, Caelum Knox stood before Lucien Duskgrave, the Alpha prince of the Stormridge Pack.

“Alpha,” Caelum reported gravely, “Riley intends to travel into the mountains tomorrow to confront Alpha Alaric and Scarlett. The roads are harsh. I fear her body won’t endure the journey.”

Lucien sat in silence, his eyes shadowed, his presence heavy with command. At last, he spoke, his voice low and resolute:

“Then I will go with her.”

The next morning dawned bright, sunlight spilling through the windows like golden fire.

Riley descended the stairs slowly, every step deliberate. In the sitting room, Lucien sat waiting, a newspaper in his hand. When her footsteps reached his ears, he looked up, his gaze softening instantly, warmth piercing through his usual cold

composure.

Caught off guard, Riley faltered, her heart skipping.

“Lucien,.. you didn’t go to the Pack Council today?”

He folded the paper, setting it aside, eyes never leaving her.

“You’re going to face Alpha Alaric and Scarlett today, aren’t you?”

Her brow furrowed.

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“Caelum told you?”

He inclined his head.

+10 Free Coins

Her hands tightened at her side. “Yes. There are things that must be ended. But Lucien...” her voice faltered, quiet but steady, “if you come with me, will it not delay your duties?”

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[1,037 words]

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Lucien Duskgrave only shook his head, his voice steady, “Don’t worry. I’ve already handed the work over to Duke.”

up

Riley fell silent for a moment before nodding. She knew once Lucien had made his mind, there was no force in Stormridge-or beyond-that could sway him.

Caelum Knox already had the vehicle waiting at the gates. When Riley and Lucien stepped inside, he started the engine with practiced ease.

From the back seat, Riley gazed out at Mooncrest-the city that had been her cage and her sanctuary. Her eyes softened, not out of love for the city itself, but for the few souls she was loath to leave behind-Lucien, and Matriarch Duskgrave. She knew once she stepped away, there might never be a way back.

The drive was quiet. By the time they reached the foothills of the distant mountains, the sun had already begun its slow descent, casting the path in jagged gold and shadow.

The mountain road was treacherous-narrow, uneven, and pitted with stones sharp as wolf fangs. Riley’s limp made each step a brutal struggle. She gritted her teeth, determined not to falter, but Lucien saw through her fragile mask with ease.

He crouched before her, his voice low, a growl softened into something almost tender.

“Climb on. I’ll carry you.”

Riley shook her head quickly. “These roads are dangerous. If I slow you down—”

“Enough,” Lucien cut in, his tone leaving no room for argument. His eyes burned like stormfire. “If you fall, it’ll be on me. Now... up.”

The weight of his command left her no choice. After a moment’s hesitation, Riley pressed herself against his back, feeling the solid strength of him as he rose with ease. His hands locked firmly around her thighs, as though he would never let her slip.

Caelum led the way, clearing a path over jagged rocks and gnarled roots. The air smelled of damp earth and faint blood-rogue territory.

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+10 Free Coins

Lucien moved carefully, every step measured, even as sweat glistened on his brow and soaked through his shirt. Riley rested her head against his shoulder, guilt gnawing at her chest.

“You should put me down,” she whispered against his ear. “I can walk.”

Lucien only huffed a short laugh. “You’ll stay where you are. We’re almost there.”

His voice was steady, commanding, and Riley stilled. She reached up once, brushing the sweat from his temple. His lips curled faintly, exhaustion eased by her touch.

After what felt like an eternity, the jagged line of ramshackle huts appeared in the distance, half-hidden in the shadows of the mountain. They stood crooked and broken, scars of a place abandoned by any true Pack bond.

That was where Alpha Alaric of the Ebonclaw Pack and Scarlett had been cast to survive.

Lucien finally set Riley down, and together with Caelum, they advanced. The closer they drew, the tighter Riley’s chest became. Old memories, sharp and poisonous, surfaced with every step. Lucien’s hand found hers, his grip firm, grounding her.

But before they reached the first hut, shadows stirred. A handful of Rogues slunk from the brush, their eyes gleaming yellow in the failing light. Scarred, ragged, and half-mad with hunger, they circled, teeth bared and claws flexing.

One lunged, snarling-only to freeze mid-stride.

Lucien's growl thundered across the clearing, low and resonant, carrying the weight of an Alpha's bloodline. His aura surged outward like a storm breaking over the mountains, slamming into the Rogues with invisible force.

The air thickened, heavy with dominance. Weaker wolves dropped instantly to their knees, whimpering as their throats bared against their will. The one who had lunged choked on his own snarl, his body trembling, eyes wide with terror as his wolf crumpled under the sheer pressure.

Lucien's stormfire gaze cut across them, merciless and unyielding. "Try it," he said softly, the promise of death clear in every syllable.

Not one Rogue moved. The hunger in their eyes curdled into fear. With tails

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+10 Free Coins

tucked and ears pinned back, they slunk into the shadows, the threat of violence dissolved by a dominance they could never hope to match.

Only when the last had fled did Lucien release the pressure, his hand still steady on Riley's. Her pulse raced, not from fear-but from the sheer reminder of what he was. Alpha-born. Stormridge's Prince. Untouchable.

Caelum, unruffled, gave a small smirk as though he had expected nothing less. "That saves us some trouble."

They pressed on, Caelum leading them straight to the right dwelling.

The structure was pathetic-a crumbling clay house, its walls split with deep cracks, its roof sagging under missing tiles. The stench of filth and unwashed bodies lingered in the yard where half-starved chickens and ducks scabbled in the dirt.

And then, from within, came the voice.

A man's roar, harsh and venomous, split the silence.

"Alpha Alaric, you used to be so powerful, but now you can only be a puppy among us. Where is the glory you once had when you attacked the Rogue gathering place?"

The voice grew harsher, spitting hatred like poison.

"As for you, you bitch! You're as filthy as that whore of a mother of yours! Two thousand coins I spent to buy that wench, and she had the audacity to defy me, to refuse my bed! If not for the son I needed, I would have slit her throat the first night and fed her to the dogs!"

A cruel laugh followed, jagged as broken glass.

"And the son she gave me? A rotten wolf, a traitor, a cripple. If I'd known, I would have slaughtered you both at birth and saved myself the trouble!"

His words dripped with venom, echoing through the broken house.

And Riley realized, with a cold chill crawling up her spine, that Alpha Alaric-once the proud leader of Ebonclaw Pack, the wolf who had hunted Rogues mercilessly- had become their plaything.

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+10 Free Coins

The Rogues would not grant him a warrior's death. No-he would be left to rot, tormented slowly, until nothing of the Alpha remained.

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[855 words]

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“Still want to eat? Eat filth instead!”

+10 Free Coins

With a vicious snarl, a man hurled another body out of the crumbling house.

The sound of flesh striking dirt echoed-thud!-dust exploding into the air as the figure hit the ground. The man who landed writhed in the mud, his limbs twisted and useless, unable to rise. His throat worked, producing only guttural, broken

moans.

It was Alpha Alaric.

Once the proud Alpha of the Ebonclaw Pack, a man who had commanded warriors and studied at Ebonclaw University, now he was reduced to this: a ragged shell dressed in tattered rags, reeking of filth. His frame was skeletal, cheekbones like blades beneath stretched skin, every inch of exposed flesh scarred and broken—a living testament to the rogues’ merciless cruelty.

A gaunt elder emerged from the doorway, skin darkened and weathered by age, eyes as cold as flint. Without a word, he drove his boot savagely into Alaric’s body.

“Useless filth,” the elder spat, each kick punctuating his venom. “You should have died long ago!”

Alaric convulsed, trying to speak, but his ruined body betrayed him. His stroke had stolen his voice; his slack mouth spilled only foul-smelling drool as he gurgled in despair.

It was then the elder finally noticed the newcomers at the edge of the yard-Riley, Lucien Duskgrave, and Caelum Knox. His gaze lingered on Caelum, recognition flashing; he remembered the one who had delivered Alaric and Scarlett to this forsaken place,

“You.... what business do you have here?” the old man demanded, suspicion in his voice.

Before Caelum could reply, a shrill scream tore through the air, carried from the direction of a crude pigpen.

The scream twisted into sobs as a man’s voice, dripping with malice, followed.

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“Ungrateful whore! To share my bed is a blessing, and yet you resist me? You’ve already been used by every male in this cesspit of a village, and still you pretend you’re pure? I’ll beat the defiance out of you!”

The sound of fists and boots colliding with flesh reverberated, followed by the woman’s ragged, desperate cries.

“I am the daughter of the Ebonclaw Pack’s Alpha! My father was a leader, my mother a noble lady, my brother a powerful heir! They will come for me—they will rescue me!” she screamed, clinging to delusions of her past life.

“Ha!” the man’s cruel laughter echoed. “Your father? That cripple in the dirt? He can’t even lift himself from the ground. You think he’ll save you?” His voice lowered to a growl. “You barren bitch. Can’t even give a male a pup. The only thing you’re good for is spreading your legs for us.”

He kicked her again, over and over, until his own breath came ragged and shallow. Finally, sweating and panting, he straightened, tugging his torn shirt into place. As he stepped out of the pen, his eyes found Riley.

The shift was instant. Hunger gleamed in his gaze, dark and feral. His lips peeled back into a grotesque grin, showing jagged yellow teeth.

“This one,” he rasped, eyes locked on Riley’s form. “She’s strong, healthy. She’ll give sons. How much? Name your price, and she’s mine.”

The lecherous words had barely left his mouth before Lucien Duskgrave moved. The Alpha Prince’s arm wrapped protectively around Riley, his obsidian gaze narrowing into a predator’s glare that promised death.

Caelum’s reaction was swifter, colder. With a snap of movement, his boot connected with the rogue’s chest, sending the man flying through the air. The impact shook the earth as he crashed three meters away, groaning and choking in the dirt. One strike had shattered his arrogance. He no longer dared to breathe a word of claim.

Chains clattered from within the pen-iron links dragging across stone. A figure crawled into view, each movement grotesque and agonizing.

It was Scarlett.

Or what remained of her.

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+10 Free Coins

Her body was wasted, nothing but skin clinging to bone. High cheekbones jutted sharply, eyes hollow and dull as if her soul had long since fled. Her tangled hair was caked with filth, her upper body clad in rags while her lower half was bare, stripped of dignity.

Her legs had been shattered, twisted into unnatural shapes so that she could no longer stand. Like an animal, she dragged herself forward, iron shackles locked to her ankles rattling with every pitiful crawl. Scars marred her flesh in every direction—slashes of blades, lashes of whips, bruises layered over bruises.

Scarlett's lips moved as she muttered to herself, her voice broken and distant.

"My father, my mother, my brother... they'll come. They love me most. I'm their jewel. They'll come for me. I must eat, I must be strong... eat, eat..."

Her words dissolved into empty repetition, as if the mantra could shield her from the nightmare around her.

Riley's breath caught in her throat. She had known Scarlett would be here, but the sight of her—reduced to this, yet still clinging to the shadow of the Ebonclaw Pack's glory—was a cruelty sharper than any blade.

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[805 words]

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Scarlett dragged her broken body toward the filthy trough. The stench of rot and animal waste clung to the air, thick enough to choke. Inside the trough was not food fit for wolves but scattered, half-molded chicken feed, damp and sour.

Without hesitation, the once-pampered daughter of the Ebonclaw Pack seized handfuls of the foul mash. She stuffed it into her mouth, chewing like a starving beast, smearing her gaunt face with grit and filth.

Riley stood still, her silver eyes sharp as blades, watching Scarlett degrade herself. A sneer curved her lips, the cruelty in her voice cutting deeper than any whip.

“Scarlett,” Riley said coldly, “did you ever imagine you’d crawl this low?”

At the sound of her voice, Scarlett froze mid-bite. Slowly, she turned, strands of matted hair clinging to her dirt-streaked face. Her hollow, lifeless eyes locked on Riley.

For a heartbeat, confusion flickered there-then the old hatred burst forth like fire. Recognition sharpened her gaze, and her body trembled with feral rage.

With a guttural snarl, she lunged, spit and crumbs spraying from her mouth, her broken limbs jerking with unnatural fury. She aimed straight for Riley’s throat, jaws wide as though she meant to rip it out.

The iron chain clamped around her ankles yanked her down before she could reach her prey. Scarlett’s skeletal frame slammed face-first into the muck, smearing her flesh with filth and animal droppings.

Yet the chain didn’t dampen her madness. She thrashed on the ground, clawing at the dirt, snapping her teeth like a rabid wolf.

“I’ll kill you! Kill you!” she shrieked, voice breaking into raw, animalistic screams.

Riley’s gaze was cold as moonlight. “Kill me? You?” She let her words drip with disdain, savoring each one. “You’re nothing but a chained cur.”

She stepped closer, her expression alight with grim satisfaction. “I came here today, Scarlett, not to save you. I came to see you rot. To look you in the eyes while you drown in the filth you earned.”

1/3

8:27 pmDED.

Chapter 286

+10 Free Coins

Her voice hardened, sharp with memory and vengeance. “Do you remember? At Ebonclaw Pack, you whispered poison into every ear. That was my home, but you turned them all against me. My parents. My brother. They all despised me for you. For you, they would have let me rot in a cell.”

Her laugh was jagged, bitter as iron. “Do you know why I endured the humiliation in the prison pits? Why I let them beat me, degrade me, and still lived? Because I waited for this day—to watch you suffer, to watch you crawl like the mongrel you are.”

Scarlett’s frenzy deepened. She thrashed harder, the chain biting into her skin, rattling with each desperate pull.

“My father is Alpha! My mother is the Pack’s Luna! My brother is a leader!” she screamed, her cracked voice trembling with delusion. “They’ll save me—they’ll kill anyone who hurt me!”

Riley barked out a cold laugh, sharp enough to cut flesh. “Alpha? Luna? Leader? Your father—Alpha Alaric—is a crippled husk, rotting in his own filth. Your mother, Luna Zara, blind and lost, howls in a madhouse. Your brother, Kael Vale, is rotting in chains. And you—look at yourself. A used vessel for Rogues. A toy for their rage. Lower than pigs.”

Scarlett shrieked louder, voice shattering the silence of the Rogue den. “No! No! I am the Ebonclaw princess! I was born to rule—you’re the curse, you’re the filth— you should die!”

Riley said nothing more. She simply stood, arms crossed, her eyes glinting with cruel satisfaction as Scarlett howled herself hoarse.

Let her scream. Let her rot. Soon the earth itself would swallow her.

Then—cold fingers clutched Riley’s ankle.

She startled, instinctively lashing out with a swift kick. Her boot connected with a sunken face—Alpha Alaric’s face.

Blood spilled from his nose, but he didn’t recoil. His gaze—once commanding, now sunken and desperate—clung to her. His lips trembled as he forced broken sounds from his throat:

“Home... take me... back...”

2/3

8:27 pmGD

Chapter 286

+10 Free Coins

His voice was wet, slurred, nearly lost to the stroke that twisted his body. But his eyes were lucid—burning with humiliation, torment, and pitiful hope.

Life among the Rogues had been nothing short of torment for him. Once, he had marched against these wild wolves, leading hunts into their territory. Now, as their captive, they took their revenge slowly. They beat him daily, withheld food and water, left him wallowing in his own waste.

And now, seeing Riley here, Alaric clung to her as though she were his last salvation.

But Riley only looked down, her face cold as frost, lips curling with venom.

“Alpha Alaric,” she whispered, voice low and sharp. “Why would you ever believe I’d take you home?”

3/3

8:27 pm

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[870 words]

Chapter 287

Chapter 287

Riley’s POV

+10 Free Coins

“Was it because you abandoned me to Rogues? Or because you carved a kidney out of me just to save Scarlett?”

My voice was ice, every word a blade sinking into Alpha Alaric’s chest.

“You cold-blooded beast. To harm your own mate and child... whatever fate you’ve come to suffer, you earned it yourself.”

A humorless laugh escaped me, sharp as broken glass. “And you still dare beg me? How laughable.”

I drove my boot hard into him. The once-mighty Alpha of Ebonclaw Pack crumpled in the mud, coughing blood, his body trembling. Yet even beaten and broken, he pawed toward me, his mouth forming garbled pleas, his eyes desperate.

I stood unmoved, watching him writhe. There was no pity left in me, no thread of daughterly mercy.

“I already told you. I came here only to witness with my own eyes the ruin of you and Scarlett. Now I have seen it. My heart is finally at ease.”

Terror swam in his gaze, wide and frantic. He wanted to scream that he hadn't meant it, that it was Dean Elira Blackthorn who poisoned his mind, that Caden Blackthorn had twisted his hand. That he was a victim, not a monster.

But no sound came.

I turned from him, my eyes cutting to Scarlett.

She looked like a drowned cur, caked in filth, shackled and snarling even in her pitiful state.

I smiled coldly, “Scarlett... my kidney has served you long enough. Don't you think it's time to return it?”

She froze at my words, caught in my gaze. For the first time, her bravado shattered. Her body shook, and she scrambled backward on hands and knees until she tumbled into the sty, reeking of mud and rot.

1/3

Chapter 287

+10 Free Coins

Step by step, I followed. My body was weak, but my will was iron. She huddled in the corner, arms clutched tight, trembling like prey before a predator.

How pitiful she looked.

And how utterly undeserving of pity.

Above us, the sky darkened. When we had climbed the mountain, it had been bright. Now thunder grumbled in the clouds, lightning flashing at the edges. The storm was coming.

Everyone who had wronged me had fallen. Their punishment was more wretched than my own suffering had ever been. The weight on my chest loosened. My chains broke with the storm.

I turned to Lucien. "My lord... the rain is coming. Let's take Scarlett and leave this place."

Lucien gave a short nod, flicking his gaze to Caelum.

Caelum's eyes gleamed with unspoken understanding. He strode to the old man- the cruel patriarch who had once held even Alpha Alaric in check-and growled, his voice steel and storm. "The key to the chains. Now."

Power rolled off him, pressing the old wolf flat. Wheezing, terrified, the man fumbled the key from his robes and thrust it into Caelum's hand.

Without hesitation, Caelum entered the sty. His movements were sharp, merciless, as he unlatched the lock and seized the chain. With one brutal yank, Scarlett was wrenched from the filth like a hog dragged for slaughter.

She thrashed, shrieking, but her body was wasted, bones jutting under her skin. Her claws raked the earth but found no purchase. To Caelum she was nothing more than a dog on a leash, dragged through the muck.

Lucien knelt before me, voice low, tender in contrast to the violence around us. "Riley, Get on. I'll carry you."

This time, I did not argue. My limbs gave in to the warmth of his strength. Slowly, I climbed onto his back, resting against him as he lifted me as though I weighed nothing at all.

Together we left the rotting yard, down the twisted mountain path. The storm

2/3

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Chapter 287

broke above us, rain hammering down, drenching earth and bone alike.

+10 Free Coins

Behind us, I could still hear Alaric's broken cries-garbled, wet, a child's whimper trapped in an old wolf's throat. His eyes followed me, wild and pleading, snot and tears running into the mud.

But I never looked back.

The old man snarled in frustration at his pitiful noise. Seizing a broom, he laid into Alaric's body with savage blows. "Cry, cry, cry—your old man's not dead yet! What are you howling for, you cursed thing?!"

The broken Alpha tried to shield himself, but the strikes landed mercilessly until, finally, he collapsed, unconscious.

The patriarch tossed the broom aside with disgust, muttering curses as he turned away, leaving Alaric's body in the storm.

Rain poured harder, each drop like a spear. Within moments, Alaric was soaked through, lying motionless in the mud, blood and filth washing from his ruined frame.

No one spared him a glance.

Scarlett stumbled as Caelum dragged her forward, her knees shredding on stone, nails breaking, palms torn raw.

Lucien bore me on his back, every step steady despite the mud sucking at his boots. Each stride sent water splashing high, his strength a constant, unshakable force beneath me.

And I finally free of the past-let the storm wash my soul clean.

And I'm about to get my kidney back.

3/3

8:28 pm ED

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[809 words]

Chapter 288

Lucien's POV

The storm broke too suddenly.

+10 Free Coins

Rain lashed against my back, soaking through cloak and shirt until the weight of it dragged at me. I could take it. I'd endured worse hunts, worse wounds. But Riley... Riley was fragile, already wounded, and the thought of this cold seeping into her body twisted my gut with unease.

This rain came at the worst possible time.

There was no shelter, no cave, no outcropping strong enough to withstand the tempest. The only way was forward.

Thunder cracked overhead, splitting the sky. The mountain path narrowed beneath our boots, treacherous and slick with mud. Then came the blinding flash -lightning spearing down, striking a tree ahead with a sound like the gods themselves snapping bone.

The oak exploded into fire and ash, splitting in half, the smell of char thick in the downpour.

Riley stiffened against my back, her pulse a quickened thrum where her chest pressed my shoulder. I could feel the unease radiating from her, and my own wolf bristled in response. Danger.

Caelum's voice cut through the storm, sharp and commanding: "Alpha, we need to move faster. Too many trees around us. We're exposed."

He was right. Our vehicle was too far behind, left at the foot of the mountain where wheels could still turn. Here, among these cliffs, only our legs could carry us forward.

I adjusted Riley on my back, my grip tightening on her thighs. "Hold on," I muttered, pushing my pace, my boots splashing through water and mud.

The storm roared, hammering at us. Then-

A low, ominous rumble. Not thunder. Deeper. Heavier.

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+10 Free Coins

Caelum's instincts saved us again. His shout was a wolf's snarl in human form: "Slide! The mountain's giving way!"

I jerked my head up-and saw it.

The hillside above us heaved, earth and stone and entire trees tearing loose, rolling toward us in a monstrous wave.

Before I could move, Riley slipped from my back. My heart lurched.

She twisted, her strength faltering yet her will like tempered steel, and shoved me with everything she had.

I staggered forward, my footing breaking against the mud, unprepared for her strike. By the time I righted myself, she was behind me, her face lifted, smiling through the rain-smiling at me like it was the last gift she would ever give.

“Lucien,” her lips shaped the words, though the storm swallowed her voice. “I wish you a long life... with a mate at your side, children at your feet, peace until your final breath...”

The world blurred, water and grief burning my eyes.

‘No!’ My roar split my throat raw. My wolf surged, a storm within a storm, and I lunged back for her.

The landslide struck at that moment, a beast of earth and stone crashing down.

I threw myself over her, arms locking around her body, driving her to the ground as the avalanche swallowed us whole.

The impact ripped the breath from me. Stones and mud battered my back, each strike like a spear. Pain blazed down my spine, a thousand knives digging to the bone. I snarled, biting back the sound, forcing my body to shield hers.

Every muscle screamed, arms shaking, veins bulging as I braced myself against the weight of the mountain. My wolf howled inside me, pouring strength into limbs that should have already broken.

Caelum’s shout cut faintly through the thunder and chaos. “Alpha! Riley!” His voice, strained, desperate, chasing us even as the storm tried to bury us alive.

Mud splattered, trees cracked, the roar of sliding earth swallowing the world.

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In my arms, Riley wept-silent tears mingling with rain on her cheeks.

+10 Free Coins

“You shouldn’t have saved me...” she whispered, her voice fragile, torn away by the storm.

I tightened my hold, forcing the words through gritted teeth, through pain that threatened to split me apart. “Don’t be afraid, Riley. I’m here. I’ll always be here.”

The weight grew heavier. More earth. More stone. My arms began to bend, inch by inch, the strength bleeding from me. But I would not let her go. Not to this storm. Not to fate.

A boulder crashed against my back, the shock a white-hot fire that ripped the air from my lungs. Blood filled my mouth, copper sharp against my tongue. My body buckled-just for a moment-then slammed down hard against Riley.

Her hands reached for me in the dark, trembling, searching until her fingers brushed my cheek. Even blind in this chaos, she sought me.

Her touch carved pain and solace into me both.

The storm buried us. Darkness pressed in. But my wolf’s vow burned fiercer than the thunder above:

If the mountain wanted to take her, it would have to crush me first.

3/3

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[1,351 words]

Chapter 289

Chapter 289

Lucien’s POV

The weight pressed down until my bones screamed.

+10 Free Coins

Mud, stone, broken branches-the mountain wanted to bury us, to grind us into nothing. My arms trembled, bent under the crushing force. But even as blood trickled hot down my back, I refused to let go.

Riley was beneath me. Small. Fragile. Alive only because I was holding the storm back with my own body.

My wolf roared inside my chest, clawing against the confines of my skin. Enough. Enough of human fragility. Enough of bleeding and breaking. She is ours, and nothing will take her.

I let go.

The change ripped through me, spine snapping, muscles twisting, claws splitting from my hands. My body stretched and broke and rebuilt itself in fire and shadow. I threw my head back, jaws elongating, teeth piercing through gums, and I howled -the sound rising above the thunder, cutting through the storm like a blade.

The wolf took shape. My wolf. White as lightning, vast as the storm itself.

The earth that had pinned me moments before now slid harmlessly down my shoulders, breaking over my fur and claws as if I were a boulder rooted into the mountain. I shook, spraying mud in every direction, and forced the landslide back with brute strength and fury.

Riley lay beneath me, eyes wide, lips parted, rain streaking across her pale face. She whispered my name-my human name-but it didn't matter. She knew it was

I bent down, nudging her with my muzzle, urging her close. She clutched my fur, burying her fingers deep, and I lifted her carefully onto my back.

"Alpha!" Caelum's voice broke through the storm, rough with relief and panic. He'd clawed his way across the mudslide, his clothes torn, his face streaked with blood and dirt. "I thought-"

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+10 Free Coins

I cut him off with a growl, deep and commanding, and jerked my head toward the path. No time for words. We had to move.

He understood at once. That was why he was my shield-brother. He turned, clearing a path ahead with the instinct of a wolf who had marched through war. I followed, every stride of my wolf-form deliberate, steady, Riley's weight light against my back. She clung to me, her heartbeat fluttering like a wounded bird.

We pushed through the storm, the mountain groaning behind us, until at last the mud gave way to gravel and the trail widened. My paws dug into the earth, throwing water and dirt behind me, carrying us down the slope with savage speed.

The night blurred. The storm raged. And then-the faint glow of headlights.

Our vehicle. The one Caelum had left at the mountain's base.

I bounded the last stretch, landing in the mud beside the car. Caelum wrenched the doors open, leaping into the driver's seat, already starting the engine. I shifted back in a rush of snapping bones, cradling Riley against my chest as I slid into the backseat.

Her lips were bloodless, her eyes half-lidded. I pressed my forehead to hers, my breath ragged. "Stay with me, Riley. Just a little longer. You're not leaving me in this storm."

99

The car lurched forward, tires skidding against wet rock. Caelum drove like the devil himself was chasing us, every second carved from fate's knife edge.

Riley's pulse fluttered weakly beneath my fingers. Too weak. My wolf snarled, furious at the fragility of flesh, at the gods who would dare make her suffer.

And then-through the thunder and rain-came a sound. Faint. Raw. Familiar.

A voice.

"...help..."

Caelum's knuckles tightened on the wheel. His gaze flicked to mine in the rearview mirror. He'd heard it too.

The sound came again, weaker, as if carried on the wind itself. "... Lucien..."

Scarlett.

2/5

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Chapter 289

+10 Free Coins

I slammed a hand against the window, forcing Caelum to a halt. The tires shrieked in protest. Riley stirred faintly against my chest, whispering something I couldn't hear.

"Stay here," I snarled, laying her gently on the seat. My wolf clawed beneath my skin, restless, demanding action. I shoved the door open and leapt into the storm.

The voice guided me—broken, faltering, but desperate enough to cut through the downpour. I found her slumped against a rock outcropping, her body broken, her breath shallow, eyes glassy with pain.

Scarlett.

Her scent was drenched with blood. Her hands clawed weakly toward me as if even now she didn't believe I would come.

I crouched beside her, the rain washing crimson from her skin, and pressed my palm to her cheek. "I won't let you die."

Her lips trembled. "It's too late..."

"No." My voice came out a growl, my wolf seething through every word. "You will live. I'll drag you back from the grave itself if I have to."

She tried to shake her head, but I gripped her tighter, leaning close so she couldn't look away. "Not until what was stolen from Riley is restored. Not until her kidney is returned to her body. Do you understand me? You don't get to die until then."

For a moment, something sparked in her gaze—shame, despair, perhaps even the faintest ember of defiance. She breathed out a broken sound that might have been a sob.

I lifted her into my arms, her weight barely more than Riley's. My body ached, torn and battered, but strength surged anew. My wolf fed me its fury, its refusal to break.

Back at the car, Caelum swung the door open, his face pale but resolute. "Hospitals are thirty minutes if we drive like hell."

"Then drive like hell," I snapped, lowering Scarlett onto the seat beside Riley.

I sat between them, one arm wrapped protectively around Riley, the other bracing Scarlett against me as the car tore down the mountain road.

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14:

+10 Free Coins

The storm still raged outside, lightning splitting the sky, thunder pounding the earth. But inside that car, I made my vow in silence, my wolf's growl rumbling low in my chest.

Riley would live. Scarlett would live—long enough to make things right.

Because I was Lucien Duskgrave, Alpha Prince of the Stormridge Pack.

And no storm, no mountain, no fate would take them from me.

Or so I thought.

We hadn't driven a mile before the world itself split open.

A roar like the sky collapsing cracked through the night. The mountainside above us convulsed, stones tearing free, trees shattering as roots ripped from the soil. Caelum cursed, slamming the wheel, tires shrieking as he tried to outpace the collapse.

But it was too late.

A shadow darker than the storm fell over us, vast boulders tumbling like the fists of gods. I had one heartbeat to decide.

My wolf surged, savage and absolute. No hesitation. No fear. Only instinct- protect.

"Down!" I snarled, wrapping my arms around Riley, shoving her against the floor of the car, my body folding over hers. My bones shifted, half-shift dragging claws and fur from my skin as I braced myself between her and the roof. My back arched, muscles screaming as the first stone struck.

Metal screamed. Glass shattered.

The roof caved inward.

I roared, a sound torn from my chest, my wolf lending me strength no mortal body could hold. Every ounce of my being poured into holding the weight back, even as steel bent into my spine and the boulders hammered down.

Pain split me open. Fire raced down my nerves. My vision blurred. But beneath me, Riley was untouched, her soft breath still rising and falling, fragile but alive.

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Chapter 289

ED

+10 Free Coins

Scarlett's cry was faint, Caelum's voice lost in the storm, but none of it mattered.

Only Riley.

Only her heartbeat.

The car groaned one last time before the mountain's wrath consumed it whole.

And with my last strength, I swore again—this storm would not take her. Not while a single drop of blood still burned in my veins.

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8:28 pm E

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[1,058 words]

Chapter 290

Chapter 290

Riley's POV

My heart clenched so hard it felt like it might tear apart.

+10 Free Coins

“Lucien, are you alright? Don’t—don’t waste your strength on me! I’m nothing but a cripple. I’m not worth this!”

But he didn’t answer, or maybe he couldn’t. He only held me tighter, his body pressed against mine, shielding me from the crushing storm of stone and mud.

In that suffocating darkness, every breath was ragged, every heartbeat sharp in my ears. I could feel his heart against me—strong at first, steady as an Alpha’s—but then weaker... slower.

“No...” Tears blurred my eyes. Guilt crashed over me harder than the landslide. If not for me, Lucien would never have been dragged into this. He’d never have been broken beneath this mountain.

“Lucien Duskgrave, you can’t die! You promised me—you said you’d stay by my side!” My voice cracked, swallowed by thunder and the grinding avalanche.

His lips brushed my ear. A whisper, so faint I almost imagined it.

“Don’t... be afraid...”

Then nothing. His body went still against mine.

Terror flooded me. The kind that claws and tears, that drowns the soul. I screamed for help, the sound raw and frantic, but no one answered. Only the storm, only the weight, only silence.

The mud pressed tighter. The air thinned. My lungs burned, my head spun, and the world around me began to fade. My last thought before blackness took me was his face—his eyes, his strength, his vow to protect me.

And then there was nothing.

I woke to the sting of antiseptic.

Before my eyes even opened, I knew the scent: hospitals. The sharp, sterile tang of

1/4

8:28 pm ED

Chapter 290

+10 Free Coins

death fought back with human tools. My chest seized, memory slamming back- the landslide, Lucien's body over mine, the weight of stone, his heartbeat weakening.

I snapped my eyes open. White ceiling. White walls. Machines chirping steadily like false heartbeats.

I was alive.

But Lucien-where was he?

I tried to sit up, tried to throw myself out of the bed, but my body betrayed me. Nothing moved. My limbs were heavy, numb, lifeless. Panic clawed at me. Was I paralyzed?

"No..." I whispered, voice breaking. Then louder, desperate: "Nurse! Nurse!"

A woman appeared, pushing a wheelchair. Her body was rounder, her face hidden behind a mask. She moved without urgency, without warmth.

"Lucien," I gasped. "Lucien Duskgrave-where is he? Tell me, is he alright?"

Her voice was flat, almost cold. "He's fine. If you wish to see him, I can take you."

Something about her tone scratched at me. Familiar. Wrong. But my chest was filled with only Lucien. My mind burned with the need to see him, to know he still breathed.

"Yes-take me. Please, now."

She leaned closer, lifted me from the bed with surprising strength, and settled me into the chair. My body sagged, useless, my nerves still poisoned with whatever they'd given me. She wheeled me into the hall, down to the elevator.

I sagged against the chair, impatient, my wolf snarling inside me to run, to find him, to feel his heartbeat again.

But then-I saw the button she pressed.

Bl.

My heart lurched. "The basement? But... the patient wards aren't—"

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Chapter 290

She didn't answer. Silence smothered us, thick and heavy.

+10 Free Coins

A prickle of fear crawled over my skin. Slowly, I turned my head toward her. And met eyes that burned with hate.

"You're not a nurse," I whispered. My chest tightened. My wolf bristled, restless, warning me. "Who are you?"

The mask came off.

I froze. Recognition slammed into me. "Selene Ashford..."

I'd only seen her once-at Carmen's birthday gathering in the Silverfang Den. But her face was burned into memory. The bitterness in her smile, the venom in her gaze. She'd changed-softer, rounder, but those eyes... I would never forget them.

Her lips curled into a smile that reeked of poison. "Surprised, Riley?"

I swallowed, my hands gripping the useless arms of the chair. "What are you doing here? Where's Lucien?"

Her laugh was sharp, cutting. "You're still thinking of him? Even when you're at my mercy? Gods, you really are a whore, aren't you?"

I tried to rise, tried to summon strength-but my body refused me. My limbs were dead weight, the anesthesia still thick in my veins.

She saw my struggle, smirked. "Don't waste your strength. The drugs haven't worn off yet. You're not going anywhere."

My blood ran cold. "Drugs...? You-you drugged me?"

Selene leaned close, her breath acrid, her words dripping with venom. "Not me. The doctors. You needed anesthesia for the surgery."

"Surgery?" My voice cracked. My wolf snarled inside me, restless, afraid. "What surgery?"

Her grin widened. "The one where they cut you open. Where they gave back your kidney,"

The words hit me like a blade to the chest.

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Chapter 290

+10 Free Coins

My kidneys are back and I'm a complete wolf now, but Sia, my wolf still weak in my body, it must be that damn wolfsbane.

Selene's eyes glittered with triumph, with spite. "You didn't know? Oh, Riley. All this time you thought Lucien was your shield, your Alpha. Do you know what he endured while you slept? His legs were shattered by the mountain, crushed beyond recognition. And yet... he sat outside that operating room for a full day and night. Broken. Bleeding. Just to make sure your surgery succeeded."

Her laughter cut me open. "And for what? You, lying here, helpless. Worthless. Still clinging to him like a leech."

I wanted to scream. To fight. To rip her throat out with my own teeth. But my body was stone, my limbs dead.

Inside me, my wolf raged, battering against the cage of anesthesia, howling for Lucien, howling for blood.

And in that moment, I swore-I would not stay weak. Not for her. Not for fate. Not for anyone.

Selene seemed to see the rage in my heart. She just sneered, "Don't even think about shifting. I know you have a white wolf, and now you have got your kidney back. I've been planning for a long time to find this perfect time. Now that you're at your weakest, it's time to make you pay the price."

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[977 words]

Chapter 291

Chapter 291

Riley's POV

+10 Free Coins

My chest ached with every breath, each word Selene Ashford spat sinking into me like poisoned claws.

“Lucien...” I whispered, my voice trembling, desperate. “Tell me-
-how is Lucien Duskgrave? What have you done to him?”

Selene's lips curled into a sneer, her eyes burning with madness. “How would I know-or care? A fool like him deserves death. Better gone than wasting his strength on a filthy thing like you.”

Her words cut deeper than any blade. My heart twisted, torn between fear and fury. I wanted to rise, to strike, to tear the smirk from her face with my own teeth -but the drugs still chained my body, leaving me weak and trembling in her grip.

The elevator chimed, a hollow sound that echoed through the suffocating silence. Ding.

The doors slid open to reveal the underground parking level, dim and cold, shadows crawling across the concrete like hungry wolves. The air was damp, reeking of oil and dust, and I knew-this was no place for healing. This was a den of death.

“Where are you taking me?” My voice cracked with panic as Selene shoved me forward. My wolf howled inside me, clawing at the walls of my mind, demanding I fight, demanding I protect what was mine. I thrashed as much as my limp body allowed, the wheelchair rattling across the concrete. “Let me go! I need to see Lucien!”

My defiance only enraged her. With a snarl, Selene raised her hand and struck me hard across the face. The sound cracked through the empty garage, and fire exploded along my jaw. Warmth spilled from the corner of my mouth-blood, sharp and metallic on my tongue.

“Bitch,” she spat, eyes blazing with hate. “Stop struggling. You fell into my hands- do you think you'll ever escape?”

She yanked my head back by the hair, forcing me to meet her wild gaze. My scalp burned, tears stung my eyes, but I refused to look away.

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Chapter 291

+10 Free Coins

Her voice dripped with venom. “Do you know what he did to me, that Alpha you cling to? Six months ago, Lucien forced me to gorge on sweets, on cakes every damned day until my body broke. I grew heavier, bloated, my beauty ruined. I starved, I clawed at myself, and still the weight clung to me. And then-diabetes. Pain. Shame.”

Her laugh was jagged, fraying at the edges of sanity. “He ruined me. So now, I’ll ruin him. I’ll make him suffer as I suffered-watching the only woman he loves vanish into the shadows.”

I bared my teeth, every fiber of my being screaming to sink fangs into her throat. My voice came out a growl, raw and trembling: “You’re insane.”

Selene’s grin widened, feral. “And Carmen-oh, sweet Carmen, your precious friend. When she learns you’re gone, she’ll unravel, won’t she? She’ll search until she breaks. I can already picture her scouring the Stormridge borders, screaming your name, her soul tearing apart piece by piece. And I’ll watch her despair, and I’ll laugh.”

Her laughter rang through the garage, sharp and unhinged. I fought against the chair, my wrists aching, my nails tearing skin, but my body refused me.

Selene shoved me toward a waiting vehicle. Its door swung open with a groan, revealing a figure inside-familiar, despised.

Maddox.

The sight of him turned my stomach to ash. My blood boiled, rage searing through the helpless fog of drugs. My voice dropped to a low snarl. “You. Maddox. So this was your scheme all along with her?”

—

For a heartbeat, I saw hesitation in his eyes. Guilt. Fear. Then it was gone, replaced by a polished mask, his lips twisting into that false, charming smile I’d once been too naïve to see through.

He leaned forward, his hand lifting as though to caress my face. I jerked away, revulsion ripping through me. His hand fell short.

Still, he kept smiling. “Riley, you don’t understand. You and I-we’re fated. Star- crossed. Lucien? He’s a prince, a Stormridge Alpha heir. Do you truly believe he sees you as anything more than a fleeting amusement?”

His voice softened, oily with false sincerity. “Come with me, Riley. Be mine, and

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I'll give you the happiness you deserve."

+10 Free Coins

My laugh was bitter, hollow. "Happiness? With you? Maddox, you are rot disguised as silk. You disgust me."

His eyes hardened, but he said nothing. Selene snarled, impatient. With cruel hands, she dragged me from the chair and shoved me into the car. My body sagged, numb and unresponsive, but inside my wolf raged, slamming against the walls of my skin, demanding blood.

I screamed, throat raw, the sound tearing from me like a wolf's death-howl. "Help! Someone-help me! They're trying to take me—!"

Before I could finish, Maddox pressed a cloth to my mouth and nose.

The scent hit me instantly-sweet, cloying, poisonous. My lungs convulsed, the world tilting. My wolf recoiled, thrashing, but the drug was stronger.

No. Not again.

Memories flooded me, sharp and cruel: the night I fled the Ebonclaw Pack, running for freedom. The Mooncrest station, the train almost in sight. And then- the hand, the cloth, the darkness. Theo Hale's trap dragging me back into chains.

And now-it was happening again. Maddox's face loomed over me, blurred at the edges, his voice a venomous whisper.

My chest heaved. My claws tried to tear free, my wolf howled, but my body failed me. The fog thickened, swallowing everything.

"No..." My lips barely moved. The word vanished into the cloth. My vision flickered, stars bursting against the black.

Lucien's face burned in my mind. His hands, his warmth, his vow. My Alpha. My storm.

Darkness surged, drowning me.

And I fell.

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[1,079 words]

Chapter 292

Chapter 292

Third Person's POV

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The sterile silence of the hospital corridor was broken only by the click of a door unlatching. The red light above the surgical ward flickered off, and the door slowly opened.

Lucien Duskgrave was wheeled out on a gurney, pale and motionless. Caelum Knox, who had been standing guard outside for hours without rest, immediately stepped forward.

The surgeon removed his mask, his voice calm but edged with gravity. "The patient's leg bones have been reset. The surgery was successful. But he must remain in bed for at least a month. Absolutely no weight on his legs during this period."

Caelum frowned, his wolf restless under his skin. "Why won't his healing take care of it? He is Alpha-born. His regeneration should outpace any fracture."

The doctor's eyes darkened with something close to unease. "Normally, yes. But not in this case. His injuries were sustained mid-shift. The bones snapped while caught between man and wolf form. That kind of rupture distorts the very alignment of spirit and flesh. His natural regeneration cannot decide what shape to knit to-it stalls, caught in the fracture."

Caelum's jaw tightened. He had seen it before-rare, brutal. The kind of wound even an Alpha might not walk away from.

The doctor added, "If we had left him to self-heal, his legs might have fused incorrectly-half human, half wolf. A permanent deformity. Surgery was the only way to guide the bone back into proper alignment. Now, only time and restraint will allow his body to finish what our hands have started."

Caelum gave a terse nod, then pushed Lucien into a private recovery room. For a time, silence stretched, broken only by the faint rhythmic beeping of machines.

At last, Lucien stirred. His lashes fluttered, and his eyes-still sharp despite the pallor of exhaustion-opened. His first words were not about himself.

"How is Riley?" His voice was hoarse, but the urgency in it was unmistakable.

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+10 Free Coins

Caelum's lips twitched into something close to reassurance. "You may rest easy, Alpha. Riley's transplant surgery was successful. The organ was her own to begin with; there will be no rejection. Her body just needs time to recover. In fact, she may heal faster than your legs."

Lucien's gaze flickered toward his bandaged limbs, silver eyes shadowed but steady. He understood. He remembered the landslide, the way he had forced a partial shift to shield Riley from the falling boulders. His body had paid the price for that choice.

A faint smile ghosted across his otherwise ashen face. Relief loosened the tension etched in his features. "Good. With her body mended, she'll no longer carry the weight of guilt. She won't think of leaving me anymore."

His eyes hardened, his tone edged with iron. "Her legs and her hearing still need attention. I'll find the finest specialists in the world, no matter the price. I will see her whole again."

Then, as if an afterthought, he asked, "And Scarlett?"

Caelum's expression darkened. His laugh was sharp, cold, with no trace of pity. "Dead."

Lucien blinked. "Dead? For the loss of one kidney alone?"

Caelum shook his head slowly, voice edged with disdain. "Her death was no simple matter of a missing organ."

The memory rose before him vividly.

Also she was saved by Lucien once, but when the mountainside collapsed again, Scarlett had been struck down by falling stone. The massive boulders crushed her lower body, pinning her beneath their weight. Pain had burned through her so violently that, for a fleeting moment, the madness clouding her mind receded. Instinct—the raw, animal drive to survive—forced its way through her delirium.

“Help me,” she had begged, her voice thin and desperate. “Please... I don’t want to die. Save me.”

But Caelum’s focus then had been singular: Riley and Lucien. He had no time for a woman who had long chosen her own destruction.

Scarlett’s fingers had clawed into the dirt, nails shattering one by one until they

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+10 Free Coins

were torn and bleeding. She had dragged furrows in the earth as if sheer will might free her, but the stone never relented. Her screams grew weaker, her strength bled out onto the soil, until the light in her eyes guttered and went dark.

By the time she was carried into surgery alongside Riley, there was nothing left of her but the shallow flutter of a dying breath. When her kidney was harvested, her body gave in entirely, and she perished upon the table.

Lucien listened in silence. His expression betrayed little—no grief, no pity. Only the cold weight of inevitability. Scarlett had sown the seeds of her own end.

“She chose her path,” he said at last. His tone was flat, final. “Caelum, leave me. Go check on Riley.”

Caelum inclined his head, shoulders taut with restrained tension. He obeyed without hesitation, striding swiftly to Riley’s ward.

Yet when he entered, the sight that met him stopped him cold.

The bed was empty.

Sheets lay rumpled, the air still faintly carrying her scent, but the girl herself— gone.

For a moment his mind went white, blank with disbelief. Riley had just survived surgery. Her body was fragile, too weak to even walk, much less vanish. How could she simply disappear?

A cold dread settled in his gut. Without wasting another heartbeat, Caelum summoned the attending physicians.

When the doctors arrived and saw the vacant bed, their faces paled. Panic buzzed through them. Orders flew, and they rushed to pull the hospital's security footage.

The monitors flickered to life, and the grainy recording played.

There she was. Riley-slumped in a wheelchair, her head tilted, her body limp with exhaustion.

Behind her, a woman in nurse's scrubs pushed her through the hall. But she was no nurse. The body beneath the uniform was heavysset, the gait wrong, the face partially hidden by a mask.

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+10 Free Coins

They watched as the imposter wheeled Riley through the hospital corridors, pressed the elevator button, and disappeared into the shadows of the lower levels.

Caelum's hands curled into fists, his claws itching beneath his skin. His wolf snarled inside him, rage and fear colliding like thunder.

She had been stolen. Taken from under their very noses.

And whoever had dared to lay hands on Riley Vale had just declared war on Stormridge Pack itself.

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[944 words]

Chapter 293

Chapter 293

Riley's POV

Pain.

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That was the first thing I felt as consciousness clawed me back from the void. The anesthesia had worn off, leaving only the raw, stabbing agony that radiated from my side. My new kidney-my own kidney, returned to me-burned like fire under my skin. Each breath felt like swallowing knives, and a cold sweat broke over me, dampening the thin shift clinging to my body.

I forced my eyes open.

Darkness.

Not the dim haze of nightfall, not the shadow of hospital curtains, but smothering, unnatural black. Panic fluttered in my chest until I heard the rough rustle of fabric.

With a harsh "whrrp," the heavy drape was yanked away.

Light flooded in, searing my vision. And there she was.

Selene Ashford.

Her smile was a twisted parody of grace, sharp as a fang. She leaned forward, amusement and malice mingling in her expression. "Riley Vale," she drawled, savoring my name like venom on her tongue, "tell me how does it feel to live like a mongrel in a kennel?"

Her voice slithered around me, mocking, cruel.

—

She began to circle the iron cage that confined me, her heels clicking against the floor with predatory rhythm. "Tsk, tsk. Who would've thought the betrothed of Lucien Duskgrave, Alpha Prince of the Stormridge Pack, would one day be reduced to this? A dog in a cage." Her laughter cracked sharp in the air, shrill and grating.

The words would have gutted anyone else.

But I'd long since learned what it meant to be beaten, starved, caged, stripped of dignity. Insults slid off me like rain off a wolf's coat. I had already been made into

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prey so many times that mockery no longer pierced me.

+10 Free Coins

So I sat in the cage, back straight despite the ache in my side, and fixed her with a steady stare. My silence was my answer. My eyes told her the truth: she was nothing but a jester to me. A wolf howling into the void, desperate for attention.

My calm only fanned her rage.

Selene spat curses, her voice climbing higher with every breath. She circled, pacing like a restless predator. Ten minutes, maybe more-her voice cracked, her throat rasped, yet she raged on.

I didn't give her the satisfaction of a single word.

When at last she faltered, her lips dry and her fury spent, I let my own words spill, low and cold. "Are you finished?"

Her eyes narrowed.

"Good. Because now it's my turn." I leaned forward, my hands curled loosely around the iron bars. "You've forgotten what happened six months ago. You've forgotten how I broke you then. Do you really think Lucien would forgive this? Do you think he won't smell your stink of betrayal the moment I tell him?"

The venom in my voice drew her close. Her face twisted, rage burning like wildfire. She leaned so close her hot breath ghosted my skin.

"Bitch," she hissed, her eyes bloodshot, veins straining in her neck. "You and Carmen ruined me! Took everything from me. I have nothing left to lose. Nothing! Do you hear me? I'm barefoot on broken glass now, and I don't care if I bleed. If I go down, I'll drag you with me."

Her madness radiated off her like heat.

Her lips peeled back in a grin that showed too much tooth. "I want to watch you die slowly, Vale. I want to watch the Alpha Prince cradle your corpse, watch the light die in his eyes. Oh, the look on his face when he realizes you're gone will be exquisite."

My jaw tightened. I narrowed my eyes, letting my own truth cut her. "Then listen well. I'm already dying, Selene. My body is broken beyond repair. But you?" I tilted my head, my voice like a wolf's snarl, quiet but sharp. "You could live decades. Every breath you take is one I can rip away. If I can trade this failing body for your

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life, it will be a fair bargain."

The words struck. I saw the fury flare brighter.

+10 Free Coins

Her shriek ripped through the room. She slammed her hands against the cage, shaking the iron until it rattled. "I'll kill you! I'll rip you apart, bitch!"

I remained still, watching her unravel. The predator in me stirred, calm in the face of her hysteria. She thought me prey, but her frenzy betrayed her-she was the cornered one, snapping wildly at shadows.

In truth, I almost welcomed the thought of death. Death meant freedom. No more pain. No more scars to carry. And I had my vengeance-Scarlett was gone. That knowledge gave me peace.

Selene's eyes burned with wild light. Her hands fumbled across the table until her fingers curled around the hilt of a fruit knife. She brandished it with a trembling grip, her chest heaving.

She was going to stab me.

I didn't move.

But then, at last, the silent wolf in the corner spoke.

Maddox.

His voice cracked through the room, heavy with contempt. "Selene, have you lost your mind?" His gaze cut between us, sharp and assessing. "Don't forget why you sought me

out. You promised me Riley. And in return, you swore you'd claim Lucien Duskgrave for yourself. Now she's mine, and you've yet to fulfill your end of the bargain. So why waste her life before you've even secured his?"

The knife stilled in her hand.

I watched her with cold eyes, caged but unbroken, waiting to see which wolf would bare their fangs first.

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[882 words]

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Chapter 294

Chapter 294

Riley's POV

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I could feel Selene Ashford's gaze drilling into Maddox, like she had just seen the most ridiculous fool alive.

"Maddox," she hissed, voice sharp as a blade, "you really believed a word I said? Every syllable was bait-to find out everything about Riley Vale from your own mouth."

Her smirk widened, cruel and calculating. "Otherwise... how would I have known one of her kidneys was inside Scarlett? How would I have known she'd thrown Scarlett into the mountains to rot for revenge? How would I have tracked her here, waited until she reclaimed the kidney, and struck when her body was weakest?"

I felt a cold tremor run through him. Maddox's face drained of color, disbelief etched into every line. "You... used me?"

Selene's eyes glinted with merciless amusement. "You, in college, weren't you the same? Using me, using her, loving only yourself? Men like you are all the same, Maddox-selfish beasts."

Maddox's hands shook, rage and shame twisting through him. He lunged, swinging to strike Selene, but she was as slippery as a serpent. She dodged effortlessly, and before

he could recover, her hand struck him with a smack that made his skull rattle, his ears ringing.

“You dare waste your pity,” she spat, “don’t forget, Maddox, we’re trapped on the same rope here. Helping me won’t earn Riley Vale any gratitude.”

I didn’t flinch. I just sat there, caged, silent. Every word, every motion they made, burned into me. My wolf stirred beneath my skin, muscles coiling and claws itching beneath my fingertips. My pulse slowed. My senses sharpened.

Maddox turned toward me. His gaze met mine, and my chest tightened. I could feel his remorse, his longing, as if some invisible hand gripped his heart. His words came, raw, broken, a plea dressed in love:

“Riley... I loved you too much. That’s why I tried to take you for myself. Don’t hate me, please. I swear, as long as you stay with me, I will never hurt you again.”

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I laughed coldly, low and bitter. “Hypocrite.”

It was enough to set him off. Maddox wheeled himself closer to the cage, clenched, voice rough with fury and despair.

+10 Free Coins

teeth

“Riley Vale! What do you want from me? Look at me! Do you know what I’ve lost because of you? These legs... broken. If it weren’t for you, no one could have done this—Lucien, that monster—he would never have touched me!”

He shook, chest heaving. “I lost my legs because of you, and I’ve never hated you for it. But you... five years in a cage, and now you’re whole, intact, unharmed. You don’t see how much worse my life has been? Even if I made mistakes, even if I wronged you once... I’ve already paid in full. So why do you punish me with your silence?”

My eyes narrowed, ice replacing any warmth I had once felt. I saw him for what he truly was—entitled, selfish, blind to the real consequences of his actions. My wolf’s growl rose deep in my chest. He had no idea. No idea what it meant to survive the darkness, to claw through the rubble of my own life.

'You speak as if your suffering cancels mine,' I said, voice low, deliberate, my claws pressing into my palms beneath the skin. "You have no right."

Maddox's chest heaved. His words spilled like venom: "Back at the Ebonclaw... we were close. You were kind, innocent. Why have you become so petty, so exacting? You're unbearable!"

I smiled. Cold. Empty. My wolf curled tight inside me, alert, sensing every twitch of his body, every spike of fear.

That was his truth, the part he never admitted: he had never understood me, never truly seen the cost of his own selfishness. And now he came here, crawling for forgiveness, expecting me to bow.

I turned my face away. I would not give him the satisfaction of my gaze. I would not waste my energy on him.

"Riley!" His shout ripped through the room, hoarse and ragged. "What more do you want? You've gone too far! I've never seen anyone so... dramatic."

I ignored him. My ears tuned instead to the movement behind the cage. Selene, silent now, was retrieving something. The metallic clink of the kitchen echoed ominously.

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+10 Free Coins

She returned, holding a basin of scalding water, steam curling like smoke around her.

"Riley Vale," she hissed, grin wicked and triumphant, "kneel and beg. Admit your faults, admit you're a worthless piece of trash, and maybe... just maybe, I'll let you go."

I didn't respond. My wolf growled low, tail lashing against the cage floor.

She had lost patience. "Stubborn, are we? Fine!"

The water tilted. The heat hit me like fire. I flinched, tried to move, but the iron bars trapped me. My wolf howled inside me, claws scrabbling, teeth grinding. Sia roared in my mind. I should have shifted, but because I had just had the transplant surgery and the wolfsbane suppressed my body, I had no strength at all.

Pain flared, burning hot, but I endured. Pain was nothing new. Survival was everything.

And I would survive.

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[718 words]

Chapter 295

Chapter 295

Riley's POV

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The scalding water hit me like molten steel. Pain flared across my skin, white-hot and consuming. I screamed, guttural and raw, the sound tearing from my throat as I curled into myself on the cold floor. My body, already weakened from surgery, could barely withstand the onslaught. Blisters erupted instantly, the scent of burnt flesh mixing with iron from the cuts and scrapes I already bore.

Selene Ashford didn't even flinch. She laughed-high-pitched, cruel, like a wolf teasing prey. Her eyes glittered with that familiar malice, sharp and predatory.

Maddox stood nearby, his face twisted with conflicting emotions—rage, regret, helplessness. "Riley... this isn't necessary," he muttered, voice low and almost strangled. "Just obey her, don't fight... you'll spare yourself the worst of it."

I glared at him, teeth gritted. Maddox, you fool. You don't get to lecture me. Not now. Not ever. You caused your own ruin. My wolf growled low in my chest, a warning I didn't bother hiding. My body ached, skin on fire, but I refused to give in.

Selene circled me like a huntress, eyes calculating, lips curled. "Oh, look at you, squirming like some pathetic little pup. Is that all you've got, Riley Vale? I thought you'd be stronger. I thought you'd fight back, but here you are, helpless and weak."

Her words cut deeper than any knife. My wolf surged, coiling within me, claws itching to rend, teeth bared. But my body refused my will. The transformation—the shift—was far from complete. I was too weak.

Selene knelt beside me, tipping my head back roughly by the chin. "I've got to admit, it's almost disappointing," she whispered, almost tenderly, before slapping me across the

face. Pain exploded in my jaw, a sharp, stinging fire. "But don't worry... I have plenty more fun planned for you."

Maddox flinched at the slap, jaw tight, fists clenching. He hated seeing me like this. He hated himself even more. "Selene... stop," he said, voice strained. "You're pushing too far..."

"You? Silence!" Selene snapped at him, standing tall, eyes burning like twin moons of wrath. "You've lost the right to speak for her. You brought her to me, Maddox. You've given me every reason to punish her. Every. Single. One."

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+10 Free Coins

Her words hung in the air like a curse. My wolf growled, my senses sharpening. I could smell her pulse, her fear of nothing, the calm madness in her blood. She wanted control. She wanted me broken. And she would have it if I let her.

Selene didn't give me a chance to recover. She yanked a length of coarse rope from the corner and pressed it to my shoulders. The iron bars of the cage kept me pinned, exposed. She tugged and pulled, forcing me to kneel awkwardly, skin tearing in protest. Every movement sent shockwaves of pain across my body.

Maddox's protests grew louder, his frustration and helplessness blending into a low growl of his own wolf instincts. But Selene ignored him, whispering threats, calling me worthless, a pup unworthy of surviving in the wild. Her hands were merciless, precise-never careless, always calculated to maximize suffering.

I tried to focus, centering myself. My wolf clawed at the edges of the pain, pushing it back, letting rage fill the cracks. I could hear the distant howls of my pack in my mind, feel their presence through the bond Lucien had tied to me-warning me, feeding me, promising me vengeance.

Selene's lips twisted in satisfaction. She paused, crouching before me, and drew something from her pocket-a small, glowing communication stone. She held it up like a talisman. Her eyes gleamed.

'Let's see if our friends are ready for the fun,' she murmured. Her fingers tapped the surface. The stone glowed brighter, sending a sharp pulse through the air.

I felt a cold thrill run down my spine, not of fear, but anticipation. Whatever Selene was summoning, whatever hand she was calling in... my wolf wanted it. Wanted the hunt, wanted the blood, wanted the reckoning that was coming.

Pain, fury, and instinct mingled inside me. I was trapped. I was vulnerable. But I was not defeated. Not yet.

Selene's laugh echoed in the empty room as the stone buzzed to life.

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[854 words]

Third Person's POV

Outside Ashmoor Academy, two sleek luxury cars gleamed under the morning sun, engines idling **with** impatient hums. Jace Hale snorted, shooting a glare at Duke. "You're relentless, you know that? Carmen hates you, yet you keep shoving yourself in her way."

Duke didn't answer. Instead, his gaze shifted to Theo Hale. "So this is your brother? Clever as you are, **he** looks like a fire spirit wandering lost in the mist. Hard to believe you two share blood."

Theo's eyebrows rose, caught off guard. He had never imagined that the girl Jace liked—Carmen—would also be the object of Duke's interest.

Jace's face darkened at Duke's teasing. "You're the fire spirit, not him. Your whole family is full of them."

"Jace," Theo intervened gently, placing a hand on his brother's shoulder.

Jace waved him off, displeasure clear. "Brother, why are you defending him? Are you my brother or his? **If** I'd known, I wouldn't have brought you along to meet Carmen."

Their bickering stopped abruptly as Carmen emerged from the school gates.

Jace immediately waved. "Carmen! Over here!"

Carmen's stomach sank at the sight of the two. Truthfully, she wanted to disappear rather than confront either one of them. She tried to ignore their presence when Duke's phone rang.

He fished it out and glanced at the screen—Caelum Knox calling. The urgency in his voice made Duke answer immediately. “Caelum, how are the Alpha Lucien and Miss Riley?”

Carmen froze. The name Riley sparked a jolt of fear in her chest. She stepped closer, straining to catch every word.

Caelum’s voice came through, tense, sharp. “We encountered a landslide in the mountains. Alpha Lucien’s legs were crushed.”

“What?” Duke’s voice cracked with shock.

Carmen’s heart hammered. “Riley... what happened to Riley?”

“She underwent a kidney transplant successfully, but... she’s been kidnapped immediately after waking.” Caelum continued.

The words hit Carmen like ice water. Riley had just survived a major operation, her body weak and vulnerable. And now, she was gone—taken by unknown hands. Fear, anger, and helplessness roared through her, twin fires threatening to consume her.

Carmen grabbed Duke’s arm, voice trembling. “Take me to her, now!”

Duke wasted no time. He flung himself into his car, engine growling like a predator on **the hunt**. **Carmen** jumped in, gripping the seat as the car lurched forward.

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Jace’s face darkened as he watched them speed off. Realizing the severity of the situation, he quickly started his car, Theo beside him, and they followed Duke’s vehicle down the winding roads.

The cars tore through the streets like hunting wolves, leaving everything else in a blur. Carmen’s knuckles whitened as she clenched her fists, anger and fear mingling, eyes burning crimson with fury. Riley, hold on. I’m coming. Anyone who dares touch her will pay

Meanwhile, three others were mobilizing with the same grim intent. They were Scarlett’s father, mother, and younger brother—Dean Elira, Caden, and Otto. Without Ebonclaw Pack’s resources backing them, they had returned to Mooncrest and discovered the truth of Riley’s fate..

When they learned that Scarlett had been thrown into the mountains, left vulnerable to whoever prowled there, hatred flared. They had been waiting for their chance at revenge, and now, with Scarlett reported dead, that chance had arrived.

The trio's movements were swift and silent, their wolf instincts honed over years of pack life guiding them. Each step was deliberate, predatory, as if stalking prey in the shadows. They had been given Riley's location by Selene Ashford, who had coldly informed them of the girl's capture.

Selene herself was in high spirits, her smile cruel and sharp. Maddox, by contrast, frowned deeply. "Why call them here?" he asked, unease tightening his chest.

Selene's laugh was icy. "Why? To make Riley suffer, of course. They won't kill her outright—not yet. But they will teach her the meaning of pain. I want her alive, trapped in torment, begging for a reprieve will never come."

Maddox's jaw tightened. "You're insane. They'll kill her!"

"No," Selene replied, voice low, venomous. "They'll break her. Every scream, every tear—captured on camera. I want the world to watch Riley Vale writhe, to see her suffering etched across every inch of her. This isn't just punishment—it's a spectacle. And I will be the one to broadcast it."

Her eyes glinted with predatory joy as she envisioned the scene. Maddox felt a cold chill creep along his spine, the familiar sting of helplessness. Selene's wolf prowled just beneath her skin, senses heightened, hunting, reveling in the suffering she orchestrated.

2

In the mountains, Riley—already weakened, still recovering from her kidney transplant—was trapped in the hands of the most merciless predators she had ever faced. Her instincts screamed, her pack senses howled warnings she could barely heed. Every heartbeat, every step, every calculated cruelty brought her closer to despair.

Selene, triumphant, held up a small communication stone, her fingers brushing across it lightly. The device glowed ominously. Her smile widened as she prepared to call in the next wave of torment, her claws and fangs metaphorically sharpening for the hunt to come.

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[839 words]

Riley's POV

Selene's laughter was sharp, cruel,

"You're insane," Maddox muttered, his voice low with uncase. "Aren't you afraid of Lucien Duskgrave's wrath? That devil won't forgive this."

"Wrath?" Selene tilted her head, smiling with venom. "I stopped caring about his vengeance the moment I took Riley Vale. You think I care what the Stormridge prince does?"

Her words struck like claws dragging over bone.

"Originally, I even thought about seducing that arrogant wolf," she sneered, "getting something out of him. But he shoved cake after cake down my throat like I was a joke, left me bloated, sick, diabetic... Now I have nothing. Nothing. So tell me, why should I fear him? He should fear me. I can't wait to watch him shatter when he learns Riley has vanished."

Her boots echoed on the floor as she came closer. I lay barely conscious, fire burning through my veins. The fever raged so hot it felt like my body was splitting in two. My lips were cracked and dry, my wounds raw, infection eating into me.

Maddox's shadow fell across me, and I felt the tremble in his voice. "She's burning up, Selene. Please... at least give her medicine."

The sharp crack of a slap resounded, and Maddox reeled back, cheek swelling red.

"Pathetic," Selene spat. "No wonder she never wanted you. Even I wouldn't look twice at a spineless mutt like you. Riley doesn't care for you—so why should you care for her?"

Her words cut deeper than the fever.

"If I were you," she hissed, leaning close, "I would have taken her the moment she left the prison. She was a branded wolf, a convict. Who would have believed her if she spoke against you? You could've broken her, claimed her, forced her to stay. But you were too weak, and now she belongs to another. This is your failure."

Maddox's jaw clenched. For a heartbeat, I smelled bloodlust on him. Hatred—toward Selene, toward me, toward himself.

And then he broke. His voice was low, hoarse, filled with bitter regret. "If I had taken you then... you'd have been mine, Riley. You'd never have met Lucien. You'd have had no Alpha prince at your back. Just me. Just us."

My heart twisted. No.

But Selene clapped him on the shoulder with a serpent's grin. "That's more like it. She's nothing but a whore of fate. Wolves are everywhere—yet you pine for this one? Then take her. Do it now. Before she dies."

She wrenched open the iron cage I'd been thrown into, seizing my clothes and dragging me out like prey. My body collapsed at Maddox's boots, skin burning, wounds tearing open.

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Chapter 297

"Your chance, Maddox," she whispered, eyes bright with hunger. "She's your first mate. You've **dreamed** of her. Are you really going to waste this moment? When she's gone, there'll be no one left to stop **you**."

I saw his hand, shaking, reaching for me. Not in tenderness, it was hunger sharpened by years **of** bitterness.

And then—Selene's scent changed. Sharp, chemical. She crouched at my side, pulling a syringe from her belt. The silver liquid shimmered in the dim light.

"Can't risk that little White Wolf of yours stirring awake," she purred. "We wouldn't want the precious **mare** of Stormridge's Alpha prince burning me alive, would we?"

Her nails dug into my arm, and before I could fight, the needle plunged into my vein. Cold fire spread instantly, crushing my wolf back into silence, caging her deeper than iron. I screamed, but the sound was only a rasp, too weak, too broken.\

"There," Selene smiled, tossing the empty syringe aside. "No more wolf. Just flesh and blood. Easy prey."

Maddox's hand descended again, and Selene, her eyes fever-bright, pulled out her WolfComm device. The camera lens gleamed as she aimed it at me.

"Oh, Lucien," she whispered with glee. "Carmen. Stormridge. You'll all watch. You'll see her broken. And **I'll** savor your despair."

The fever dragged me under, the world blurring—until a sudden pounding rattled the door. Hard. Urgen

Maddox froze, his claws twitching back. Selene's grip tightened around her dagger as she stalked toward the door. "Who's there?"

A cool voice answered, muffled through the wood.

"It's me. You called us, remember? You said Riley was here."

Dean Elira Blackthorn.

Selene exhaled, shoulders loosening. She threw the door open. Elira swept in, Caden and their son Otto Wilson at her back. Their eyes fell immediately on me sprawled on the floor, blood soaking through my side.

Hatred twisted Elira's face the instant she saw me. She stormed forward, her eyes glowing with savage light. "Bitch. You murdered my daughter. And now you'll pay."

Her boot slammed into my back. Pain split through me like lightning—right where my kidney wound had barely held. Flesh tore. Warm blood poured out of me, soaking the ground in a widening pool.

Darkness clawed at me, pulling me down, and I wondered dimly if this was how the White Wolf was meant to die.

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[681 words]

Riley's POV

The sharp, searing pain ripped me out of unconsciousness.

My body convulsed, cold sweat beading and rolling down my forehead, my skin pale as death.

As my vision cleared, the first thing I saw was Dean Elira Blackthorn's twisted, hate-filled face, looming over me like a predator ready to devour its prey.

Beside her, Caden stood with his arms crossed, smirking down at me with mocking disdain.

And then—another boy. Younger. A stranger to me. Yet the malice in his eyes as he looked me over was

unmistakable.

He clicked his tongue, gaze raking over my body.

“Well, well. So this is the Ebonclaw Pack’s trueborn daughter. Not bad. Even beaten down like a dog, that face is still worth playing with.”

A sick thrill glimmered in his eyes as he stepped toward me, rubbing his palms together.

“It’d be a waste to let her die just like this. Why not let me have some fun first?”

Neither Dean Elira nor Caden stopped him.

On the contrary, Elira’s eyes lit with cruel satisfaction.

“Go on, Otto. My son. But be careful—don’t kill her too quickly. Death would be too merciful for what she’s done to your sister.”

The boy—Otto Wilson—laughed darkly, boasting about his experience with women overseas, as if I were nothing more than another toy.

Selene Ashford stood nearby, clutching her phone, her eyes gleaming with anticipation as she barked, “Do it! Show her what happens to those who cross us.”

Otto reached for me—

And then Maddox’s voice cut through the room.

“No! Riley is mine. You don’t touch her.”

Otto froze, his expression twisting with fury. In a blink, he slapped Maddox so hard the sound echoed through the room.

“You? A crippled lawyer? You think you can tell me what to do?”

Maddox fell to the floor, his cheek blazing red

Dean Elira sneered down at him. “Pathetic. Once a lawyer, now not even a man. You can’t **protect her**, **you** can’t even protect yourself. Everything you studied—worthless.”

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Chapter 298

Laughter rang around me, cruel and merciless.

Maddox's face turned iron-blue with rage, but he could do nothing. He could only watch helplessly as Otto dragged me toward the bedroom.

He threw me onto the bed, his weight crushing down on me.

I choked back a scream, fighting against the agony burning through my body. My wounds throbbed, my vision blurred with fever, but I forced myself to move, to fight.

My hand fumbled along the nightstand until I felt something cold-metal. A lamp.

With the last of my strength, I seized it and swung.

The lamp crashed against Otto's skull. Blood poured instantly, streaking down his face, making him look

even more monstrous.

He roared in rage, striking me across the face, again and again.

Each slap split my skin, blood filling my mouth. My vision swam, but I refused to cry out.

Dean Elira and Caden stormed in at the sound of Otto's screams. Their eyes blazed with fury when they saw his bleeding head.

"You little bitch!" Elira hissed, moving toward me-

But before she could reach me, a heavy pounding rattled the door.

"Who is it?!" Elira snapped, her face twisting.

The pounding grew louder, more insistent.

Caden's brow furrowed. "Could it be Lucien Duskgrave's men?"

Selene paled. "Impossible—they couldn't have found us this quickly—"

The banging only intensified.

"Open the door. Now."

That voice. Cold. Authoritative.

My heart jolted. Duke. Lucien's right hand.

Panic swept through the room.

“They’ve found us!”

“Then grab weapons!” Caden snarled.

Knives were pulled from the kitchen.—Maddox clutched a rolling pin in trembling hands.

Otto didn’t stop—he tore at my clothes, laughing like a rabid animal.

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Chapter 998

“Even if I die, I’ll taste you first. Let’s see what Lucien’s precious mate feels like“

The door shuddered beneath relentless kicks-

And then with a thunderous crash, it burst open.

Caelum Knox. Duke. Theo Hale. Jace Hale. Carmen.

They stormed inside, shadows of death in their eyes.

Dean Elira, Caden, Selene—every one of them froze, their faces draining of color.

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[763 words]

Chapter 299

Chapter 299

Riley’s POV

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They hadn’t expected so many of them to show up. They knew they couldn’t get away today, and the moment Carmen and the others burst in, chaos erupted.

“Die!” Carmen’s roar cut through the room as she charged straight at Maddox, eyes blazing red with fury.

And then I saw her—Carmen—launch herself at Otto Wilson. My heart stopped. He was on top of me. The white sheets were stained crimson with my blood. My skin was raw, blistered, and burnt in places, my face swollen and battered. I could barely breathe, my body trembling violently.

Carmen’s face contorted with rage, her teeth bared. “You son of a-! How dare you touch Riley! Did you think I wouldn’t find out?!”

“Wait! Wait!” Otto cried out, panic in his voice. “It wasn’t me! I didn’t touch her!”

Carmen’s eyes snapped toward him, her pupils narrowing dangerously. “Then who—?”

“It was Selene Ashford! She made the call, she told me to- Otto stammered, writhing under her fury.

Carmen froze for a fraction of a second, her chest heaving, before realization struck. Her furious red gaze shifted to Jace Hale, who had just entered behind Duke. His face went pale.

“You—Selene?” Jace whispered, stunned. His mind raced, and recognition dawned like a lightning bolt. “It was...my ex—Selene?”

The truth hit Carmen like a hammer. Rage twisted back into a different kind of focused intensity—she wasn’t just protecting me; she’d thought Otto had personally attacked me. The fire in her eyes flared again, now more precise, targeted.

Otto screamed, thrashing weakly as Carmen advanced again, blade raised. “I swear! It was her call! She’s the one—Selene Ashford!”

I coughed violently, tasting blood as my throat constricted. My body shook from pain and adrenaline, but my wolf growled low, instinctively aware that the fight wasn’t truly over.

“You’re asking for death!” she screamed, plunging her blade into Otto’s back.

He shrieked, collapsing onto the bed beside me, convulsing, his face twisted in agony.

Her strikes were relentless, each one a furious blow that left him utterly defenseless. Otto’s body became a torn canvas of wounds under the storm of her attacks.

I struggled to breathe, shock rooting me to the spot. Tears spilled uncontrollably.

“Stop... don’t...” I whispered, my voice hoarse.

Carmen’s eyes softened for just a moment as she dropped her blade and swept me into her arms. “Riley... it’s okay. You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

Outside, the sounds of fighting slowed. Caelum Knox, Duke stormed inside, assessing the scene. Their jaws

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Chapter 299

dropped at the sight of me—exposed, battered—and Otto’s lifeless body.

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“Carmen... you killed him again?” Duke’s voice was tense, concern threading every word. “We could have called the authorities. They’re criminals! You don’t need to-”

“Authorities?” Carmen laughed, harsh and cold. “These animals hurt Riley. If they go to prison, they’ll be back in a few years. That isn’t justice—it’s mercy.”

“They need to pay with their lives,” she spat, her voice deafening in the room. “Every wound they inflicted. on Riley, they will repay in full.”

I clung to Duke, my tears streaming, heart pounding. “What means again?”

Duke’s face hardened. “Those who tormented you in prison... after release, Carmen made sure they wouldn’t hurt anyone again. Do you know what she’s done for you, Riley? Even Maddox’s legs—she broke them herself to stop him from hurting you further.”

“Shut up!” Carmen snapped at Duke, fury blazing in her eyes. Her warning could have burned steel.

Caelum stepped in, tugging Duke slightly. “Duke... Riley is under the Alpha’s protection. Speak carefully.”

But Duke’s chest burned with helpless anger. “The person I love is about to be sentenced... and you expect me to stay silent?”

A deadly silence fell.

Duke took a deep breath and stepped in front of Carmen, taking the knife from her hands.

“What are you doing?” she asked warily, scanning him for threat.

“I won’t let you die,” Duke said through clenched teeth. “Get out of here, now. I’ll handle this. If the authorities arrive... I’ll cover for you.”

My chest tightened, nearly suffocating from the mix of pain and relief.

A violent cough tore through me, and blood spurted into my mouth. My vision blurred at the edges, but I clung to Duke’s presence like a lifeline.

Even in the haze of pain, my wolf growled low in my chest, reminding me the fight wasn’t over. But for the first time in hours, I felt... protected.

Chapter 300

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Chapter 300

Third Person’s POV

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The sharp tang of iron clung to the air. Riley’s breath came ragged, her skin pale against Caelum Knox’s chest as he lifted her in a swift bridal carry. Her limp body looked fragile, but the stubborn spark in her eyes refused to dim.

Behind them, chaos spread across the room. Only two figures remained sprawled upon the ground- Selene and Maddox-while the Blackthorn pair, Caden and Elira, had already slipped away into the night.

Carmen's gaze fell upon Selene and Maddox with a murderous intensity. Her wolf snarled within her, hackles raised, the urge to rend and tear drowning out every rational voice. In one motion, she seized a knife from the floor, steel glinting under the dim light, and stalked toward them.

But Carmen's blade was already arcing downward, fury guiding her hand.

Before the fatal strike could land, a larger body stepped between.

Duke.

His hand shot out, intercepting her wrist. His eyes, usually unreadable, now burned with something primal -devotion, desperation, and a lethal promise.

"Carmen," he growled, voice raw, "let me do this."

And then he turned, his arm sweeping with brutal precision. The blade tore through flesh. Selene's scream was cut short, silenced as blood spilled hot and heavy across the floor. Maddox tried to crawl, sobbing, but Duke descended on him like a predator with prey cornered. Blow after blow fell—merciless, inexorable—until Maddox's body was nothing more than a broken husk.

The room froze in horror.

When the silence finally came, it was thick as fog. Duke dropped the blade, chest heaving. His eyes sought Carmen's, heavy with something that looked almost like sacrifice.

"You still have your mother to care for," he said, voice thick. "Let me bear this blood. I'll go to the prisons of the wolves. I'll take the burden. You—you still have a future."

Carmen's throat tightened. She stared at him, stunned, her wolf caught between sorrow and rage. His words dug deep, carving fissures in her resolve. For the first time, she felt the true weight of his loyalty.

Her eyes softened, briefly. And then—steel returned.

She smiled, though it was jagged and broken. "Duke... you don't understand. I was always meant to walk that path. The moment I lifted this blade, the Moon had already marked me."

Before he could stop her, she snatched back the weapon. In a single, swift motion, she struck down the last trembling form. Blood sprayed, hot against her cheek.

She looked at Duke, her face half-shadow, half-madness. "I'll be the prisoner. One more soul on my hands means nothing."

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Chapter 300

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Duke's eyes widened, a storm of pain and fury colliding in his chest. But Carmen only turned away, her voice low, hollow. "We are both damned. At least my damnation was my choice."

Riley's world blurred after that, darkness consuming her until the sterile white of hospital walls swam into view. The sting of antiseptic filled her nose. She was faintly aware of Mia's desperate sobbing voice and the hurried footfalls of Caelum, Theo Hale, and Jace Hale at her bedside.

But the strongest presence arrived with a rush of power that made even the Alpha heirs draw back.

Warden Macryn Voss—Ashmoor Academy's famed battle instructor, a woman whose aura carried the authority of a hundred campaigns—stepped into the room. Her eyes blazed with silver fire as she extended a hand over Riley's broken body.

"All people go out, Mia stayed."

She commanded, and everyone left, trusting Maeryn's strength.

After the room was empty, Professor Maeryn glanced at the shattered Riley and sighed.

Golden light bloomed, soft but fierce, encasing Riley in its glow. The healing energy seeped into her veins, illuminating every fracture, every poisoned scar.

Maeryn's expression darkened.

"Your wolf is collapsing," she said grimly. "You had just begun to recover after your kidney was restored. If you had been given time—proper rest, balance—your wolf might have strengthened. But the torture, the injections of wolfbane suppressants... the damage is spreading. The wolf—poison has awakened. It's devouring you from within."

Mia sobbed harder. "Please, Professor, there must be a way!"

Maeryn's jaw tightened. "There is... one chance. But it is slim."

All eyes snapped to her.

"In the Western ranges, beyond the Rift, grows a herb called Moonshade Veyra. A thousand years may pass before one sprouts. Its essence purges wolf-poison completely. With it, Riley's wolf could be reborn."

Mia's eyes widened. "Then we go to the Western Pack and demand it."

"No." Maeryn's voice was like iron. "The Western Pack stands against every eastern bloodline. Especially Stormridge."

Riley's weak gaze turned toward her, every breath a battle. "Why... especially Stormridge?"

Macryn's eyes flickered with old memory. "Because their Alpha—Aedric Stormbane—was once my student, as Lucien was. Both proud, both destined for greatness. But what began as rivalry turned to hatred. Blood has already been spilled between them. Aedric would rather burn the world than give Lucien a single leaf of Moonshade Veyra."

The room thickened with silence.

Riley, however, felt a cold dread spread through her chest. She knew Lucien. If he discovered that her life hung upon Moonshade Veyra, he would not hesitate. He would gather Stormridge's fangs and march west.

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Chapter 300

He would unleash war.

She could not allow that.

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Her hand reached for Maeryn's, weak but insistent. "Promise me... don't tell him. Don't tell Lucien."

"Riley—"

“Promise me!” she rasped, her eyes fever-bright. “If he learns, he’ll start a war. Too much blood has already been spilled. I don’t want my name to be the spark that burns the Packs.”

Maeryn looked at her long and hard. In that fragile face, she saw not weakness but the iron heart of a wolf refusing to be a burden. At last, she inclined her head.

“I will keep your secret,” Maeryn said, her voice solemn. “I will scour the world for another cure. But Lucien must not know.”

When she left the room, her orders were curt and absolute, “Not a word to the Alpha Prince. Not from anyone.”

Mia nodded, though unease shadowed her expressions.

Inside, Riley’s tears slid silently across her cheeks. She knew she might not survive. But if her death could keep the wolves from another war, then perhaps it was worth it.

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