

Defy 161

Chapter 161: He Betrayed Her

The shift in the atmosphere was so subtle at first that Violet almost missed it. One moment, they were dancing, laughing, swaying in rhythm and letting the night carry them away. Then the next, everything stopped after the strange horn blared.

The music faltered, stuttering like a broken record before cutting off completely. Conversations amongst the students trailed off mid-sentence, laughter died in the air, and a tense silence settled over the field like a thick, suffocating fog.

Violet stilled, her senses prickling. Something was wrong.

"What happened?" Ivy asked, her voice uncertain.

But she wasn't the only one asking.

Confusion rippled through the crowd as murmurs rose among the new students. Except that was the thing— it was just the new students.

Violet's sharp gaze darted across the crowd, and that's when she noticed it. A pattern.

The older students weren't asking questions.

No. They weren't confused at all.

Their faces twisted with barely-contained amusement. Their masks of casual friendliness had cracked, revealing cruel intentions beneath. The air around them pulsed with a sick anticipation, like predators waiting for the perfect moment to pounce.

They had been waiting for this.

To make it worse, the werewolves no longer blended into the party. Their stance had shifted instead. They now stood taut, muscles coiled like springs, eyes sharp and poised for instruction. What instructions?

Her throat dried as realization clawed at her. This was it, the event Adele had warned her about. The one no one spoke of. Her gut screamed at her to make a move immediately.

"We have to get out of here. Now!" Violet's voice cut through the growing unease, loud and desperate enough to make Lila, Ivy, and Daisy exchange uneasy glances.

Daisy, ever the sharp one, quickly fell into step beside her. "What's going on?" she asked urgently.

Violet moved fast, weaving through the dazed crowd, her breath coming quick as she explained. "I don't know exactly. I only caught snippets, but there's supposed to be some sort of event today. Some kind of initiation I think..."

Daisy sucked in a sharp breath. "Hazing," she whispered, horrified.

It made sense.

No wonder no one talked about it. No wonder the upperclassmen looked so hungry for what was about to happen. It was a secret tradition.

Hazing wasn't exactly common in high schools, but Lunaris Academy wasn't just any school. It was an elite school built on conformity, hierarchy, and deep-rooted secrets. It only made sense that the older students would find a way to remind the newcomers of their place.

And yet, this didn't feel like a normal hazing ritual. Nothing about Lunaris Academy felt normal.

A cold dread settled in Violet's stomach as they hurried forward, pushing past the clueless crowd of new students who were still murmuring, still asking questions, still too slow to react.

Fools.

Couldn't they feel it? The air itself had changed.

A thick, buzzing charge hung in the night, crawling over Violet's skin like static, making the fine hairs on her arms stand on end.

If this was truly tradition, then they were already too late. The thought clawed at her mind, but she shoved it down.

No. No. No. Keep moving. The entrance is close. Once we're out of sight, we run.

Just a little farther—

Then a low, vicious bark cut through the night.

A massive wolf stepped out from the trees, its hackles raised, lips curled back in a snarl so feral it sent ice racing through Violet's veins.

Its eyes locked onto them, gleaming with intelligence

Violet's stomach dropped. They weren't going anywhere.

Fear tightened around her lungs as she instinctively grabbed Ivy's wrist, yanking her back before the wolf could lunge. The girls thankfully were smart not to make a wrong move, their gasps of terror swallowed by the sudden, suffocating quiet.

There was no leaving the current situation.

They were trapped.

And then, a figure stepped into the firelight with an eerie, unshaken calm.

Asher Nightshade.

The flames from the bonfire danced over his face, casting shifting shadows that only made his presence more menacing. But it was his eyes that froze Violet in place.

They burned. Not with rage, nor violence, but with satisfaction. He had been waiting for this.

A cruel smirk curled his lips as he surveyed them, drinking in their fear like it was a fine wine.

Then, in a voice as smooth as silk but laced with iron, he spoke. "Gather the newbies from the ends of the field."

The command was so calm, so casual, as if he weren't issuing what felt like a death sentence.

Her stomach churned.

Violet turned to her friends whose faces were pale, their eyes wide. Fear locked her lungs, until instinct shattered it.

"Run!" she screamed.

The moment Violet's roommates bolted, it was as if a spell had been broken. The other new students finally realized what was happening and panic set in like wildfire.

Screams tore through the air as bodies crashed into each other, some students trying to run, others still too slow to grasp the danger before they were seized.

At first, Violet and her roommates stuck together, weaving through the chaos, but instinct told her they wouldn't make it far like this.

"Split up!" she shouted.

And they did.

Daisy veered sharply to the left, her brown hair flying behind her. Lila ducked low, slipping through gaps between panicked bodies, and Ivy took off toward the far side of the field. Violet ran straight ahead.

It was madness around her.

The werewolves moved fast, plucking students from the crowd with terrifying ease. But they weren't the only threat as the elite students had joined in, their faces alight with pleasure as they dragged their victims away.

Violet barely dodged a grasping hand, twisting her body at the last second. But it was not fast enough as a blonde elite girl lunged at her from the side.

She reacted on instinct, driving her elbow into the girl's ribs so hard that it sent a jolt through her arm.

The girl let out a strangled gasp and stumbled back, clutching her side. If Adele didn't step in to help her, Violet was certain she'd be feeling that for a long, long time.

However, Violet didn't have time to gloat. Not when she was so close now. If she could just disappear into the underbrush, she could hide and wait this out. No one would find her in the academy grounds before sunrise. She would make sure of it.

Her breath came fast, her muscles burned, but Violet pushed harder only for someone to slam into her from the back.

Violet crashed to the ground, her breath rushing out of her lungs. She barely had time to recover before a figure loomed over her, the bonfire casting a glow against the stark white of his hair.

Alaric Storm.

Her boyfriend just captured her.

Her stomach dropped.

Alaric wasn't like the others. Where the other students smirked and laughed, reveling in the chaos, his face was blank and distant like he didn't want to be here. Like he had no choice.

"I'm sorry." was all he said before a rough fabric of a bag was pulled over her head, cutting off her vision entirely.

Chapter 162: Silver Glade

The ground beneath Violet's feet was uneven, and with the bag over her head, it meant her steps were blind and uncertain. Hence it wasn't surprising when she stumbled, her foot catching on what felt like a root or a rock.

"Easy," Alaric whispered into her ear, his breath warm against her skin as he caught her.

As if she wanted the hands of that betrayer on her body.

Nonetheless, that proximity was all she needed. Violet drove her elbow into his gut with all the force she could muster.

Alaric let out a sharp oof, the sound of air forcibly leaving his lungs. Pain lanced through his stomach, and for a moment, he doubled over, cursing under his breath. Damn it, she was quite strong for a human!

"Okay, I deserved that," he admitted, voice strained as he straightened, trying to catch his breath.

Violet wasn't done with him. Following the direction of his voice, she twisted, aiming another strike, but this time, her boyfriend was ready.

He caught her easily, his grip firm as he halted her struggles. "That's enough, little minx, before you hurt yourself." He called her with his usual endearment.

Violet went still for a split seconds before raw, blistering rage ignited like an explosion inside of her.

"Don't you dare call me minx!" she spat, her breath hot against his face even through the fabric of the bag.

The sheer hatred in her tone sent a feeling of unease through Alaric, not because he feared her, but because of the shift in their relationship. Right now, Violet sounded like she'd tear his throat out if she had the chance.

Violet's mind burned with his betrayal.

How dare he? How dare he use that name!

She just couldn't believe that the same hands that had made her tremble with pleasure moments ago were now dragging her away into some twisted, sadistic hazing event.

It made her sick.

His grip easing just slightly and rested on her shoulder. "I did give you a hint about the game." Alaric defended himself.

Violet twisted against his hold, wishing she could see his face and gauge his expression.

But despite the darkness shrouding her vision, she injected every ounce of venom she had into her voice as she snarled, "Yeah, I just didn't expect you to be part of it."

Alaric's fingers tightened, just for a moment. "I have no choice."

"Everyone has a choice," she hissed. "You could have let me escape."

A dry scoff left Alaric's lips. "Is that what you think?" His voice dropped lower, an edge to it. "This plan has been in motion since before you were admitted to Lunaris Academy. You were never going to make it out of here. Not with wolves hiding in the dark, waiting to pick off the stragglers."

Violet's breath caught. The way he said it, so matter-of-fact, sent an icy chill through her.

"To think I thought Asher was the worst," she said, voice dripping with acid. "But you're no different."

Alaric hesitated for a beat.

And damn it, she wished she could see his face to see if her words had struck something in him. Did he even care? Did he feel an ounce of guilt?

Then, he exhaled. "This is tradition, Violet. It's not as bad as you think."

Not as bad? Not as bad?!

He continued, "You just have to prove yourself. And no matter what you think of me, I'm still on your side. I won't let you end up with Asher."

His words were vague, heavy with something he was telling her. Another secret, she bet. A part of Violet wanted to demand what he meant by that, but her hot and unforgiving temper got the better of her.

"Get lost," she snapped.

Then, louder, fiercer, meaner, she said, "No, go fuck yourself!"

"What's going on here?"

Violet froze upon hearing that voice.

Even with the bag over her head, she felt his oppressive presence like a shadow creeping over her skin.

The one and only, Asher Nightshade.

Asher said with mockery, each syllable dripping with cruel amusement. "Are you struggling to handle your girlfriend, Alaric? Or should I take over?"

Even blind, Violet could feel the added meaning beneath those words.

Alaric's entire body tensed, a low, dangerous snarl ripping from his throat. "Get lost."

Asher laughed.

The sound was haunting, a deep, taunting thing that coiled around her like a phantom touch.

Goosebumps erupted along Violet's arms because she knew that whatever this initiation was, Asher was at the heart of it. And that terrified her more than anything.

So when Alaric resumed guiding her forward, she let him. Not because she trusted him or that her fury had dulled.

But because between him and Asher, Alaric was the lesser evil.

They walked for what felt like an eternity, dragging Violet deeper into the unknown. The only sounds being the rustling of leaves underfoot and the occasional distant howl of wolves echoing through the night

Then, without warning, Alaric pulled her to a stop. "Stay here," he commanded her.

And then, as if sensing the defiance brimming beneath her skin, he added, "Don't do anything stupid."

His grip lingered for a fraction of a second longer, as if he was debating saying more, but then, he was gone.

The absence of his presence left a hollow sort of silence in its wake. Violet stood as still as a statue, her senses straining against the suffocating darkness.

But what were they doing? Where had Alaric gone?

A prickling sensation crept up her spine. She had no idea how many people were around her, or if she was entirely alone now. For a moment, the temptation to rip the bag from her head was overwhelming, but she hesitated at Alaric's warning.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed the bag and yanked it off. The motion was rough, unceremonious, and the sudden intrusion of light seared her eyes.

Violet winced, pain stabbing behind her eyes. The shift from darkness to the bright overhead light was jarring, and she blinked rapidly, forcing her sight to adjust.

As her vision cleared, her surroundings sharpened and a cold sense of recognition settled into her bones.

They were in a clearing, one that was in the middle of a forest. Towering trees loomed on all sides, their trunks stretching high into the night sky. The night air was heavy, damp, carrying the distant scent of moss — and trouble.

It was the Silver Glade.

The infamous, haunted woodland of Lunaris Academy, and the very place she had once tried to escape through.

But she hadn't escaped then.

Now, the initiation was going to take place here.

Chapter 163: The Running Game

Violet looked around, taking in the glow of the street lights lining the forest path, their cold illumination stretching endlessly into what remained of the Silver Glade since they were in the middle of it already.

The sheer amount of effort and resources put into this so-called initiation unsettled her. Presumably, it was for their safety, but most of all, this was undoubtedly a spectacle. A stage, carefully set for whatever twisted initiation the Alphas had devised.

A shiver ran down Violet's spine. What in the world were they planning?

The group of newbies —a mix of first-year students, new admits, and scholarship students like herself— stood together, their confusion and anxiety saturating the crisp night air. At least, in this moment, there was no divide between them. They were all equally trapped.

Surrounding them were the elites and older students, standing in a loose circle. They were unable to hide their laughter, whispers, and amused smirks as they watched them, ensuring there was no way to escape. They were the enforcers in this initiation.

Violet's pulse quickened as she searched the sea of nervous faces until she spotted her roommates. Relief flooded her veins like a sudden breath of air breaking through suffocation.

Lila was the first to shove through the tight cluster of newbies, rushing toward her. Without hesitation, she threw her arms around Violet in a tight hug. Ivy and Daisy followed suit, their presence grounding her.

"Are you hurt in any way?" Violet asked, her gaze going from one girl to the next, though it was Lila she focused on first.

"No," Lila answered with a firm shake of her head.

"Me either," Ivy added, though she fidgeted restlessly, as if bracing for the worse.

Daisy, however, crossed her arms, her gaze scanning their surroundings. "I don't like this."

Violet turned to her, reading the tension on her friend's face. Daisy was smart. If anyone could figure out what the Alphas were planning, it was her.

"What do you mean?" Violet asked, watching her closely.

Daisy's lips pressed into a thin line before she answered. "It's a chase."

Violet's blood turned to ice.

"Or a run," Lila added, shifting nervously. "I once overheard some older students whispering about a running event for new students."

Daisy shook her head. "Whether it's a chase or a run, it doesn't matter." She lowered her voice, saying seriously. "Your biggest concern should be, if we're running, what's chasing us?"

Violet swallowed hard, her mind already supplying the answer.

"The wolves," she whispered.

Silence fell as a ripple of fear spread through the girls, their expressions wide-eyed.

Ivy squared her shoulders, attempting to inject optimism into the moment. "Then we just have to make sure we don't get caught."

Except no one responded, the tension in the air suffocating enough. No one has been known to outrun a wolf.

And then, almost on cue, a horn blared through the clearing and every head turned towards the sound in unison.

From a distance, elevated just enough to loom over the crowd like gods among mortals, were the Terror Four—as she now preferred to call them—Asher, Roman, Griffin, and Alaric.

They stood in unison, exuding raw dominance. Their gazes were unreadable yet imposing. Their mere presence alone speaking volumes about the night ahead and sending a fresh wave of unease rolling through the gathered students.

Violet knew the saying that the Alphas were divided among themselves, each with their own ambitions and rivalries, yet united. And seeing them together now, she finally understood.

They might clash and fight for everything, but when it came to maintaining control over the academy, they were united. Unbreakable.

And Asher, was the first to step forward. Of course, it had to be him. He was the only one who would take pleasure in this.

"Welcome to your initiation, new bloods," he announced, his voice a chilling mix of cold authority and twisted amusement. His eyes scanned their faces, feeding off their fear like a predator savoring the scent of its prey.

"I know you might be scared..." he mused, letting his eyes linger on the trembling first-years.

"Confused..." He dragged the word out, feigning sympathy.

"Angry..."

His piercing eyes locked onto Violet, his lips curving into a knowing smirk. As if her anger was the most entertaining thing he'd seen all night.

Violet clenched her fists so tightly that her nails bit into her palms.

"You have nothing to be scared, confused, or angry about," he continued smoothly, his tone mockingly reassuring. "This is tradition. One that those before you have endured and survived."

He gestured to the surrounding students, the ones watching with sick anticipation. No wonder they all looked so eager. They had suffered through this before, and now, they were here to watch others go through the same torment.

Lila scoffed under her breath. "Such a sweet talker."

Ivy, for once, didn't argue. Instead, she glared at Asher, her lips curling in rare defiance. "I'd love to wipe that smug look off his face."

Violet, Daisy and Lila turned to stare at her, startled.

"What?" Ivy asked, catching their looks.

None of them replied, though the shift in Ivy's demeanor didn't go unnoticed. For so long, she had idolized the Cardinal Alphas. Now, standing in the crosshairs of their twisted game, it seemed she had finally begun to see them for what they truly were.

Roman was the next to speak, "The school may have placed you in your respective houses, but now, it's time to prove you deserve your place. Or rather..." His lips curved slightly. "Let fate decide."

And Violet knew exactly who the fate are.

Her jaw tightened.

"And how, exactly, will this fate decide?" She asked challengingly with a loud voice.

The students murmured, shifting slightly and creating space around her as they exposed Violet to the probing stares of the alphas.

Asher's eyes burned with something wild, eager, thrilled. He took a slow step forward, relishing the tension.

"Simple," he said, pausing for drama. Then, with a wicked grin, Asher answered,

"Through a task."

Violet's heart pounded yet she stared him dead in the eyes. "What task?"

Asher tilted his head, as if savoring her unease.

"The Running Game."

Chapter 164: Never Leave Him

The moment Asher's words left his lips, there was chaos. Murmurs and anxious whispers spread through the crowd of newbies like wildfire.

Violet clenched and unclenched her fists, the anxiety inside her coiling tighter. She felt sick. Daisy had called this a chase, but the most accurate term was a hunt, because there would be nothing playful or innocent about it.

"Silence!" Roman's voice boomed, and the noise cut off instantly. The cardinal alphas, Lunaris Academy's so-called gods, stood before them, their impassive expressions only adding to the suffocating tension. Right now, they looked less like leaders and more like executioners watching their prey squirm.

Violet watched Asher closely. He was savoring this moment, drinking in their fear, their uncertainty, like it was the finest ambrosia.

"The rules of the Running Game are quite simple. You run. We chase." His tone was unapologetic, final, and the slow curve of his lips sent shivers down the spine of anyone who dared look at him.

Violet and her roommates exchanged a look, silent but heavy with understanding of the risk ahead. Around them, the other students panicked wide eyed, their breaths quick and cold sweat breaking out across their faces.

The thought of being chased by wolves was enough to cripple even the bravest of men. And yet, here they were, innocent students about to be thrown into a nightmare. Some looked ready to bolt right then and there, but there was nowhere to run.

This was what Lunaris was truly about. Not academics, not prestige, not scholarships. It was about dominance. About power. About ensuring those at the top never let the rest forget their place. And there was no escaping it.

"Alphas. Betas. Deltas," Roman continued, his voice cutting through the uneasy air. "These are the ranks of wolves that will be hunting you. The ordinary Gammas will be cheering you on from the sidelines, waiting at the finish line." The laughter in his voice made it clear that this wasn't a race but entertainment.

Violet ignored the bastard. Instead, her gaze shifted to Alaric and Griffin. Their expressions were cold, unreadable, but their stances were tense. They didn't want to be part of this. That much was clear. But wanting and doing were two different things.

No matter how guilty they felt, it didn't change the fact that, when the time came, they would chase her down just like the rest.

If they truly felt sorry, they wouldn't just stand there. They would end this cruel tradition, not uphold it.

Almost instantly, the newbies' phones beeped in unison. Violet pulled hers out, just as Alaric spoke for the first time.

"A map of the region has been sent to you," he stated, his voice carefully neutral. "You can try to escape beyond the lit areas, but it's night. And last I checked, humans don't see in the dark." He let that sink in before adding, "Wolves, on the other hand? They're the best hunters at night."

Alaric's warning was clear: stay in the light or be hunted in the shadows.

That was encouraging

He continued, "Your objective is simple, make it to the collapsed wall at the far end of Silver Glade. That is your finish line."

Violet quickly minimized the map and studied the marked 'X'. How big was the collapse? Could they crawl through? Climb over? Something about it didn't sit right.

"Five kilometers," Daisy murmured.

"What?"

"Five kilometers to reach the end." Her mind was already working through the calculations. "A normal walking pace would take an hour. Jogging, maybe thirty to forty minutes."

She exhaled sharply. "But I highly doubt they'll make it that easy." The girl shot a pointed look at the cardinal alphas.

"This is unfair!" Lila yelled at the alphas to everyone's shock.

Everyone stilled.

"Lila!" Ivy hissed, trying to pull her back, but Lila shook her off and stepped forward, her chin lifted defiantly.

"A human cannot outrun a wolf. This is impossible, and I'm sure you know that as well, cardinal alphas."

A heavy silence followed.

Everyone held their breath, waiting for the alphas to put Lila in her place. No one spoke to them like that!

However, Violet already moved, positioning herself close to her friend. If they dared lay a hand on Lila, she would fight them to her last breath.

"Of course, it's unfair," Asher admitted shamelessly. His smirk was infuriating. "That's why you'll get a head start. Five minutes. Nothing less, nothing more. You're welcome."

Lila rolled her eyes. He would not be getting a thanks from her.

Her boldness seemed to inspire another girl, who tentatively raised her hand. "I... I have a question."

Asher turned to her, his tone dripping with mock sweetness. "Of course. Ask away, darling. Let it never be said that the cardinal alphas are heartless." He looked straight at Violet when he said that, making it clear who the words were truly meant for. Her.

The girl hesitated, then carefully asked, "What happens if we get caught?"

A dangerous gleam flickered in Asher's eyes. "What do you think happens?" His voice was all silk and menace. "We kill the weaklings, of course."

A breathless silence followed.

Then Asher laughed, breaking the shock that have overtaken everyone.

"Relax, I'm kidding." He relished their horrified reactions.

Violet was simply speechless. Only him would enjoy making such dark joke.

"If you get caught, you join the pack that catches you. For example, if you're in the North pack, but you're caught by me or one of my people..." His smirk deepened. "Congratulations. You now belong to the West Pack."

Then, slowly, he met Violet's gaze on purpose as he delivered the final blow.

"It doesn't matter if you're dating the Alpha of the North pack. Once you're caught... you belong to me."

Violet's stomach knotted at once.

Suddenly, everything Alaric had been trying to warn her about began to make sense.

This wasn't about the Running Game.

Asher was coming for her.

And he would make damn sure she never left the West House ever.

Chapter 165: Sound Of Thunder

"He's going to come after me," Violet whispered to herself with dread. Her friends heard her, their expressions shifting to one of concern.

"What do you mean by that?" Lila asked, alarmed.

Violet clenched her fists. "This is my one chance to leave the West House, but Asher won't let that happen. He'll focus all his resources on capturing me."

"Alaric won't stay still either way," Daisy countered. "You're his girlfriend. This is his chance to keep you close. It'll turn into a fight over you, and I have no doubt Griffin and Roman will back their respective friends."

"Wait a minute," Ivy interjected, a spark of realization in her eyes. "If they all fight over you, doesn't that mean it'll give us enough time to escape? What happens if we actually manage to escape without getting caught?"

No one had an answer, and Ivy, never one to hesitate, raised her voice, addressing the Alphas directly. "What happens if we escape successfully? Do we still have to return to our old house?"

Griffin answered her, "You'll have the choice to join any house you want."

Hope spread like wildfire among the newbies. If they escape, they will be free to choose a house for themselves. The possibility of such freedom was intoxicating considering all of them had a dream Alpha they wanted to stay under.

Ivy turned back to her roommates with excitement. "So, let's say we make it together. What house would we pick other than the West House?"

"North House, probably," Lila suggested, glancing at Violet. "She has a cardinal Alpha for a boyfriend. We'd have a smoother stay there."

Daisy, ever the strategist, shook her head. "Elsie is already a member of the North House. If Violet moves in, it'll turn into a warzone for power."

"If it comes down to that, Violet will win. I believe in her," Lila said with absolute faith in her voice.

"Or," Ivy cut in, "we avoid the drama and go with the East House. Griffin isn't so bad, and he and Alaric are friends."

"It still wouldn't be better than staying under her boyfriend's watch!" Lila argued.

Violet, who had been silent up until now, finally had enough.

"Guys!" she snapped, frustration in her voice. "We have way bigger problems than deciding which house to end up in. None of this will matter if Asher catches me!"

"She's right!" Ivy huffed. "We'd have to deal with another roommate if Violet gets taken, and I don't like strangers in my space."

Daisy's gaze swept the crowd, calculating. "There are about forty newbies. Each pack has one Alpha and one Beta, but the ones we should really be worried about are the Deltas. I can't tell how many each pack has, but to keep the race fair, they're probably be evenly distributed. Let's assume eight Deltas per pack. That means for every newbie, there's a werewolf assigned. Outrun or defeat yours—which is pretty much impossible—and you're good to go."

She wasn't wrong.

In the wolf hierarchy, Alphas ruled as the dominant leaders, Betas were their trusted second-in-command, and Deltas, the elite warriors, carried out their orders with unwavering loyalty. They were the ones to fear. Gammas were merely pack members, hunters, and guards. But the Deltas? They were trained to catch their prey. And tonight, that prey was them.

Lila swallowed. "I'm sure Alaric will save her. But we're a unit. Wherever Violet goes, we go, right?"

She looked at the others expectantly, but the silence that followed was heavier than lead.

Damn it.

Violet read the shift in mood and sighed. "None of you have to—"

"I'll go with you," Daisy interrupted. "You have connections with the Cardinal Alphas. If I stick with you, I have a better shot at success when I graduate."

Violet didn't flinch at her blunt honesty. She wasn't offended. Daisy was smart, and she needed someone like that on her corner. If their partnership was transactional, so be it, as long as it was built on trust.

"Fine," she said.

All eyes turned to Ivy.

Unlike Daisy, who came from nothing and needed to carve her future, Ivy had money and influence. In one word, she needed nothing from Violet.

Yet the girl shrugged. "I promised to make you rich and famous. Can't back out of my word now, bitch."

Violet said. "Thank you."

Now, all that was left was Lila.

But before anyone could question her, Lila clung to Violet's arm, pressing herself close. "You already know I'm not going anywhere."

"Yeah, you're my stalker," Violet teased.

The girls all burst into laughter, their bond solidified. However, that laughter was abruptly cut off.

"It's time to prove yourselves, newbies." Asher spoke.

Silence slammed down.

Violet and her roommates exchanged nervous glances. The moment they had been waiting for—more like, the one they dreaded—was here, but they drew strength from their bond.

Asher reveled in their unease, saying in a deceptively smooth tone. "Before I send you off like tasty lambs to be devoured by wolves, I'd like to render small mercies."

Murmurs rose across the crowd. Asher? Offering mercy? That had to be a joke.

"One thing you'll notice about this race," Asher continued, "is that we wolves don't just hunt by sight. We hunt by scent."

A shudder passed through the group. It was easy to forget while surrounded by these creatures regularly, just how different they truly were.

"So," Asher drawled, turning to Alaric, "to even the grounds, we'll be cutting off your scents. Thunderboy here will summon a rainstorm to wash it away."

Even though Alaric was used to the nickname, Asher usually said it with mocking condescension and the way Alaric's jaw clenched showed exactly how he felt about it.

Nonetheless, Alaric stepped forward, tilting his face toward the sky, his arms stretching outward. A crack of lightning tore across the sky, illuminating the darkened clouds that had begun to swirl above, dense and ominous.

A startled gasp rippled through the crowd as the heavens responded to Alaric's silent call. Thunder rumbled deeply, shaking the ground beneath their feet. The clouds churned violently, as if Alaric were pulling the very threads of the storm together with his sheer will.

Then— crack.

A blinding bolt of lightning struck the ground just inches from Asher. Yet he remained motionless, unflinching, his face indifferent as he stared down the storm's wrath without so much as a blink.

Violet's breath hitched at the sight of Alaric, his entire presence transformed. His eyes were now a ghostly white and crackled with pure electrical energy, flickering like contained lightning storms within his irises. Sparks danced along his fingertips, tiny threads of electricity weaving through his skin like veins of raw power.

He looked like a god. A god of thunder and lightning.

The static in the air grew unbearable, forcing those nearby to instinctively step back. Then, with a final roar of thunder, the clouds released their burden.

Rain came down in heavy, punishing sheets. The scent of ozone filled the air, mingling with the earthy petrichor of the drenched ground.

It began to wash away their scents, their traces, and any advantage the wolves had over them. Neither could they hear anything aside from the relentless drumming of rain and the distant grumble of thunder.

And yet, when the horn blared for the second time that night, they did hear it.

The Running Game had begun.

Chapter 166: Wolves' Den

The moment the signal was given, chaos erupted.

Students scattered like a herd of startled deer, their bodies moving forward with a singular goal to escape and win. Eyes burned with desperation, feet pounded against the damp earth, and within seconds, the wild expanse became a battlefield of newbies pushing, shoving, clawing for an advantage.

Violet's grip on Lila tightened, her fingers digging into the girl's wrist. Beside them, Daisy clung to Ivy, all of them moving in sync as they cut through the frenzy.

Desperate students tried to shove between them or rather, strategically separate their competition. But the four girls held their ground, pushing forward like a current refusing to be broken.

The tall grass lashed at their legs, slick with rain and mud. The damp air burned in Violet's lungs, her breath coming in ragged gasps. But stopping wasn't an option. Not now. Not ever.

"Fuck it!" she cursed, swiping her wet face with her left hand.

The ground beneath them had become soft and muddy from the rain that Alaric had summoned. What mercy? Asher's so-called mercy was nothing but a cruel trick, an added layer of difficulty to an already merciless game.

"This is fun!" Lila screamed, her eyes alight with exhilaration

Violet snapped her head toward her, incredulous. Was the girl insane? What part of this game looked fun?

Behind them, she could feel the heated gazes of the werewolves, each ready to close in on them the moment the waiting time was over.

"I mean, look at this! It looks like we might actually run past—ahh!" Lila's words were cut off by a sickening snap.

A sudden force ripped her off her feet, and in the blink of an eye, she was whipped into the air.

"Lila!" Violet screamed, skidding to a stop, her heart plummeting.

Lila dangled, suspended upside down, the blood rushing to her head. The snare bit into her skin, the coarse rope twisting mercilessly around her ankle. She twisted and thrashed, but the more she struggled, the tighter the noose became.

"Violet!" Lila shrieked, panic lacing her voice. None of them had seen this coming.

"Shit—!" Daisy barely had time to curse before she too was yanked into the air, her scream sharp and swallowed by the rain.

In mere seconds, two of them were captured, their bodies swaying helplessly from the tree.

Ivy clapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide with terror. "T-There are traps everywhere..." she whispered, voice trembling.

Violet's stomach dropped.

She turned in a slow, horrified scan of the area. The blood drained from her face.

Ivy was right. There were traps everywhere.

The waiting time was a lie. This was a calculated ambush.

The Alphas had never planned to wait five minutes. That was just a cruel illusion. A way to pick them off before the real chase even began.

Lila and Daisy had been snared, but others had it worse. Students struggled in hanging nets, their bodies twisting and fighting to break free. It will be hell to get out of those. They were stuck there for good until the alphas captured them especially with the others — some, their friends — running and leaving them for good.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!" Violet ran a hand through her soaked hair, her mind reeling.

She couldn't go forward. Who knew how many traps were buried ahead? There was no going back, not to the Alphas. And she damn well wasn't leaving her friends behind.

"Ugh!" Lila groaned, her body swaying slightly as she tried to twist herself up. Above her, the tree branch trembled under her weight.

"STOP MOVING, YOU IDIOT!" Daisy barked from her own trap, her voice carrying above the rain. "You'll only tighten the snare further!"

"Hold on, I'm getting you down!" Violet moved, her pulse hammering.

Daisy snapped her head toward her. "Be careful!"

Violet slowed her steps, her eyes scanning the ground. Thanks to the rain, the loose earth made it easier to spot the disturbed patches where the hidden triggers were buried beneath the grass. She dodged one, then another, her breaths came in short, ragged gasps.

Reaching Lila, she crouched beside the base of the snare, and began working on the knot. But it was tight. Too tight. Whoever set this trap had ensured it wouldn't come undone easily.

Her fingers were slippery and cold, but Violet tried pulling at the fibers, prying them loose. Nothing. The rain only made it worse, the fibers slick and impossible to grip.

"Shit," she hissed, searching the ground. She needed something. Something sharp. Her gaze fell on a sharp, jagged piece of wood and she picked it, pressing it against the rope—

Snap.

The stick snapped in half like a twig.

"Fuck!" Violet hissed, tossing it away. She needed a knife, something sharp enough to saw through the thick fibers. But she had nothing.

"Violet." Ivy's shaky voice reached her ears.

Violet turned, and her stomach clenched because Ivy held up her phone and the screen glowed in the dark.

Two minutes were gone. There was only three minutes left.

She knew what Ivy was implying. They had to go. She wanted to leave them behind.

"You can go but I'm not leaving them." Violet's voice was like a whip, her glare sharp as daggers.

Ivy flinched, biting her lip, ashamed. She didn't want to abandon them either. She was just... scared.

But so was Violet.

And she was done letting fear make her decisions.

Violet rose to her feet, her chest heaving as she turned in the direction of the wolves and saw just whom she was looking for.

Asher was standing at the distance, watching her with that infuriating smirk, as if he already knew how this would end. As if he held the solution to her problem — it hit her. Of course, he did.

Her fists clenched. Fine. He wanted to play this game. Game on.

Violet began to walk back to the startling line only for Ivy to grab her arm.

"Where are you going?" She lifted a careful brow, "What are you about to do?"

Violet's eyes burned with determination as she yanked free. "Getting them out of that mess."

And then she ran straight into the wolves' den.

Chapter 167: Division Of Alphas

There was no rule that banned students from returning to the start of the race to get help. If there was, no one had mentioned it, and Violet would plead ignorance if it were judged.

At first, Violet walked briskly, then, as the urgency of the dwindling time pressed down on her, her pace quickened into a jog, then a full sprint.

Rain pelted her face, her damp clothes clinging to her skin, and the slippery path was treacherous, but Violet didn't stop.

The werewolves noticed her approach immediately. Their keen gazes followed her, curiosity twinkling in their eyes like embers waiting to ignite.

Asher's brows lifted in mild surprise while Griffin and Roman pinned her with their gazes, trying to guess her intention.

Alaric, who had been leaning against a branch, looking utterly bored, stiffened when he saw her coming. He straightened, his expression tightening with concern.

Violet didn't realize how furious she must have looked striding toward Asher until one of the wolves muttered under his breath, "She's going to punch him."

Alaric must have thought the same because he moved into her path, his jaw tight and his face painted with guilt. "Violet—"

But Violet didn't stop. She didn't even acknowledge him. She walked straight past him, as if he were nothing but a shadow in her periphery.

There was only one person who had what she needed, and she was going to take it from him.

Asher.

The slitted gray-eyed Alpha oozed nothing but arrogance as she closed the distance between them.

"Calm down, my little Violent queen," he taunted her, his voice a rich, velvety drawl. "I don't think hitting me would help your situation right now."

Violet stopped right in front of Asher and regarded him thoroughly. Look at him, all smug and confident, thinking he had her all figured out.

Perhaps, he expected a slap, maybe a well-placed knee to his gut. Except Violet never had violence in mind from the start.

Before Asher could get another word out, Violet surged forward, gripping his hair and yanking his face down to hers. And then she kissed him. Hard.

For the first time that night, silence fell over the wolves.

Not just them. Asher himself froze, his cocky smirk vanishing into pure, stunned stillness. But it only lasted a fraction of a second before Asher recovered quickly, his instincts sharper than his shock.

A low, approving growl rumbled deep in his chest as his arms wrapped around her, pulling her flush against him.

Alaric, just as the others were frozen for a second, right before a snarl escaped his throat. How dare he!

Lightning snapped at his fingertips as his fury radiated in visible sparks of electricity. He lunged only for Griffin to seize his wrist, bracing himself as the crackling current jolted through his body. Yet he gritted his teeth, shaking his head at Alaric. This was not the time.

Alaric gave in hesitantly, but the glare he shot Asher was pure murder.

Violet might have started this, but Asher was the one in control now.

His lips moved against hers with slow agonizing confidence, teasing, claiming, and conquering. He sucked her bottom lip, then nipped at it, his sharp canines scraping lightly against the sensitive skin. It took every ounce of Violet's self-control not to melt into him, and moan at the sheer intensity of it.

Asher's grip tightened, his fingers splaying across her lower back as his tongue traced along the seam of her lips, coaxing them to open wider. When she refused, he nipped her bottom lip until he drew blood and that was enough to get her to open up.

His tongue slid against hers with searching hunger. He stroked and sucked until heat bloomed in her chest, spreading like wildfire down her spine, and pooling low in her stomach.

Fuck. She had to end this. Now.

With a sharp inhale, Violet broke the kiss, staggering back, breathless. But she did not leave empty-handed.

In her grip was a small sheathed knife, one she had slipped from Asher's pocket while her lips had been distracting him.

Asher's eyes widened slightly as he realized what she had done.

He thought he knew her inside and out, but what the puppet master failed to realize was that Violet knew him just as well. Those traps had Asher's signature all over them. And she'd bet anything they were a last-minute addition, which was why both Alaric and Griffin had been caught off guard.

If Alaric had known about the traps, he would have warned her, and maybe even slipped her a weapon to even the odds. But Asher had anticipated that. He had deliberately kept lover boy in the dark, ensuring that Violet walked into the game unarmed and vulnerable.

Thanks to that, Violet was able to guess Asher would have a weapon on him. His claws could cut through rope, but there was no guarantee the snare or net traps would catch her. So he'd keep a knife handy, just in case. After all, no one would enjoy the thrill of freeing and recapturing her more than Asher.

Violet smirked, lifting the blade between them like a trophy. "Thanks for this," she taunted, rubbing her victory in his face.

Asher let out a slow, husky chuckle, "Nicely executed, my little queen. It's quite a loss, but I have to admit, I thoroughly enjoyed that." His tongue flicked out to swipe the taste of her from his lips.

Heat flooded Violet's body, unbidden and unwelcome. At the same time, above them, the sky cracked open with a deafening thunderclap. Alaric was losing his patience.

But Asher ignored him, his whole focus on Violet, and right now, his eyes gleamed with an emotion so dark and insatiable.

"However," Asher murmured, voice thick with promise, "your time is ticking fast, little queen. It would do you well to run fast and smart because I'm coming for you. And when I do—" he flashed his sharp canines. "We're going to finish what you started."

A shiver danced down Violet's spine.

She didn't need to be told twice. She turned on her heel, sparing only a brief, heavy glance at Alaric before she bolted back into the forest. They would talk about this later, but for now, she had to get to her friends before the hunt truly began.

Behind her, Asher flexed his shoulders, rolling out the tension in his body. His wolf was already prowling at the edges of his mind, restless, eager. Ready.

But it was not yet time. But soon.

The thrill of the chase was a dance as old as time. And this time, the only prey he wanted was Violet Purple.

He had already given instructions. If any of his pack should capture Violet Purple, they would not drag her through that finish line. No, that honor would be his. He would claim her right in front of her.

She could run, fight, and resist all she wanted, but in the end, she will be his.

But Asher's thoughts were interrupted as Alaric's fist collided with his face. "I told you not to lay a hand on her!"

Asher staggered back, blood dripping from his lip, before he let out a low, dark laugh. He straightened, wiping the crimson away with the back of his hand.

"She was the one who kissed me first, moron, in case your eyes are blind."

Alaric was consumed with jealousy and anger, his snarl pure fury as his body practically vibrated with the urge to shift and attack.

Asher's wolves responded instantly, their growls filling the night air, muscles tensed and ready to defend their Alpha.

The North Pack wolves did the same for Alaric, crouching low, their snarls rumbling through the forest.

Tension coiled like a wire about to snap, the air thick with the promise of a fight.

"That's enough!" Griffin shoved himself between them before things could spiral into bloodshed. His eyes burned with frustration. "We're here to hunt the humans, not each other."

The stand-off remained for a beat longer, both sides bristling, waiting for the first move. A sight Roman observed with furrowed brows.

Just as he thought, Violet Purple was more dangerous than he had anticipated.

And that only solidified his plans for tonight.

Chapter 168: The Unfortunate Lunar Orb

"Violet!" Ivy called out with relief the moment she appeared, and yanked her into a tight hug. Thank the gods she was safe!

She had been scared out of her mind when Violet had gone up against the Alphas, convinced they'd harm her. But time and time again, her friend had proved she could take care of herself.

Violet barely returned the embrace before pulling back. "How much time is left?" she demanded.

Ivy swallowed hard. "A minute."

"Fuck!" Violet cursed, her pulse kicking into overdrive. There was no time. She had to move now.

Without hesitation, she sprinted toward Daisy, her boots splashing mud as she dropped to a crouch beneath the suspended girl. Then she pulled out the blade she'd stolen from Asher, the polished steel gleaming wickedly from the light's reflection.

"You better brace yourself," she warned.

Daisy let out a nervous squeak. "Oh God. Am I going to land on my face? Maybe you should cut it slowly—wait, no, we don't have time! Should I hold onto the net? Or maybe...."

The girl was still babbling from fear when Violet sliced through the snare in one swift motion. The rope snapped.

"Shit—!"

Daisy dropped like a stone.

"I got you!" Ivy made a valiant attempt to play rescuer, but in a tragic twist of fate, she lost her footing just as Daisy crashed into her and they hit the ground in a tangled heap.

"Ugh," Ivy groaned, winded. "I think my kidney just moved."

Violet didn't have the time to ask them if they were okay because Lila was still trapped, the snare now cutting deeper into her ankle.

With rain-slicked fingers, Violet adjusted her grip on the blade and began sawing through the thick rope. It was slippery and stubborn, but she refused to give up. With a final grunt, the fibers gave way.

Lila dropped, but unlike Daisy, she was better prepared. Twisting midair, she landed gracefully in a crouch before rising with a triumphant grin.

"Did you see that? That was so cool, wasn't it?" she beamed.

Although her nerves stretched thin, Violet ignored Lila's annoying enthusiasm and pulled her into a brief hug.

"Thank you," Lila murmured. "You could've left me behind, but you didn't."

Violet pulled back. "What kind of ruler abandons her people?" she shot back.

But that moment of happiness did not last. A horn blared in the distance and everyone froze.

They all knew what it meant. The wolves were coming.

"It's time to go!" Daisy cried, already tensed to run.

Ivy reached for Violet's wrist, but she shook her head. "No. I can't go with you. I'll only slow you down."

Ivy's eyes widened. "No, Violet, you can't —"

"I'll draw them away. Go!"

Right about that moment, what sounded like a thousand excited howls rent through the air and sent chills down their spine. The wolves were enjoying this chase. Not to mention, they were closing in. Fast.

"Go, go, go!" Violet urged.

Lila snapped into action. "I will get them out! Follow me!"

No one questioned it. They bolted, running blindly through the trees, while hoping they wouldn't stumble into another trap else it was over.

Violet watched her friends disappear before exhaling sharply. She then slid the knife back into her pocket, after all, who knew what else Asher had in store for her? She needed protection, especially now the wolves were getting closer.

Violet could hear them now. The deep thud of their paws pounding against the rain-slicked ground, their massive body rustling the trees and fallen leaves. They moved relentlessly, like death itself was hunting her down.

Violet turned and bolted in the opposite direction. She wasn't just running to escape. No, she was running to buy time for her friends knowing Asher and his pack would focus on her.

The forest blurred around her, the cold night air stinging her lungs as she pushed herself harder, faster, than she ever did in her life. The intensity of the chase sharpened Violet's senses to a razor's edge that every distant growl, every subtle crunch of a leaf registered in her mind, adrenaline coursing through her veins like wildfire.

Violet didn't follow the main path that was illuminated by streetlights. That was a death trap as it made her an easy target. Instead, she veered deeper into the forest, using the dim reflection of the lights to guide her just enough so she wasn't running blind.

The wolves howled again but unlike the first one that was filled with cruel amusement as they revelled in the thrill of the hunt. The tone had shifted.

They were communicating.

Shit. They'd found her.

Violet risked a glance over her shoulder and what she saw made her heart stutter violently in her chest.

A pack of werewolves was tearing through the trees behind her, their eyes burning like molten gold in the darkness. They were closing in fast, their powerful bodies a blur of fur and muscle. It looked like a brutal game of Fangball, except this time, she was the unfortunate Lunar Orb.

And if they caught her, there would be no second round.

The sight sent a jolt of panic through her, and in that split second of distraction, her foot caught on a root and she went down hard.

Her body slammed into the wet earth, but the ground beneath her was uneven. Before Violet could stop herself, she was tumbling forward, rolling down the dirt and gravel.

Above her, a massive wolf lunged towards her but before it could land, another wolf slammed into it mid-air. They hit the ground with a bone-rattling thud, their snarls ripping through the night as they clashed just inches from where she landed.

Violet scrambled to her feet, her pulse hammering in her ears. She barely had time to react before the first wolf somehow got free and lunged at her again, its jaws snapping viciously near her.

But the second wolf intercepted again, knocking it back before they tumbled into another brutal scuffle.

Violet didn't wait to see who won. She ran.

But her living nightmare didn't end there.

Another wolf burst from the trees, cutting off her path. She braced herself, but before it could strike, another wolf crashed into it, sending them both sprawling.

This happened again. And again.

Every time a wolf emerged from the darkness, ready to capture her, another one would intercept, forcing it back, their battle intense.

Thanks to that, Violet was driven deeper into the forest, her lungs burning and her body screaming in protest.

Violet couldn't tell who was helping her. The wolves all looked the same in the dark, but she knew without a doubt that some of them were fighting for her. Was it Alaric's or Griffin's people? She couldn't tell.

But there was a wolf she hadn't seen yet. One that terrified her more than the others.

Asher.

The black wolf was nowhere in sight. And that meant only one thing.

Asher was waiting.

Waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Waiting for her to let her guard down.

Waiting for her to fall right into his trap.

Chapter 169: A Sudden Ally

Thoroughly drenched and covered in dirt, Violet had no clue where the hell she was. Her initial plan had been to circle back toward the edge of the Silver Glade, but the wolves had driven her deeper into the blackened woods, forcing her into this unfamiliar terrain. And now, she was lost.

It was by sheer luck, she had managed to shake the wolves off her trail while they fought amongst themselves. But Violet knew better than to slow down, not when they were still out there hunting her. At this point, her heart pounded like a war drum, the frantic beat pulsing in her ears as her lungs burned with every breath.

She was exhausted, every muscle in her body screaming for rest, but there was nowhere to stop. Nowhere was safe. The Silver Glade was riddled with unseen dangers, and the moment she let her guard down, she'd be as good as caught. So Violet pressed on, boots splashing through puddles as she trudged deeper into the unknown.

The downpour had lessened from its earlier downpour to a chilling drizzle, a deceptive calm settling over the forest. The idea of hiding out until morning was tempting. If she could just hold out that long, the game would end, and she would avoid capture. But the cold had burrowed into her bones, leaving her shivering violently. Violet had to clench her teeth to keep them from chattering.

She bet her ass this had been Asher's true intention when he had Alaric summon the storm. No one, especially not a human, could endure this bitter cold for long. It would only be a matter of time before her body gave out.

It didn't help that she had sacrificed her crop top in a desperate bid to confuse the wolves. Tearing it into shreds, she had scattered the pieces around to lead her pursuers away, hoping to mask her real path. Now, she was exposed to the elements and had nothing but drenched skin and mere determination to keep her warm.

A sudden flash of lightning lit up the forest like a camera's blinding flash, allowing Violet a brief glimpse of her surroundings. Gnarled trees stretched high, their skeletal branches stretching like clawed hands reaching for her. For a moment, she spotted no movement, no glowing eyes peering from the dark and thought, maybe she had lost them.

Or maybe they wanted her to believe that.

The thought sent a violent shudder through Violet. It was dangerous to let down her guard but her legs could take no more.

Violet made out a thick tree and stumbled toward it, sagging against its rough bark, gasping for air. Just a minute. She just needed a minute to —

A sharp hiss sliced through the silence and a weight coiled atop her head.

Oh. God. No.

Every nerve in Violet's body went rigid.

The slow, slithering movement of scales against her damp skin made her stomach drop. She bit her tongue, every instinct demanding she fling the snake off her, but fear kept her rooted in place.

Violet barely breathed. For a moment there, she was tempted to believe that was Roman, then she could shove him off and curse his ass. But then, she was in the middle of the woods and there were plenty of snakes here. Real ones.

Unfortunately, if it wasn't Roman in snake form, then she risked the chance of provoking it and getting bitten. If it turned out to be a venomous snake, then she was as good as dead.

Violet swallowed hard as the creature moved down, its smooth, coiling body slinking over her forehead, down her cheek, and further still. The moment its tail slid past her chin, it dropped to the ground with a soft rustle of leaves.

She barely had time to register the relief before Roman Draven stood before her in all his naked glory.

Violet's breath hitched in her throat, shock — and relief — freezing her before her instincts could kick in. She tried to scream but his hand clamped over her mouth.

"Don't scream," Roman whispered immediately, his voice edged with warning.

Fuck.

Violet's strength drained in an instant. After all her efforts, she had still been caught. But that didn't mean she'd go down without a fight.

She twisted, ready to shove him away, but Roman's next words stopped her cold.

"Alaric and Griffin sent me."

Violet stiffened. Then her eyes narrowed. "You lie," she hissed.

Alaric hated Roman's guts. There was no way in hell he would go to him for help. This had to be some sort of trap.

But Roman didn't waver. "Alaric told me you might not be human."

Violet's breath hitched. Only Alaric knew that. Maybe Griffin, too—since he was his best friend—but neither of them were snitches.

Roman continued, "They think Asher might have figured it out as well and were worried about what he'd do to you once he gets his hands on you."

It might be a lie but his next words struck something deep in her chest. "So they came to me for help, to help you escape this hunt successfully and be able to make your choice."

Something inside Violet's chest twisted painfully. Alaric and Griffin had gone to this extent for her?

They had put aside their pride, their hatred of Roman, putting themselves at risk to protect her. And how had she repaid them? By rejecting them earlier without even thinking about the idea.

Violet swallowed, feeling guilty.

She didn't trust Roman and he could be lying, twisting the truth for his own amusement for when he will betray her at the end.

But she knew Alaric and Griffin. She knew their loyalty and they wouldn't give up on her. Right now, she bet Alaric and Griffin must be searching for her.

Same as Asher.

Perhaps it was the ominous thought, or the cold, or both, but a violent shudder wracked her body and Roman noticed.

"God, you're freezing," he muttered, exasperated. "How stupid are you to wander this deep into the silver glade on your own?"

Violet's temper flared. "I didn't wander on my own, you goddamn snake, your brethren chased me this far!"

Roman's jaw tensed. He said nothing, but she could feel his irritation simmering beneath the surface.

"Come on," he finally said. "I'll take you somewhere to dry off before we finish this. I'm not about to have you passing out on me. I can't carry you and fight off Asher at the same time."

Before she could ask what he meant by that, Roman's tongue flicked out and licked her cheek.

Violet nearly jumped out of her skin. "What the fuck are you doing?!" she hissed, barely restraining the volume of her voice.

"Relax," Roman murmured. "I'm masking your scent."

Violet gaped at him.

He continued, "It's not foolproof since I can't cover every inch of you. But it's better than nothing. If someone gets too close, all they'll smell is me, not you."

Lick every inch of her body? Yep. This had to be a blast.

His tongue moved again, dragging slowly down the line of her jaw, her throat, her collarbone. The heat of it burned against her chilled skin.

Then he went lower.

His tongue traced a wicked path to the top of her chest before sliding lower, laving over the curve of her exposed stomach. Her breath hitched, her fingers clenching into fists as heat curled in her gut.

By the time Roman was done, Violet's panties were drenched, and it was not from the rain.

Chapter 170: His Own Santuary

If it weren't for the fact that the game was deadly serious and the forest was dark and lonely, Violet would have rejected Roman's help outright and risked it all on her own. Because the gods help her, she was mortified right now!

She knew Roman had scented her arousal. There was no hiding that from a werewolf. Although he didn't say a word or give any outward indication that he noticed, Violet had no doubt he must have savored every bit of her discomfort.

Roman must be exhilarated inside of him for ruffling her. To make it worse, he would probably bring it up and not let her hear the end of it the next time they met under more favorable conditions.

Lightning slashed across the sky, illuminating the forest in a brief, blinding flash before plunging them back into blackness. With her sight reduced to near nothing, Violet had to rely on her hearing instead.

Thanks to that, every snap of a twig and rustling leaf, distant howl, or subtle shift in the air put her on edge. And right now, the only sound she focused on was Roman moving.

"Get on my back," he said, crouching low.

"What?" She was sure she had misheard him.

Roman explained to her, "I have a location in mind, but we need to go deeper into the Silver Glade. No one would expect you to go that far, and even if they do, they'll never anticipate that you'd actually stay there. We'll be alone, and you can take ten minutes to rest and restore your body heat. Nothing more, nothing less."

Ten minutes alone with Roman? Violet didn't know how to feel about that. Moreover, they were going deeper into the silver glade, was that even a wise decision?

"And what if we get lost?" she asked warily.

Roman chuckled, the sound warm and lazy, as if the very idea was amusing. "Miss Purple," he drawled, his voice sliding over her like silk. Violet swore that ridiculous nickname sounded a hundred times more sinful coming from his lips.

Get a grip, girl!

She was already in a dire situation with this hunt, this was not the time to be getting distracted by Roman freaking Draven!

"Are you even listening to me?" Roman's voice snapped her out of her thoughts.

"What?" she blurted.

Roman smirked, knowingly. "Where did that pretty little head of yours go? Never mind. Listen, I roam this forest in my animal form every night. Trust me, nobody knows every inch of these woods better than I do. I'm practically the forest god at this point."

Yeah, a naked forest god.

Thank the stars it was too dark to see much, because her brain did not need to be providing visuals right now.

"Fine," Violet muttered at last, lowering herself toward him.

She reached blindly in the dark, her fingers grazing warm, solid muscle as Roman leaned back, allowing her to climb onto his back. His skin was burning hot—almost too hot—but the moment she settled against him, she realized just how frozen she had been.

Roman rose to his full height, lifting her as if she weighed nothing.

"Hold on tight," Roman warned, and then, he ran.

Violet braced herself before they were hurtling through the forest at a mind-numbing speed. The wind lashed against her skin, cold and biting, but Roman's heat was like a furnace beneath her. At first, she was rigid, her grip on his shoulders tentative, but as they moved, she instinctively clung tighter, pressing herself into the solid warmth.

Though the forest remained pitch black, the sensation of moving so quickly in the dark was exhilarating. She could not believe how effortlessly Roman navigated without light, but it made her realize just how powerful wolves were.

Roman never slowed down, his steps eerily silent even at this insane pace. For a moment, Violet allowed herself to enjoy the ride, letting the rhythm of his movement lull her into a sense of security.

But just as she was beginning to relax, Roman came to a sudden stop, his entire body going rigid beneath her.

Her pulse spiked at once. "What is—"

"Don't talk. Hold your breath," he commanded, his voice sharper than intended.

Something in his tone made her obey without question. Without panicking. Her lungs burned as she forced herself to stay silent, and remain still.

Then there was a rustle not far from where they stood. Violet's fingers dug into Roman's skin as she realized what was happening.

One of the wolves was nearby, searching for her. The creature was maybe fifteen meters away, sniffing the air, trying to catch her scent. But it was struggling with Roman having masked her trail. But even at that, if it got any closer, it would surely find them.

Tension coiled in Roman's muscles as he poised to react. He wouldn't let the wolf get too close.

Then Violet heard Roman make strange sounds in his throat right before the wolf's head whipped towards them.

A sudden, shrill caw pierced the air. It was immediately followed by another. Then another.

Violet felt it rather than saw it, the moment Roman's ability reached out and commanded the crows roosting in the trees.

A whole murder of crows exploded from the treetops above, diving at the wolf in a chaotic frenzy. The beast yelped, snapping its jaws at the attacking birds as they clawed and pecked, overwhelming it completely. The wolf had no choice but to retreat, vanishing into the darkness.

The second it was gone, Roman resumed running, carrying her through the forest without breaking a sweat. Minutes later, they arrived at their destination.

"We're here," he announced.

Violet, still clinging to his back, squinted into the darkness. "What is 'here'?"

As if answering her prayers, lightning cracked through the sky, lighting up their surroundings for the briefest moment.

It was a tree house perched high in the branches.

"Whoa," Violet breathed, eyes wide. "Whose treehouse is that?"

"Mine," Roman said, and for the first time, there was something almost boyish in his voice, as if he was excited to share this secret with her.

Violet turned her head to look at him, suspicion in her voice. "Why do you have a treehouse in the middle of the forest?"

Although Violet immediately realized how stupid the question was. Just like Alaric and his lab, it seemed like these Alphas all had their own secret sanctuaries.

"I told you, I'm not like the others," Roman replied. "My powers require me to let my animal side out at night. Sometimes I'm too tired to go back to the dormitory, so I stay here. Other times...I just need to be alone."

For the first time, Violet saw something human in Roman, something beyond the cocky playboy she had always pegged him as. It didn't make her trust him, but it did make her distaste waver. Mind you — just a little.

Roman turned his head, catching her in the trap of his glowing green eyes.

"Hold on tight now, honey," he purred. "We wouldn't want you falling and breaking your neck from this height. That wouldn't be a pretty sight."

Violet clutched him so tightly she was probably choking him, but Roman didn't seem to mind.

It was only then, as her mind replayed his words that it hit her.

We wouldn't want you to fall.

We?

Her stomach dropped. Who else was here?