

## Defy 171

### Chapter 171: Human Heat Source

Violet didn't get the chance to ask her question because Roman was already ascending the wooden stairs with minimal effort as if he was carrying mere air and not a grown human like her.

Instinctively, she tightened her grip around his shoulders, pressing herself closer as the steps beneath them groaned and creaked ominously. A scream hovered at the tip of Violet's tongue when one particularly fragile plank let out a cracking sound, her heart seizing at the thought of them crashing down. And breaking her pretty neck.

Violet wanted to tell Roman to stop, that the flimsy rope supports wouldn't hold both of their weights, but before she could utter a word, they already reached the top. What the.... Violet was rendered speechless. Fucking werewolves!

The platform they stood on was stable, but the entrance to the tree house was not a door, but an open archway framed by roughly cut wooden beams, weathered with age and exposure.

A single curtain hung in place, swaying slightly in the wind, its fabric thin and frayed at the edges, giving the entrance a rustic, almost dreamlike feel.

Violet gulped, her fingers still curled around Roman. The place had an air of secrecy, as if belonging to something—or someone—wild and untamed. And now, she was stepping into it.

Roman didn't drop Violet until they were inside the treehouse, and the moment her feet touched the wooden floor, she seized the opportunity to ask the question that had been burning in her mind.

"Who else is here with us?"

Roman faced her, his expression shadowed with confusion. "Who else is here?"

Although she couldn't see him in the dark, she could feel the warmth radiating from his body like a beacon. Frustration welled in her chest, and she pushed against his shoulder to make her point.

"Don't play cheeky with me! Is that why you brought me here?"

Roman let out an exasperated sigh. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh really?" Violet shot back. "'We wouldn't want you to fall.' That's what you said on our way up here."

"So tell me, who else is here?!" she demanded.

Roman didn't respond right away, and Violet's stomach twisted with dread. It didn't help matters that the silence stretched, feeding her worst fears.

Her mind began to reel. If she needed to escape, how would she do it? Climbing down in the dark was impossible.

Panic was creeping up her spine when suddenly, Roman suddenly burst into laughter. A deep, unrestrained laugh filled the treehouse, making not only her brow twitch but her annoyance to rise.

"What's so funny, Mr. Draven?" she snapped, folding her arms.

"Nothing much," he said between chuckles. "Aside from the fact that you completely missed a rhetorical way of speaking."

Violet's glare intensified.

"I said 'we' instead of 'I' to sound more inclusive, and now you're convinced I'm plotting something." He intentionally took a step closer, their bodies brushing. "But the way I see it... you're the one hoping something happens."

Violet's breath hitched, but she refused to back down. However, Roman wasn't done. He leaned in, his lips hovering near her ear.

"Tell me... what were you expecting? Or rather.... " his voice dipped, low and teasing. "Who were you hoping for? Alaric? Griffin? Or... Asher?"

Violet's cheeks burned, while her pulse hammered wildly at the sound of those names.

She recoiled, flustered. "Get lost."

Roman only grinned. "Sorry, honey, but you'd be the lost one if I left. Now come here."

Before she could protest, Roman reached out, his hands closing around her arms. His touch was warm—so incredibly warm that she nearly leaned into him, craving to sink into the heat that chased away the lingering cold....

Okay, hold on, sister. What in the name of things-that-shouldn't-happen was she thinking?

His thumbs brushed her arms absentmindedly, and she shivered, and it was not just from the chill.

Roman noticed. And, of course, misread it. "Still cold?" he mused. "Don't worry, we'll share body heat. You'll be fine in no time."

Violet's brain screeched to a halt.

"Share body heat?" she repeated, her throat suddenly dry. "Isn't there... like... an extra shirt or something? I'd probably stop feeling cold if I wore something."

Roman chuckled, the sound deep and knowing. "Body heat is better. A werewolf's temperature runs double—sometimes triple—what humans' do." He cocked his head. "Don't tell me you didn't enjoy the contact earlier?"

Violet's face heated against her will, and the fact that he could see it in the dark only made it worse. She hated feeling vulnerable, especially around him.

She met his gaze, stubborn. "You will keep your hands to yourself?"

Roman barked out a laugh, shaking his head. "Honey, your kind are the ones always throwing themselves at me, not the other way around."

Violet groaned, exasperated. "Your cockiness is infuriating. Do you know that?"

"Confidence is sexy, Miss Purple." He chortled, then added, "Come on now, let's get this over with. We don't have all night. The longer we stay out here, the more time the others have to regroup and track us down."

The thought sent a shiver through her, but Roman's presence was oddly reassuring.

"Wait here," he instructed.

Violet's ears twitched as she listened to him move through the treehouse, shuffling around as if searching for something.

"Come."

His fingers curled around her wrist, guiding her forward. The dark made it impossible to see where they were going, and then— Thunk. Her leg hit something.

"It's a couch," Roman informed her. "And we're going to lie together."

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Violet's brain did an instant double take.

She and Roman. Lying together.

That was a bad idea. A really bad idea.

Violet wasn't even sure she could trust herself at this point. She might as well be putting her hands into an open flame and praying not to get burned.

And Roman? He was the fire. A burning furnace of warmth that she desperately needed.

The Lord help her soul.

She heard Roman settle onto the couch first, the furniture creaking slightly under his weight. Then, before she could second-guess herself, he reached for her and pulled her down beside him.

Violet, still wary, turned her back to him as she adjusted herself. The couch was not meant for two people. With Roman's broad frame taking up most of the space, there was barely any room left, forcing her body flush against his.

Roman, of course, didn't seem to mind. If anything, he tugged her closer until they were spooning. Violet would have protested, except his heat seeped into her body like a healing balm.

The guy had not been kidding. His body temperature was ridiculously high. Lying against him was like being wrapped in a living, breathing heat source, and she could not get enough.

Roman took that as permission and pulled a blanket over them, his arm draping securely around her waist.

And for the first time that night, Violet felt truly safe and warm.

Chapter 172: Reject Them All

Nestled in his safe warmth, it was no surprise that Violet's eyelids began to droop as sleep threatened to drag her into its dark depths. At first, she resisted the lulling call—after all, who knew what this fool would do to her while unconscious? However, fatigue won over, and she decided to risk it.

And sleep, she did, for all of a few minutes because something was poking into her back. At first, Violet ignored it, shifting slightly in the cramped space, desperate to stay within the blissful haze of sleep. But then it poked her again and again, until her eyes snapped open, and her brain immediately caught up to what was happening.

She was swaddled in Roman's heat, his blanket wrapped around her like a cocoon, but there was no mistaking what was pressing against her considering a certain Alpha was naked behind her.

She clenched her jaw. Oh, for fuck's sake.

"Behave," she muttered, her voice thick with sleep.

There was a beat of silence. Then he said, "Who?" Roman feigned innocence.

Violet ignored him, obviously not in the mood for his games. However, before she could sink back into sleep, "it" poked her again. A slow, bubbling irritation bloomed within her.

"Roman," she said through gritted teeth. "I'm trying to sleep."

Roman hummed, the vibration of his chest resonating through her back. "Don't worry about 'him.'" He admitted shamelessly. "He's just saying hello. First time meeting you and all."

Violet's lips twitched despite herself, but she forced the amusement down. She knew Roman and if she encouraged him even once, he'd never stop.

"Well, tell him his greeting is explicit and highly inappropriate," she shot back, her voice oddly cool. The gods knew she had no idea why she was even entertaining this ridiculous conversation.

Roman sighed dramatically. "I can't."

Her brows furrowed. "And why's that?"

"Because," he used a falsely timid tone, as if confessing a terrible secret, "he's big, long, and scary... and I'm afraid of him."

Violet swore she wouldn't laugh but damn it all, a burst of laughter escaped before she could stop it. And the moment it did, Roman grinned like the smug bastard he was.

He added almost immediately, "He wasn't lying, though, he does have all those features."

The suggestive undertone in his voice was impossible to miss, but oddly enough, it wasn't aggressive and didn't repulse her. Roman was teasing her, and Violet begrudgingly appreciated the lightness of the moment.

It wasn't until now that Violet realized how dangerous this situation was. She was alone in a secluded treehouse, pressed against a naked Alpha, and if Roman had any ill intentions, there would be no one to stop him.

Yet, he hadn't tried anything. The thought made a strange and unfamiliar emotion coil in her chest.

"I can tell," she deadpanned, making a point not to move. "It's poking right at me."

She had no idea why those words left her mouth. It wasn't flirting. Was it? No. Definitely not. Just a neutral observation.

Right?

"You're handling this better than I expected, Miss Purple." The contented sound Roman made rumbled right through her and made her feel warm all over. Violet knew at once she couldn't let whatever this was continue.

"I think I'm warm enough now," she announced, shifting in an attempt to untangle herself.

"No, wait—" Roman reached for her.

The problem was the couch was ridiculously small, so when Violet twisted to get away, she lost her balance. Roman tried to catch her but failed.

With a startled yelp, they tumbled to the floor in a tangled heap with Violet flat on her back, and Roman on top of her. Violet gasped as the air whooshed from her lungs, leaving her momentarily stunned.

For a long, charged second, neither of them moved until Roman lifted his head, their eyes locking in the dark. Those piercing green orbs of his glowed strongly, almost hypnotically, and Violet felt her heart stutter in her chest.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Even without light, she knew exactly what that look in his eyes meant. He was going to kiss her.

Violet's breath hitched in her throat. Roman's face was so close she could feel the warmth of his breath as he leaned in slowly.

But just as their lips were about to meet,

Violet slapped a hand over her mouth.

Roman paused, blinking at her in surprise. Then, he grinned lazily like a predator who knew nothing could stop him from getting what he wanted.

Instead of pulling away, Roman lowered his head and let his lips press against her palm softly. As Roman lingered, the deliberate caress sent heat shooting straight through her.

It was just a kiss on her palm. But fuck! Violet felt it everywhere. And worse? It was not just that. His body was flush against hers, and his undeniable arousal was now pressing directly between her thighs.

God help her!

Flustered, she shoved him away. "Get off me, asshole."

Roman rolled onto his side, laughing.

Violet had to scramble to her feet, mortified, her face burning. She faced the entrance, wanting to get out before she lost whatever sanity she had left.

She would not fall for his tricks like the other girls had.

Violet knew guys like Roman. The second they got what they wanted, they moved on to the next conquest. He was untamable. And Violet wasn't so damaged in the head to think she could change a man like him.

Her chin lifted. "I want to leave. Now. Take me out of here."

Roman sat up, stretching leisurely, still amused as hell. "Fine," he snickered, "but you can't leave like this."

Before she could argue, Roman was moving again, rustling around for something.

A moment later, something warm and thick was pulled over her head. It was his woolly sweater.

The overwhelming scent of pineapple and whipped cream hit her all at once. It was intoxicating. Then—oh fuck, then—Roman's knuckles brushed against her breast as if by accident while adjusting the sweater, and a violent shudder ran through her.

Violet jerked back like she'd been burned.

"I can do it myself," she snapped.

Roman raised his hands in mock surrender. "If you say so, my lady."

Violet yanked the sweater down furiously, realizing it was huge. The thing nearly swallowed her, hanging down to her knees. And his scent was everywhere, so strong, she almost wanted to bite into him.

What the hell was wrong with her?

She took a deep breath. "I'm done. Now let's go."

But Roman didn't move.

He said, "Before you go, there's something we need to talk about."

Violet would have said this was not the time but something about his tone made her hesitate.

She asked carefully. "What is it?"

"It's about the hunt."

At the mere mention of it, her body went rigid. But she remained curious. "What about it?"

Roman exhaled slowly. "If I help you win tonight, don't choose a house."

Violet's heart skipped a beat.

"What?" she asked, voice a whisper.

Roman's next words sent a chill straight through her.

"Reject them all."

Chapter 173: What Would You Sacrifice?

"W—what?" Violet's jaw fell. No. She must have heard wrong. There was no way he had just said what she thought he did.

"You heard me right," Roman said firmly, leaving no room for misinterpretation.

Fuck. He was serious.

Violet's mind scrambled for logic, for something that would make sense of this absurdity.

"Wait a minute," she started, "You want me to reject all of the houses, and then what? Live happily ever after with you in the forest?" She gestured around blindly, knowing he could see her through the dark. "In your treehouse?" The sarcasm dripped from every syllable.

"Isn't that what you wanted from the start? To be free from the Cardinal Alphas? From Asher?" Roman reminded her, unfazed.

"Yes, that's what I wanted at the beginning," Violet admitted, "but now, I'm dating a Cardinal Alpha, and Asher still won't leave me alone."

"Because you belong to a house."

Violet frowned. "Excuse me?"

"We are werewolves, governed by magic, laws, and tradition. Do you think we take our roles lightly? This academy isn't just a school, it's a training ground for the future. The power structure here is a reflection of the rule we will enforce once we graduate and take our rightful places in our packs."

He continued, "If you reject the houses, you'd exist outside the system. Asher wouldn't be able to touch you. The rules forbid him from dating someone who isn't part of a pack. He'd have no claim over you."

Violet's lips parted in realization. "So, in one word, I'd be an outcast?"

"Not exactly," Roman mused. "But close enough. You'd still have a place to stay, finish your education, and no one could force you into anything. Isn't that the freedom you've been fighting for?"

Violet's brows knit together in thought. This sounded too good to be true, and her instincts screamed that Roman wasn't telling her everything. Right at that moment, it hit her.

"Wait a damn second." Violet's mind raced as the pieces clicked into place. "If Asher can't come after me, does that mean... I can't date Alaric either?"

The look on Roman's face was all the confirmation she needed.

Violet's expression twisted into a glare, anger flaring hot in her chest. "That's not happening."

Alaric was the only good thing in this godforsaken place. And now, Roman expected her to give him up? Just like that? Not a damn chance.

"It's for your own good," Roman said sincerely.

"Still not happening." She hissed through clenched teeth. "And if you're done trying to convince me to break up with my boyfriend, take me out of here."

She turned on her heel, heading straight for the entrance only for Roman's next

words to stop her cold.

"Do you know that Elsie came to me because of you?"

Violet stilled, her body rigid with tension. Though she didn't turn, the stiff set of her shoulders made it clear she was listening.

"She wanted me to capture you, claim you under my house. She wanted me to put you in your place, to punish you for daring to go after her prospective suitors." He scoffed. "But I couldn't do that to a lady, could I?"

Violet swallowed hard, her stomach twisting. But beneath that emotion was also disgust and anger — anger of what she'd do to Elsie once she got her hands on her.

"Then your boyfriends came to me for help, asking me to betray Asher."

Violet flinched at the plural—boyfriends. By chance, do they know what they did ....? No, this was probably Roman being his usual cheerful self.

He went on, "Asher thinks we're on the same side. But I have to choose to betray him to help you. And believe me, he won't forgive that kind of betrayal. Unfortunately, that's the sacrifice I have to pay for the betterment of everyone."

A slow tension crept into the air. Violet could hear nothing but her own heartbeat roaring in her ears as Roman stepped in front of her now, his presence suffocating. Lightning flashed again, illuminating his austere face.

"So tell me, Violet Purple," he said her full name with an unsettling gravity. "What are you willing to sacrifice?"

Green eyes clashed with gold ones, and she answered in a single word.

"Nothing."

The air itself seemed to hold its breath. When —\*\*BOOM.\*\* Thunder cracked across the sky as if punctuating her defiance.

Roman's jaw tightened, his expression darkening. The playful, smug Alpha from moments ago was gone and had become someone she couldn't identify.

"Fine," he bit out, his voice eerily calm. "You made your choice."

For a fleeting moment, fear gripped Violet. But she held her ground. Roman wouldn't hurt her. That wasn't in his nature. The worst he could do was drag her across the finish line and claim her for his house. That much she could handle.

Then his next words sent ice through her veins.

"I'm calling in the favor you owe me."

Violet's stomach plummeted .

"No." The word ripped from her throat. "You can't—"

"I can't demand anything that puts you in danger, nor can I ask for anything sexual. Those were the terms." Roman said with a controlled tone, "And I'm not putting you in trouble, I'm saving your ass instead."

"Save my ass." Violet glared at him.

Roman tilted his head slightly, watching her with that lazy, arrogant smirk curling his lips. Then, with feigned resignation, he shrugged.

"Fine. If you don't want to do it, you can go back on your promise." His tone was mocking, amused. "But then we need to discuss compensation. You lied, manipulated, and used me, a Cardinal Alpha, for business, without offering me a share of the profits. Do you have any idea how much it costs to have me make an official appearance on radio, TV, cover shoots, and magazines? We're talking millions of Cedes here. Do you have that kind of money, Miss Purple?"

Roman Draven was relishing her helplessness.

A bitter look crossed Violet's face, her fists clenching so tightly her knuckles turned white. She wanted to punch him, maybe knock some sense into his smug head, but that would make the situation worse. This version of Roman was not to be messed with.

"You're doing this for Elsie," Violet spat. "Her little loyal servant, running around at her beck and call. What makes you think she'll choose you in the end?" she intentionally provoked him.

Roman laughed. A deep, knowing laugh that sent shivers down her spine. "That's where you're wrong, darling. Elsie won't be the one making the choice. The one who gets to be Alpha king would. I'm just making the process easy for her. After all, no one wants to marry an unwilling bride."

The message was loud and clear — Roman Draven had every intention of winning the throne.

"So tell me, little Purple," his voice dropped to a quiet, dangerous drawl. "Will it be the easy way... or the hard way?"

A long silence stretched between them. Then, with gritted teeth, she spat out her answer.

"I'll do it."

#### Chapter 174: Another Chase

Unlike the first time Roman had carried her, Violet was tense now and it wasn't just because they were about to descend from the tree house.

After their heated exchange, Violet no longer trusted him. He was not who she had thought he was. Roman Draven was nothing but a fox who seem to be enjoying this power play far too much.

But before she could overthink it, Roman moved, except he didn't take the way down as she expected. No, the fucking bastard leaped from the tree house.

The scream lodged in Violet's throat as they plummeted toward the ground, her heart lurching violently while her arms tightened around him instinctively.

He was going to get them killed!

That was all Violet could think as the air rushed past her ears, and for a split second, panic overtook her senses.

But in a blink of an eye, it was over. Roman landed with ease as if he had merely stepped off a curb rather than free-falling from a height that would have broken some bones in her body.

The Alpha was unshaken unlike Violet, she felt like she had just lived through an out-of-body experience.

She inhaled sharply, realizing only then that she had been holding her breath. Her pulse thundered in her ears as she turned her head to look at Roman, expecting some indication that the jump had at least rattled him.

But no, there was only a self-satisfied gleam in his glowing green eyes.

Cocky bastard.

Even after dropping from such a dangerous height, he stood perfectly upright, not even winded in the slightest. Or limping.

God, these creatures were scary.

Violet swallowed, her grip still locked around his neck before she realized he was waiting for her to let go.

"You can hold on a little longer if you like, sweetheart. I know you just want a feel of this body." He said shamelessly.

Violet scowled and shoved herself away from him, nearly stumbling in the process before regaining her footing. Perhaps in the past, his teasing would have cracked her up, but now, all she felt towards him was loathing.

Roman stretched his shoulders, saying, "That was fun, wasn't it?"

But Violet leveled him with a glare, her voice flat. "Drop me like that again, and I'll make sure you never have fun again."

Roman shuddered dramatically, his voice thick with mock terror. "That was violent, little Violet."

He chuckled, but the joke was lost on her. Violet's expression remained blank, unimpressed, her patience already hanging by a thread.

Roman sighed, the humor bleeding from his tone. "Fine. Let's get this over with." His voice took on a business-like edge, a sign that the games were officially over.

"This time, you're riding in my wolf form. It's the fastest way to get there, and the best way to fight. And fight, we will."

The mention of a fight made Violet's stomach tighten. Right, the Hunt was still on. Her moment of rest was over and it was time to face her unfortunate reality.

Roman dropped to the ground with a soft grunt, his body contorting in ways that was considered unnatural. His bones snapped and shifted beneath his skin, the grotesque transformation sending a shudder through Violet.

Even though she knew werewolves were built for this, it was still impossible to ignore how brutal the process looked. She winced as his fingers lengthened into claws before curling into massive paws, his frame stretching, muscle expanding, until the human known as Roman Draven was gone.

In his place was a massive wolf, towering and menacing, his fur a rare green. His razor-sharp teeth gleamed, saliva dripping onto the ground as a guttural growl rumbled in his throat.

Even with the sheer beast of it all, Violet felt no fear because no aggression rolled off him in her direction.

Instead, Roman lifted his head slightly, then gestured toward his back with a jerk of his snout. The invitation was clear. He wanted her to get on.

Violet hesitated for only a second before swinging her leg over his back. She expected it to be awkward, uncomfortable even, but his fur was softer than she could have imagined, thick and warm beneath her.

Her fingers instinctively ran through it, a subconscious action, and the second they did, Roman practically vibrated beneath her, a deep, rumbling purr leaving his throat.

It seems whether in his cat or wolf form, Roman loved physical touches. But the moment Violet recalled what the bastard had done, her heart hardened at once. Annoyed at herself, she quickly withdrew her hand.

The moment she did, Roman let out something that sounded suspiciously like a disappointed huff before he suddenly took off. And holy shit, he was fast.

A startled gasp left Violet as the world became a blur. The sheer force of his speed nearly knocked her off balance, and Violet had no choice but to flatten herself against his back. She grabbed tightly onto his fur, the wind whipping past her, and stinging her face.

The ride was both exhilarating and terrifying. Roman's wolf moved with the kind of easy agility no human could ever hope to match, weaving through the forest accurately. If he hadn't been carrying her, she wouldn't have even seen him move. He was a blur, the very definition of a predator on the prowl.

It wasn't long before Violet saw the lightened path in the distance. They were close now.

And so were they.

Before they even reached the clearing, a spine-chilling howl cut through the air behind them loudly, followed by another, and another until there was an entire chorus of them.

Violet's heart rate spiked when she turned her head to see wolves moving in the darkness, fast and relentless.

They weren't just howling. It was a signal to the others that they had found her and they chased them as if their life depended on it.

And just like that, it was Fangball all over again.

Chapter 175: Better Player

"Roman!" Violet screamed at the top of her lungs as one of the wolves rammed into them, sending Roman stumbling sideways.

The impact nearly dislodged Violet, her body lurching dangerously, but she clung desperately to his thick fur, yanking hard enough to tear out loose strands.

There were about four wolves closing in on them, snapping and snarling relentlessly. They struck from all angles, nipping at Roman's legs, and lunging at Violet, trying to pull her down. The sound of their pounding paws and vicious growls were so aggressive it drowned out even Violet's own frantic heartbeat.

Roman let out a savage roar that vibrated through her bones and sent a tremor through the earth. Violet knew at once that he was about to make a move, so she braced herself. But all her preparation still did not ground her for what happened next.

In a move so sudden it left her breathless, Roman's body morphed beneath her, his bone snapping, limbs reshaping, and mass shifting until she was no longer on top of a wolf.

"Oh my god! Oh my god!" Violet shrieked as her hands lost their grip, fingers scrambling for purchase as Roman shifted this time into a powerful, muscular stallion.

This was a living nightmare! Why had she ever agreed to this? Why was her life like a cursed action movie? Of all people the gods could have chosen for this madness, why her?

Riding a horse was hard enough with reins. Without them? Violet might as well be tap dancing with death in the middle of a Roman gladiator battle.

Roman, now in his horse form, galloped forward with incredible speed, hooves striking the earth in powerful beats. However, the wolves refused to back down, their predatory instincts keeping them locked onto the target.

One lunged at his flank, but Roman kicked out, sending it sprawling. Another snapped at his leg, only to be met with a powerful buck that sent it flying into a tree.

But these creatures were brilliant humans in wolf bodies, hence the remaining two adapted quickly, dodging Roman's strikes, forcing him into a narrowing path where three more wolves emerged from the trees, closing in like a pack of vultures.

They were surrounded and Violet's heart sank. This was it. It was over. They would overpower Roman and capture her for Asher.

Roman, however, was not defeated. Instead, he pawed at the ground, his nostrils flaring, ready to charge.

All of a sudden, several fierce howls rang through the air, sending a ripple through them. The sound came from behind and

Violet turned, her breath catching as she spotted two wolves at the head of the oncoming reinforcements. One of the wolves had a snow white coat, the other a striking deep red.

Alaric and Griffin.

Violet had never felt so relieved to see them!

But even with the size of the charging force, the other wolves, which were undoubtedly Asher's pack, stood their ground, refusing to back down.

It was a brutal, merciless brawl as wolves slammed into each other, bodies colliding with sickening force, growls turning to snarls, snarls to yelps. This was no longer a game. It was a war and the forest the battlefield. And the prize was her.

Roman's pack had joined forces with Alaric and Griffin's, making up the numbers. It turned out Roman was not lying after all and it relieved her.

It wasn't long before Asher's wolves were outnumbered and overpowered. But even with the enemy pack subdued, one problem remained—who would claim her now? Alaric? Griffin? Roman? Would they let her go and let her choose, or would one of them seize the victory?

The three Alphas faced each other in a silent standoff, waiting for who would make the first move. Then Alaric let out a low snort, nodding toward the finish line.

They would let her go. Violet was greatly relieved.

With no hesitation, Alaric and Griffin took off, with Roman falling into step beside him, their wolves weaving through the trees in unison. The others stayed behind, ensuring none of Asher's subdued pack members interfered again.

They were racing towards the finish line and Violet's heart swelled with joy as she saw the walls of Lunaris Academy. She was going to make it!. Finally, there would be an end to this insane, twisted game.

But even in the middle of her celebration, something gnawed at her. Where was Asher? He had been absent all night, and that wasn't like him.

The moment the thought crossed her mind, her question was answered because someone was standing alone in the middle of the path ahead.

Asher was naked and unmoving.

Tension rolled off Roman's body as he went rigid beneath her. Of course he was tense, he was betraying his best friend after all.

But it wasn't Asher's presence alone that unsettled Violet, but his composure. He looked too relaxed. Too confident. The kind of confidence that only came when you knew you had already won.

The moment Violet realized it, it was already too late.

Everything happened in an instant. The first net snapped into place and Alaric was yanked into the air, his wolf form twisting as he was caught mid-sprint.

Then Griffin was gone as a pit opened beneath him, swallowing him whole.

Violet screamed.

All around them, wolves were falling one by one as Asher's traps captured them all.

It wasn't just the newbies Asher had hunted tonight. He had played his own cardinal brothers.

Roman should have fallen too, but he knew Asher well enough to know he would pull a stunt like that. He leapt, pushing off the ground with all his might and straight over the last row of traps. And right at Asher.

Asher moved at the last moment, slipping out of the way with that infuriating smirk.

But Roman landed not just hard, but too high and Violet fell.

The impact slammed the air from her lungs and the world blurred, pain radiating through her limbs. She lay there for a moment, dazed.

"Violet!" Roman was beside her in seconds, human again, his hands lifting her up.

Violet groaned, her vision swimming. "Peachy," she wheezed.

Then, slow, mocking claps echoed behind them.

"Well played, brother," Asher drawled.

#### Chapter 176: Who Is Who?

Aside from a few scrapes and bruises, Violet was physically intact, but the situation was far from safe.

Roman didn't let go of her, instead, he pulled her behind him protectively, his body acting as a barrier between her and Asher. His stance was rigid, as if silently warning the West Alpha.

"You can hand the girl over now, Roman," Asher said smoothly, taking a few steps forward before stopping, as though waiting for Roman to close the remaining space between them. "You've done well so far."

Violet's ears were ringing at that statement. What did he mean, 'done well so far'?

Her stomach twisted violently. No. No way. That was impossible.

Her wide, frantic eyes snapped up to Roman's face, searching for something—anything—that would disprove the horrifying thought creeping into her mind. She wanted to believe he wasn't part of this. That all of this wasn't just an elaborate ruse.

He wouldn't betray her... right?

"Roman?" Asher arched a brow, expectant. "What's the delay?"

Violet stiffened when Roman's hands suddenly gripped her arms. This is it. He was going to drag her toward Asher, hand her over like a trophy.

But just as her breath hitched in preparation for the inevitable, Roman did the unthinkable.

Instead of surrendering her, Roman kissed her. Violet's mind shattered. What. The. Actual. Fuck?

Her body locked up, her brain failing to catch up with reality as Roman's lips claimed hers. Her breath hitched, her eyes frozen wide open in shock. She barely even registered the warmth of his mouth before he pulled back, an infuriatingly smug look settling on his face.

"That makes four of us," Roman murmured with satisfaction. "I wasn't about to be left out."

This absolute bastard.

Violet didn't even have time to react properly before Roman's demeanor changed entirely. His playful arrogance vanished, his expression hardening as he leaned in. Their faces were inches apart when he whispered urgently.

"The collapsed wall is at the far left. Go. Now."

And then—slap.

Roman freaking Draven smacked her ass, the way one would spur a horse into motion.

Violet should have strangled him for that, but right now, survival first, murder later. She took off.

A furious, inhuman snarl erupted behind her. "NO!"

Asher's voice was raw and livid, the sound reverberating through the night. He had given Roman a chance to redeem himself and yet he had thrown it all away.

The clash of pure violence behind Violet was deafening. Snarls, growls, and the brutal sound of fists meeting flesh resounded as Roman and Asher tore into each other like wild beasts. They weren't just rivals now. They were enemies.

But Violet couldn't afford to look back. She focused on the wall in the distance, her breath coming in ragged gasps. She was close, but where was the opening?!

How much further did she have to walk to find it?!

Violet would have used her phone's map, but every second counted. And she did run out of time.

A snarl tore through the night and Violet's blood turned to ice. She wasn't alone.

Asher had anticipated this. He had known Roman might betray him. And so, just in case, he had kept some of his wolves behind as a failsafe. Unfortunately, Alaric and Griffin were trapped and couldn't help her. Not on time.

Violet's heart slammed against her ribs. The wolves were nearly upon her. She could feel them closing in. She couldn't outrun them.

Fuck!

Before she could even scream, someone yanked her off the path. A firm hand clamped over her mouth, muffling the cry that nearly escaped her lips.

"It's me. Lila."

Violet's heart nearly stopped. Lila?!

She whipped her head around, and sure enough, there she was.

Violet almost collapsed with relief at the sight of a familiar face in the middle of this insane nightmare. She wanted to sob, hug her, but before she could even open her mouth, Lila's cold voice stopped her.

"Don't talk. Don't move."

Violet stiffened immediately, not just at the command in her friend's tone but because the wolves had arrived.

Her breath hitched. They were right in front of them, pawing at the ground, sniffing the air but they didn't see them.

Violet's lungs burned as she tried not to breathe too loud. How?

The wolves' eyes scanned the area, convinced she was near, yet somehow, they couldn't pinpoint her.

What the hell was happening?

Seconds stretched into eternity before, one by one, the wolves backed off, growling in frustration as they slunk away to continue their search elsewhere.

Even after they disappeared, Violet's muscles remained locked in place, her entire body screamed with unease. The wolves hadn't just given up. They had been unable to see her. And there was only one person responsible for that.

Violet slowly turned to Lila, heart pounding.

The faint light spilling through the trees cast shadows over her friend's face, making her features look more austere than Violet had ever seen before. Like she was a completely different person.

"Who are you?" Violet asked her.

"I'm the same Lila you've always known," she said, her tone clipped and urgent. "But there's no time to explain. The cloak is off. They'll see us if they track us again. We need to move, now."

Without waiting for Violet's response, Lila grabbed her wrist and dragged her forward. They didn't run for long before they finally found the opening.

Violet nearly collapsed with relief. The hole was real. It was a break in the wall, large enough to crawl through. The exit to Freedom.

Unfortunately, Asher's wolves were waiting. They were smart to know that no matter how well Violet hid, she would have to pass through here.

Lila's grip on Violet's wrist tightened.

"Run!"

And they did.

The wolves chased after them.

Violet ran till her lungs were burning but Lila was faster. She reached the hole first, sliding in effortlessly.

"Come on!" Lila called from the other side.

Violet dropped to her stomach and scrambled through. Almost there. Almost—

Teeth clamped down on her boot and she screamed.

"It's got me!"

Lila lunged. Her hands closed around Violet's wrists, pulling hard except the wolf yanked back and Violet was trapped between them.

Violet choked on a cry. Her back scraped against the jagged stone, pain flaring as her body was jerked back and forth between Lila's grip and the beast's fangs like a twisted tug-of-war.

"Lila, just let go!" Violet shouted.

"Never."

And then, Lila's eyes flashed purple and with an unnatural burst of inhuman strength, she yanked Violet forward so forcefully the wolf's grip broke.

The beast crashed into the wall with a yelp, and all that was left in its jaws was Violet's empty boot.

#### Chapter 177: A Kingdom Divided

Violet and Lila collapsed onto the damp ground, gasping for breath. Neither of them bothered to stand, at least not yet. Not after what they had just survived.

Adrenaline pumped violently through Violet's veins, her heart pounding so fast it felt like it might leap from her chest. But most of all, her mind reeled from the sheer madness she had just survived.

She had made it! Against all odds, against Asher's relentless pursuit, his traps, and

the wolves. She had won.

But the thrill of victory was not all satisfactory.

Violet swallowed hard as she turned her head slightly, her gaze landing on Lila. She was lying on her back, staring up at the night sky, her chest heaving as if whatever she had done back there had taken a toll on her.

There was no mistaking what she had seen. Lila had made them sort of invisible to the wolves, the flicker of purple in her eyes and the unnatural strength she possessed. Lila was not human, Violet was sure of it.

Sensing her stare, Lila turned her head to look at her and Violet immediately averted her gaze.

Violet bit her lip, unsure. She didn't know what to think anymore. Who was Lila?

Had she always been like this? Had everything she knew about her been a lie?

Was this some kind of long-running deception?

God

. Violet groaned inwardly, her head pounding. Everything was happening too fast. Too much.

Violet was still trying to process the complicated request from Alaric and Griffin, her own complicated feelings towards the cardinal alphas, the insanity of the hunt, Roman's request and now this. She might as well go crazy at this point.

In conclusion, she wasn't ready for that conversation.

"Violet!"

Daisy and Ivy came running toward her, relief painted across their faces. The moment they reached her, they pulled her into a double hug, their warmth grounding her.

But the moment their arms pressed against her back, Violet hissed as pain exploded through her body. It was a delayed response to the brutal tug-of-war she had endured minutes ago having been running on pure adrenaline. But now? she felt every ache.

Daisy's eyes widened. "You're hurt."

Violet nodded her head, running a hand down her arm, only now registering the scrapes, the bruises, the throbbing pain settling deep into her muscles. Great.

But something else caught her attention. Violet noticed the way Ivy and Daisy subtly shifted away from Lila and her eyes narrowed slightly.

It seems they knew too. Violet couldn't help but wonder what had transpired between them for Lila's secret to come to light.

The air was thick with unspoken questions, but this was not a place nor time for such talks because they were not alone.

Violet lifted her head to see Elsie approach, followed by the rest of the wolf packs and students who were still hanging around. It had been over an hour since the games began and the students were eager to see the result of the game.

Elsie made a dramatic entrance by being the only one in front, walking with regal confidence that made it clear that she was the queen and this was her domain.

When Elsie reached Violet, she didn't waste time. The first words out of her mouth were, "You do know you're a bitch, right? Keeping all of us waiting, are you that desperate for attention?"

But Violet didn't even flinch, nor look affected by the comment because she always expected the worse from Elsie.

Violet was about to open her mouth and grace Elsie with the privilege of an answer when Lila did the unthinkable.

"At least, she won, unlike you," Lila said unapologetically, heads snapping toward her.

"... No, wait, I'm wrong. Werewolves aren't put through the Running game, right? Such a fair system," Lila said sarcastically, "So if you haven't gone through the process, don't whine your mouth over something you haven't experienced and come out victoriously."

The shift in atmosphere was instantaneous as silence dropped like a guillotine. The sheer audacity of Lila's words left everyone dumbfounded.

No one spoke to Elsie like that. At least, not someone like her. Had it been Violet, they would have understood. The purple storm was number three on the ranking and Alaric's girlfriend after all. She had the defiance to stand against Elsie without it being outright suicidal.

But Lila? She wasn't even in the top fifty.

Neither was she a werewolf. In one word, Lila wasn't even supposed to matter. And yet, she had just thrown a super punch.

Ivy sucked in a breath, whispering, "Holy shit."

This wasn't Lila's usual sass. No under-the-breath mutters. No cheeky jokes. No, this was meant to hurt.

And it did.

Elsie's expression darkened at once, her wolf rising to the surface. A low snarl tore from her throat, and her pupils dilated, her body shifting slightly as if ready to lunge at Lila and teach her a lesson.

But Violet moved, stepping in front of Lila, and using her body to shield her friend, even though she was injured and Lila—who clearly wasn't human—could probably protect herself better.

Violet couldn't help it. It was almost as if it was ingrained in her DNA to protect her own people. Her own pack.

Elsie's eyes sharply snapped to hers, furious but Violet held her ground.

"If you dish out insults, be woman enough to take them," she ground out.

The tension skyrocketed, both women facing off against each other. Another growl rumbled from Elsie's throat, and for a moment, it seems she would really attack until Grace made the mistake of interfering.

She reached for Elsie, saying carefully. "Elsie, I think we should stop—"

A loud slap met her cheek and the students gasped. Grace stumbled back, holding her face, her lips trembling.

The students were quick to recover from the shock, already used to the sight. Everyone knew Elsie was a bitch but

no one ever did anything about it. No one ever stopped her.

Violet was not a reckless heroine either. She only saved those who mattered to her and who wanted to be saved. Grace could leave Elsie's side, but she obviously stayed for the benefit and did her dirty biddings. So that was not her business. When Grace was ready, she knew what to do.

And so—like clockwork—Elsie turned her back on Violet, as if none of it had happened, and spoke to the students.

"To the school grounds. Let's get this nonsense over with."

Then she walked away and the crowd moved with her. Loyal. Obedient. Like a kingdom following its queen.

But not everyone moved, some students stayed behind to congratulate the purple storm. It seemed the kingdom was divided after all.

Violet was stunned by the new attention the students showed her — admiration and respect. The Purple Storm had just walked through fire and come out victorious.

Natalie grinned, stepping up beside her. "You're always full of surprises, aren't you, Violet Purple?"

Violet huffed a tired breath. "Contrary to your thoughts, I didn't have a choice but to win this time."

Natalie chuckled. "Good for you. The choice is yours now."

Violet asked. "Is that where everyone is going?"

"To decide the houses, yes." Natalie explained. "I assume you're picking North, right? You and Alaric would be together. Oh, and Elsie too. Lucky you." The sarcasm in her voice was thick.

Violet forced a smile. "Indeed. Lucky me."

If only she knew.

Chapter 178: Time To Decide

For the first time ever, their usually loud, boisterous group moved in absolute silence toward the school grounds. There was no witty banter, or teasing shoves.

Nor Lila cracking inappropriate jokes to lighten the mood.

Just silence.

Unlike the other students, who were practically skidding forward with excitement, eager to witness the final initiation of the new members into their permanent packs and houses, Violet and her friends lagged behind.

Violet knew time was running out and had to tell them before it was too late. Stopping abruptly, she turned to face them, saying, "We can't be in the same house."

Ivy, Daisy, and Lila froze in place, blinking at her in disbelief.

"What?!"

And just like that, the three of them erupted in protest, their voices overlapping in an explosion of outrage.

"Where is this coming from?! I thought we had an agreement?!" Daisy demanded.

"Wait, wait, wait—" Ivy scoffed, arms crossing over her chest. "Is this because you don't want us near your boyfriend's house? That's... wow, Violet. That's petty even for you."

But it was Lila's reaction that stopped everyone cold.

"No. Never. I'm not leaving your side!"

There was silence.

In the past, Lila's clinginess had always been cute, playful, and exaggerated. But now, knowing what she was? That she wasn't even human? It felt different.

It wasn't just Violet, Ivy and Daisy had matching horrified expressions, all of them clearly wrestling with the same realization.

Lila sighed, rubbing her forehead in frustration.

"I'm still the same Lila you know. How many times do I have to say that before you stop looking at me like I'm some kind of monster?" Her voice grew cold. "Had I known this is how you'd all react, I should've let you get captured. At least then, we wouldn't have the freedom to choose and stay together."

That one hit hard. Violet, Daisy, and Ivy exchanged guilty glances because Lila was right. If she hadn't used her powers, they would have been caught. And they wouldn't know her secret either.

Despite their head start, the wolves were faster and stronger and had caught up to them. Lila had been the one to shield them, to make them invisible long enough for an opening to escape. And then? She had gone back for Violet.

They owed her.

Daisy let out a breath, her tone softer now. "Fine. We believe you. But that still doesn't explain what the hell you're trying to pull right now." Her sharp gaze flicked back to Violet.

Violet's stomach churned, but she stayed firm. "It's for your own good. You can't follow—"

"HEY!" A voice cut through the conversation. It belonged to a werewolf who glared at them for standing at the corner, separated from the others.

"What are you waiting for? Move your asses already!"

At once, the girls had no choice but to comply.

Violet swallowed her words, keeping the rest of her explanation to herself. She could not say more, not in front of all these people.

If anyone overheard her plans and reported back to Asher or even Alaric. Both men would do everything to stop her, Asher especially. She needed to catch him off guard.

They arrived at the school's main ground, the same spot Amilo had dropped her off on her first day.

Violet had to applaud the alphas. The act was nearly symbolic, marking the beginning. A fresh start. Even if that start was brutal.

Violet's breath hitched when she caught sight of Roman in the crowd. His face was bruised, deep reds and purples staining his handsome features.

He had fought Asher and judging by the damage, it had been vicious.

Their eyes met, unwavering emerald green piercing hers. Roman's lips didn't move, but his eyes delivered the message loud and clear: Keep the deal.

Violet's stomach churned at the thought of still going through with the deal.

And then, because fate enjoyed kicking her while she was down, Alaric found her.

His icy-blue gaze roamed over her, frantic, searching.

"Where are you hurt?"

Violet tried to step back, but his grip tightened. Even with his careful touch, pain flared through her back, making her wince. Damn it.

Alaric's eyes narrowed.

"You're not okay."

"I'm fine," Violet gritted out but Alaric wasn't buying it.

His nostrils flared. "I can smell your pain, Violet. Don't lie to me." He turned to Finn. "Where's Adele?"

Finn frowned. "Haven't you heard? Adele left yesterday on a trip. She was supposed to return today, but I guess she got delayed. She probably won't be back until later today."

Alaric cursed under his breath. He hated the thought of his girlfriend being in pain and being unable to help out, especially knowing it was partially his fault.

Suddenly, his eyes lit up with an idea.

"A werewolf's saliva has healing properties." His tone turned hopeful. "It's not as good as Adele's abilities, but it's better than nothing."

Oh, no.

A vivid mental image of Alaric licking her wounds flashed through her mind, and her heart sank especially knowing that was his plan after this was over.

Violet couldn't take this anymore, not with the way Alaric looked at her, like he would burn the world down for her. The guilt was suffocating.

His warm fingers cupped her face gently.

"Hey..." His voice was gentle, his concern etched into every syllable. "Are you okay?"

Violet's throat tightened. The words were right there at the tip of her tongue and she was going to say it —

"Alaric! Get your ass over here! It's time!"

Griffin interrupted them.

Alaric's jaw clenched. But before leaving, he turned back to her, his eyes burning with intensity.

"I'll understand if you don't choose my pack. It's okay."

Violet swallowed, his words nearly breaking her. He thought that was the issue.

But his expression darkened the next minute. "But not the West House."

His meaning was crystal clear. Not Asher.

Not after everything they had done to get her out of it.

Violet couldn't speak because if she did, she wasn't sure she'd be able to hold it together. So she nodded instead.

Alaric pressed a brief, tender kiss to her lips. Then, without another word, he turned and walked away to join the Cardinal Alphas.

And then, there was Asher, standing at the center of it all, and looking as arrogant as ever. Except, this time, he was bruised.

Roman had fought back and for the first time, Violet felt something close to satisfaction at his pain.

Asher's eyes locked onto hers as he spoke.

"Congratulations, winners and losers of the Running Game. It's time to decide which pack you'll belong to for the rest of your miserable school days."

## Chapter 179: East. West. South. North

There was a little commotion as the pack members who had chased them through the Silver Glade, went into the crowd of newbies and began dragging the defeated students away.

"Are they doing what I think they're doing?" Ivy asked Daisy in a whisper.

"The wolves are identifying and pulling their captured prey, the ones who lost in the game, to their permanent houses," Lila was the one who replied, calmly explaining it all to the others.

She said to her roommate with a serious expression. "That would have been your fate if I hadn't stepped in. We would have been separated just like that."

The truth of her words hit like a cold slap, and all three of them swallowed hard, the weight of what could have been settling over them.

"And we're grateful for your help," Violet said sincerely, locking eyes with Lila.

A slow smile spread across Lila's face, and just like that, the girl they knew was back. "Of course. I'm amazing, and I know it." She flipped her hair dramatically, making Daisy snort.

Violet let out a soft chuckle, and before she knew it, her arms were wrapping around Lila in a tight hug. Lila melted into the embrace, holding on just as tightly.

But their moment was shattered by a sharp shriek.

Their heads snapped toward the sound, their laughter fading. A girl was being wrenched away from her roommates, her cries filled with devastation as her friends clung to her, powerless to stop it.

Violet, Lila, Daisy, and Ivy stood frozen, stricken by the sight knowing that could have been them. For the first time that night, the girls exchanged a shared, silent look of gratitude toward Lila, who felt a swell of pride in her chest.

By the time the pack members had finished their work, there were only eleven of them left, standing together in a haphazard cluster.

"Fuck, this is terrible!" Violet heard someone mutter from the crowd, their voice bitter. "There shouldn't be this many winners. This year's game is a failure."

"I hear it's because of her, the purple storm, " another person chimed in, his own voice tinged with resentment. "Alpha Asher gave orders to prioritize chasing her, which meant the others had more time to escape."

"Well, we'd see what house she'd choose soon enough," the first voice concluded, a bitter jealousy lingering in the words.

Violet frowned. Why were they blaming her for the failure of their twisted game? She was not the one who had asked Asher to follow her.

Griffin stepped forward, and announced,

"Congratulations, winners of this year's Running Game. You now have the esteemed privilege of choosing your permanent house. The Fiery and Unwavering East House; the Mysterious and Merciless West House; the Wild and Unbridled South House; and finally, the Brilliant and Resourceful North House."

He squared his shoulders as he introduced his own house. "The East House thrives on passion and resilience. My pack is made up of fearless, loyal warriors. Driven by an insatiable appetite for adventure and challenge, we thrive in the face of danger. In one word, the East House is for those who are unafraid to take bold risks."

His words sent a ripple of awe through the crowd, and more than a few students looked convinced. That was until Asher stepped in.

He exuded his usual icy confidence as he said, "The West House is not merely a collection of students. We are masters of subtlety, planners who always move several steps ahead of our enemies. We excel in strategy and intellect, using our wits to defeat opponents before they even know they've lost."

Violet couldn't shake the feeling that his words were aimed directly at her even though he was speaking to the crowd.

"After all," His voice dropped into a silken cadence. "who wouldn't want to be on the winning team?"

His pack howled in agreement, supporting him.

"Damn," Daisy muttered under her breath, "Dude's a bastard, but he's good at this."

Violet glanced at Daisy, noting her impressed look. She knew the appeal of Asher's words. Daisy was smart, and Asher's pack would give her the opportunity to thrive. But at what cost?

Then, as if sensing the need for a shift in mood, Roman sauntered forward, breaking the tension with his own brand of charm.

"Whoah, hold up, calm down, everyone," he said, flashing his signature grin. "We're here to have fun, right? Why stress over all this when you can live freely and still soar to your greatest potential?" His tone was light, almost teasing, as he spread his arms wide.

"Welcome to the South House, the ultimate chill zone, where success comes with a side of pleasure. I mean, what's life without a little indulgence?" He winked, and Violet had to roll her eyes at his insufferable confidence.

"And with me as your Alpha... well, let's just say, paradise has never looked so damn good."

The girls in the crowd looked enamored, and some even giggled at his antics, but Violet wasn't fooled.

"Manwhore," Lila coughed into her palm.

Violet shot her a warning look, knowing full well that Roman was as deadly as he was charming. She couldn't provoke him.

Finally, all eyes turned to Alaric, and for a moment, the crowd grew quiet, as if waiting for him to find his footing.

Unlike the others, the lightning prince looked completely unprepared, awkwardly scratching the back of his head. His face flushed red, and for a moment, it seemed like he might just bolt.

Because he had no choice but to fulfill his role as a cardinal alpha, most people didn't realize that Alaric Storm was actually an introvert. This was why he often appeared cold and distant, preferring the solitude of his lab over the company of others.

"I... uh, I guess I don't have much to say," Alaric started, his voice awkward but earnest. "We have money, and, uh..." He seemed to stall before adding, "And dreams come true in the North House?"

The crowd was silent for a beat, it was the worst pitch anyone had ever heard and yet, a girl's voice broke through.

"O. M. G! He's so cute and he has money. I'm sold."

Violet felt a flash of jealousy, her gut tightening as she saw the girl step forward to declare her allegiance to the North House.

It took every ounce of self-control not to yank the girl back by her collar and throw her across the field.

One by one, students began making their pledges.

"North!"

"South!"

"West!"

"East!"

When it was over, South House had three pledges, North had two, and East and West had one each. But it wasn't over.

Not yet.

Because Violet and her roommates hadn't chosen.

Chapter 180: Shatter

All eyes were on them now, the crowd buzzing with anticipation. What house would the purple storm choose? They couldn't wait to find out.

"What are you waiting for, drama queen? Pick a house already and stop wasting our time!" Elsie snapped with an impatient huff.

"Let her be, Elsie," Alaric told her off.

"No, Elsie's right," Asher cut in, his voice edged with mockery. "It's time for her to make a decision. We don't have all night... or do we, little human?" His dark eyes gleamed as he fixed his stare on her.

Violet squared her shoulders, lifting her chin with forced confidence, her hands trembling so subtly she barely noticed, until Lila reached out and intertwined their fingers, squeezing gently.

When Violet turned to her, Lila offered a small smile, as if silently saying: No matter what, I'm with you.

The simple gesture strengthened her resolve. Violet sucked in a shaky breath, then let her gaze sweep over the alphas, reading each of their faces.

First was Asher, looking smug and composed, but Violet could see the tension beneath the surface. The bastard knew she was not going to choose him. Good for him.

Griffin was relaxed but watchful, giving her a friendly smile instead.

Roman looked intense, his gaze pinning her in place like a warning: Don't back down now. Not after coming this far.

And then, Alaric. His eyes held pure, unfiltered hope, as if he was willing her to choose him but unwilling to pressure her.

Violet hesitated upon that look in his eyes, her chest tightening knowing she was about to break his heart. It was the hardest thing to do but Violet tore her gaze away. If she let herself linger, she might not have the strength to go along with the plan.

She took a deep breath. Then, blurted out, "I reject all the houses."

The reaction was instantaneous.

"What?!" Gasps and startled murmurs rippled through the crowd, voices layering over one another in disbelief.

Violet steeled herself, then repeated, louder this time, "I decline the offers from all the houses. I want to be on my own."

Silence crashed over them, thick and suffocating. It was the kind of silence that felt fragile, as if a single breath could shatter it.

The looks on the faces of the students were nothing short of horrified, as if Violet had just shot a silver bullet straight through the heart of their beloved cardinal alphas.

Ivy and Daisy looked bewildered, exchanging wide-eyed glances. They had never even heard of rejecting the packs as an option. What would happen now? What did it even mean?

Before they could process it, Lila stepped forward to say. "I also reject the four houses."

Another collective gasp rang out, the student's whispers turning frantic. What was happening? What in the goddess name were they doing?

Lila turned to Ivy and Daisy, her expression expectant, waiting for them to follow suit.

"No, wait... let's think about this," Daisy hesitated, her gut screaming that this was a bad idea.

But Ivy, never one to pass up a dramatic moment, stepped forward with a theatrical flourish. "I decline the honorable offer from the four packs. I think I'm better off alone."

Another round of murmurs emerged. More gasps.

"Ivy!" Daisy hissed, eyes darting between them.

Ivy nudged her. "Come on, don't make us do this alone."

Daisy shook her head. "No. I don't—"

"We made a deal, remember?" Lila reminded her, her voice gentler now.

Violet interjected, "No, let her be. I told you all not to follow me."

"But we're supposed to stick together," Lila argued, only to flinch under Violet's sharp stare.

"Fine..." Lila's lips twisted into a dramatic pout. "Go ahead... leave us. Move on. Join your fancy new house, make new friends, gossip, laugh, eat, study—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake—FINE! I'll do it!" Daisy snapped, throwing her hands up.

One should have seen the grin that spread across Lila's face like wildfire.

She was going to regret this. Daisy knew it, but she had no choice.

Daisy sighed in defeat, then stood tall. "All four of us reject the pack houses."

The murmurs became tumultuous this time.

"They've lost their fucking minds," someone muttered.

"Doesn't rejecting the houses make them...?" another voice trailed off in realization.

"Rogues," a third voice finished grimly.

The word slithered through the crowd like poison and the moment it was spoken, a low hiss of disdain followed, as if the mere thought of rogues tainted the air around them.

But that was not the end.

A furious snarl ripped through the night as Asher lunged, his fist connecting hard with Roman's jaw.

"You fucking fox! You did this, didn't you?" Asher roared.

Roman wiped the blood from his split lip, flashing a grin through crimson-stained teeth. "Checkmate, puppet master. You've been outplayed."

The sheer rage that flashed across Asher's face was scary.

Asher Nightshade had planned for everything. He knew Violet wouldn't pick him, but that hadn't mattered. He had another plan like always.

If an alpha wanted a member from another house, they could challenge that house's alpha for them. His plan had been simple: challenge Alaric for Violet. Win and claim her.

And then Roman had burned it all to the ground.

With another enraged snarl, Asher lunged again, but Griffin shoved him back, standing between them.

While the alphas clashed, Alaric was already at Violet's side. His hands cradled her face, his expression stricken with desperation.

"Tell me this is a mistake," he pleaded. "Tell me you misspoke, and we'll fix it. The houses will understand."

Violet swallowed against the lump in her throat. The raw emotion in his eyes burned her, but she couldn't let it sway her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "But this is the only way Asher can't reach me. The only way you'll be safe. I'm truly sorry."

She saw the light in his eyes dim — the moment her words crushed him.

His hands slipped from her face, falling uselessly to his sides. And just like that, she shattered his heart.