

Defy 241

Chapter 241: Broken Queen - 1

Everyone has a moment—right before disaster strikes—when the world still feels intact. That perfect second where the floor is steady beneath your feet, and the storm has not swallowed the sky yet.

Then, the ground shifts and the fall begins. And while some falls are silent, others echo like a war cry.

Violet had always known she was walking a precarious line here, balanced between defiance and destruction. She had played the game, danced at the eye of the storm, believing she could command the chaos instead of becoming consumed by it.

But the thing about storms is that they don't ask for permission before they strike. Neither do the walls stop the world from watching when they finally collapse. And they did fall.

The wolves smelled blood. The everwatchful vultures of Lunaris had waited for a single crack in her armor, a moment of weakness—anything to rip her apart. And here it was, gift-wrapped and displayed for all to see.

One video.

One reckless moment, twisted into the proof of the one thing she'd fought so hard never to be: the daughter of a whore.

Like mother, like daughter.

The words had not yet been uttered, but she could already hear them being whispered in the hallways, sensed them winding their way into the next scandalous Moon Feed article, felt them shaping on sneering lips as they watched Violet Purple's downfall.

Checkmate.

"Violet..." She heard Lila mention her name, and when her gaze slid up to hers, there was concern and pity there. Her protector looked at her as if she was the sparrow whose nest had been raided at dawn.

Somebody had captured Violet's heavy petting with Alaric and Griffin at the bonfire in Silver Glade. Except this was no ordinary scandal, no simple humiliation, but her worst nightmare brought to life. And she knew exactly who would revel in making her suffer so that his own queen could blossom.

Roman.

Rage flared inside her like an inferno, and Violet whirled toward him, her eyes blazing. "You did this, didn't you?!"

Roman's expression darkened, his posture rigid. "This is not my doing!" he barked back.

Violet didn't flinch. Instead, she studied him. While the rest of the class looked shocked or horrified at the content of the video, Roman seemed merely caught off guard, as though he hadn't expected it to be released.

Her stomach churned. "But you knew about it, didn't you?" she snarled.

Roman's jaw clenched. "It was a bonfire party, and the three of you—" He slanted a look at Griffin, "—weren't exactly discreet. Anyone could have seen you."

The truth hit Violet hard. She hadn't been careful, not that night. One moment, she'd been trying to apologize to Griffin, and the next, everything had spiraled out of control.

And now, thanks to that slip, the entire school had a front-row seat to her moans and to Alaric and Griffin's hands on her body. Even with the darkness of the night, there was no mistaking her hair, her voice, nor that of the two Alphas tangled with her.

Her blood turned cold. If the video was from Friday night, why had it been exposed now? Why not immediately? Clearly, this was intentional.

Violet hastily pulled out her phone, tracing the source of the video. It wasn't just a random leak but had been posted through a blog, one owned by Nicole. And there it was an article titled, "The Truth About the Purple Whore" glaring back at her, bold as day.

It dawned on her at once who did this.

"Elsie." Violet sneered, bitterness clawing at her. She spun around to storm off in search of that backstabbing witch, only for Roman to grab her arm.

"Violet, don't —!"

"No. Don't touch me!" Violet shoved him off, her eyes sparking with fury.

She got in his face, snarling. "You were the one who requested this ceasefire so I'd let my guard down, and then you both set out to ruin my life!"

Roman shook his head, frantic. "I swear I had no idea it was recorded. I only wanted you and Elsie to cohabit peacefully."

Violet's voice turned cold. "Well, now you see there'll be no peace." She stated it like a final verdict.

"Violet..." Griffin spoke up this time. Her glance shifted toward him, and he met her eyes with a pleading gaze. But Violet wasn't in any mood for gentle persuasion. Elsie had started this; she would end it.

Without another word, Violet stalked off, ignoring the calls not just from Griffin and Roman, but her concerned roommates too. Right now, the shield she wove around herself was being scattered like windblown petals and she needed to regain it in a way or another.

When animals were backed into a corner, they had two choices: Flight or fight. Violet chose fight. It was the only way she knew.

The scene, unfolding right in the middle of class, had caught enough onlookers to fill the entire room. Yet when she moved, the students parted for her like the Red Sea parted for Moses. And, of course, they followed, eager to see what she would do next.

Violet wasn't certain where Elsie might be, but she couldn't waste a single second calming down. Anger roiled in her veins like a storm and she wanted the bitch to feel it while it blew hot.

She knew how Elsie's mind worked. The queen bee loved to flaunt her authority after a move like this. And Violet would find her. Or find those who would find her.

Then she felt this tingling in the air and that was precisely when Alaric Storm decided to appear, looking as handsome and severe as ever, a faint tension shadowing his features.

But Violet brushed past him. She had no patience for pretty storms right now. But he caught her arm, spinning her around.

"Not now," she hissed, attempting to pry loose from his grip.

But Alaric's next words froze her.

"Let's break up."

"What?"

Chapter 242: Broken Queen - 2

"This is seriously not the time, Alaric." Violet said firmly, shoving past him, desperate to find Elsie. They would talk about their relationship issues later.

But just as she took a step, his next words shattered her.

"Is that what you learned from your mother?"

She froze.

A violent crack split through Violet's chest, as if her very soul had been struck. Her breath hitched and the air around her suddenly became suffocating.

With her ears ringing, Violet turned back to him slowly, her eyes wide with disbelief. Alaric? Her Alaric? Of all people, she never thought he'd be the one to twist the knife in such a cruel way.

Her gaze went to the sea of students, their hungry stares locked onto the scene, devouring her pain like a meal laid at a grand feast.

Alaric has thrown her into the center of a storm she didn't ask for, her secrets unraveling in the eyes of a ravenous crowd.

Violet swallowed the lump in her throat, forcing herself to speak. "Why are you doing this? Did Elsie put you up to this? To humiliate me publicly, is that it?"

Alaric laughed, a harsh, cold sound that dug into her bones like claws. "Elsie? I should thank her, actually, for opening my eyes. For helping me see exactly the kind of person you are."

Violet felt her heart fracture into a million tiny splinters, but she refused to let it show. Not here, not when so many vultures were already circling.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she clenched her fists to fight the tremor in her hands. Then she lifted her chin, staring straight into Alaric's blue eyes.

"Fine. Let's break up." She said it coolly, like the words didn't taste like blood on her tongue. "There you have it. We're good to go, right?"

Violet was ready to walk past him and be done with this nightmare when Alaric suddenly grabbed her arm. The next thing she knew, he was lifting her wrist into the air, displaying her like some kind of exhibit for the entire school to see.

"What you saw in that video is real," Alaric announced, his voice carrying over the stunned crowd. "Yes, Griffin and I had a good time with her."

A flurry of gasps erupted from the students, and the next seconds, the sound of their judgment and disgust increased.

Violet felt the world around her tilt.

No. No, no. She didn't want this.

But Alaric wasn't done.

"Griffin and I thought she was the one for us. We wanted to go exclusive with her. We actually believed in her." He let out a bitter scoff, then added cruelly, "But I guess, just like Eve in the Bible, women just love colluding with snakes."

His meaning couldn't be clearer. He was talking about Roman.

Just like that, the students' gasps and whispers turned into a roaring tide of gossip.

The blood drained from Violet's face. Alaric knew. He must have seen or heard something about that night with Roman. But that had been a misunderstanding. Didn't he know that? Why would she ever want Roman?

Even at that, Violet never imagined Alaric would publicly condemn her like this instead of talking it out with her. He had made sure the whole world saw her for exactly what she had always feared.

A girl no different from her mother.

He finally let her go, the horror barely settling when a new voice rang out.

"And that is why you don't trust kids from the slums. They infest everything they touch."

Elsie.

The queen bee stepped forward from the crowd, her expression smug, eyes gleaming with cruel triumph

Of course. This had to be her plan. She had managed to get Alaric on board with it. To think she had ever trusted that bastard.

Elsie's gaze raked over Violet with pure loathing, and then she tsked, shaking her head.

"But then again, I suppose it makes sense. She learned from the best. A mother who spreads her legs for money? I bet if anyone else paid her right now, she'd spread her legs just the same. Perhaps, Principal Jameson needs tougher rules on awarding scholarships to kids from cheap districts."

Laughter erupted around them, but not everyone did. Some of the scholarship students looked uncomfortable, offended even, but no one was brave enough to stand against the Queen Bee. No one except the purple storm.

But Violet just stood there, cocooned in shock, and taking blow after blow. If someone had told her this was how her day would end, she would have laughed in their face. Not in her wildest imagination did she expect this.

Elsie stepped closer, leaning into Violet's personal space. "I guess you've finally learned your place, Rogue Queen." She said, taunting the self acclaimed title. "I'd expect you to keep your hands off my men from now on."

Then, with a final act of cruelty, Elsie spat in Violet's face.

"That's enough, Elsie," Alaric cut in, but Violet barely heard him. She was drowning in the humiliation.

Right now, Violet stood like a cornered pawn on a grand chessboard, trapped with no safe moves left. She was the caged bird with its wings clipped, and its heart thrashing in its prison of dread.

In slow motion, all she saw were laughters, cameras recording, malicious eyes feeding on her downfall. Her chest constricted painfully, tears threatening to break free, but she refused to let them fall. Not for them.

Then, from the corner of her vision, Violet saw a sudden flash of motion as Griffin Hale lunged at Alaric, landing a punch square across his jaw.

Alarmed cries rang out as people scrambled back not just because Griffin hit Alaric, but his body was beginning to swell, his muscles expanding, the telltale sign of his beast coming out. Alaric reacted instantly, lightning sparking at his fingertips in a bid to defend himself and contain Griffin's enraged beast.

There was pandemonium with students shouting and bolting toward the exits. They all knew what was about to happen with Griffin in his beast state and Alaric's lightning unleashed. It would be chaos.

Somewhere amid the panicked jostling, Violet was shoved around until her senses kicked in. She bolted with the crowd, not moving to seek safety but to escape everything. To hide from the world. She didn't care where she ended up as long as it was far from here.

As Violet pushed through the body of panicking students, a hand reached out, grabbing hold of her and yanking her from the stampede.

Chapter 243: Dirty Secret

Violet didn't resist as Micah led her through the hallway toward his office. All she wanted now was to be far away from everyone. So she stumbled along, her breath ragged, as if the air itself was too heavy for her lungs to bear.

As soon as the office door shut behind them, everything came crashing down on her like a collapsing dam and Violet broke down in tears.

She had always thought of herself as strong. That she could withstand anything. But how wrong she was because right now there was a chasm inside her chest, swallowing every last piece of her.

The pain was unbearable. It hurt so much she could hardly breathe. How could he do this to her? Had it been Roman, she could have understood. She had expected it even. Not just Alaric. Not him of all people.

Micah stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, clearly torn between wanting to help and not knowing how to. Sadly for him, whether he liked it or not, he was the school counselor. That meant he had to do something.

"Are you okay?"

He winced the second the words left his lips.

What the hell kind of question was that? Of course she wasn't okay, dummy! His inner mind chided him.

Violet lifted her tear-streaked face, her expression twisted with agony. "My mother..." she managed, voice quivering. "I— I want my mother..."

Micah blinked. Her mother? His throat bobbed, struggling for an answer.

"Uh—unfortunately, I can't help you with that right now." He hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck. "It would take hours for her to get to Aster City."

"Your phone," Violet broke in, frustration in her tone. "I lost mine in the chaos." Tears choked her as she tried to speak. "Please, I just need to call her. I need to hear her voice..."

Her eyes—gods, her eyes— were filled with so much pleading Micah felt something twist uncomfortably in his chest.

He quickly reached into his pocket and handed her his phone, watching as her trembling fingers fumbled over the screen, tears spilling and making her vision blur. But despite several mistakes, Violet finally dialed the number, pressing the device to her ear.

"Pick up," Violet whispered, voice raw with pleading. "Mom, please..." But the call wouldn't connect.

Violet bit down on her lips nervously as she tried over and over, and each time, it failed.

Her chest tightened, her stomach dropping into a pit of horror. Why wasn't she picking up? Why wasn't the call going through? Where was she? But then, this was Nancy, hadn't she learned her lesson enough?

The final attempt disconnected with a flat beep and a strangled sound escaped Violet's throat—half sob, half scream—before she suddenly threw the phone across the room. The device clattered against the wall and hit the floor with a dull thud.

Micah stared at the phone for a long moment, his lips pressing into a thin line.

Oh well. Teenagers.

He'd deal with that later. Right now, his priority was the girl falling apart in front of him.

With a weary sigh, Micah stepped forward and Violet didn't even refuse him when he gently pulled her against his chest. Instead she clung to him as if he was the only thing keeping her from drowning.

Her body was shaking, Micah stroked her hair, murmuring. "Yes, little one. Let it out. You've been holding it in too long."

His soft encouragement seemed to unleash something inside of her. Violet buried her face in his chest, gripping his shirt in fistfuls as she cried even harder.

The sound was raw, the type of grief that steals all breath. And Micah stood there, saying nothing more, just holding her while she sobbed out the shards of her heartbreak in heaving gasps.

Hours passed, yet Violet remained sprawled on Micah's couch, staring up at the ceiling as if it held the answers to all her problems.

Micah's voice finally broke through her trance.

"Just how long are you planning to stay here, again?"

Violet turned her head lazily toward him. Micah was sitting in his chair, munching through a packet of almonds now. Earlier, she'd seen him devour chocolate-covered pretzels, a ham-and-cheese sandwich, a ridiculous amount of spicy chips, and an entire caramel-drizzled popcorn bucket.

Now that she thought about it, he ate a lot. Not that it showed.

"Why?" She arched a brow. "Tired of my honored presence already?"

Micah snorted, lifting another almond to his lips and chewing obnoxiously loud in the otherwise quiet room.

"You can't hide here forever."

"I'm not hiding." Violet frowned, crossing her arms. "Think of it as me... recharging."

"Mhmm." His tone oozed disbelief, but he let it go. Instead he lifted his phone and casually remarked, "If it pleases your highness, then you should know the video's been taken down."

"You can't erase it from every student's phone in Lunaris," Violet answered flatly.

Micah ignored her cynicism and continued, "And, for what it's worth, classes have been canceled for the day. Principal Jameson summoned the culprits to her office and word is she's tearing them a new one."

Violet rolled her eyes. "As if."

If people actually feared Jameson's authority, half of the bullshit that happened in this school wouldn't exist in the first place.

Micah seemed to sense that none of his attempts to distract her were working, so he let her be. Violet returned her gaze to the ceiling, her voice dropping to a murmur.

"They called me a whore, you know."

Micah said nothing.

Her throat tightened, but she forced the words out.

"But how can I be a whore when I'm still a virgin?"

The sound of chewing immediately stopped. Violet glanced over to find Micah giving her a pointed look.

"What?" she asked.

"That's a bit too much information," he replied drily.

She shrugged. "Aren't you my counselor?"

"I'm your counselor, not your therapist. There are still a few things I'd prefer not to know."

"Says the guy who sleeps with his students," Violet shot back, voice laced with a hint of accusation.

"Guilty as charged," Micah said without shame. Then with a grin, he added, "That was a low blow, little Purplehead."

For the first time since everything happened, a slow smile touched Violet's face. But just as quickly, the memory of the day crashed back, and the smile vanished. The walls slammed back up, and she turned her eyes back to the ceiling, her expression unreadable.

"Look deeper," Micah said after a moment.

Violet turned her head slightly. "Huh?"

Micah locked eyes with her, the intensity radiating in his gaze made her swallow. "Everyone has a dirty secret. Look closer, Elsie's might be closer than you think."

Chapter 244: Violet Purple Has To Go

Jeremiah, Griffin, Alaric, Roman, and Elsie were gathered in Principal Jameson's office, making the air inside feel suffocatingly tense. If anyone dropped a lit match in there, it might have erupted in flames given the hostility crackling among them.

None of the alphas were speaking. Each of them stood at their own corner, wearing scowls like armor, positioned as far from one another as the room allowed.

All except Elsie Lancaster, who sat primly in the chair before Jameson's desk, legs crossed, looking unbothered and bored. She alone seemed immune to the atmosphere, her expression far too composed for someone at the center of a brewing storm.

Then the door flung open and in came Principal Jameson, her heels echoing sharply like war drums against the tile. She came around her desk and paused, taking one long, disbelieving look at the fractured scene before her.

There was disunity among the cardinal alphas. Something that had never happened in Lunaris Academy's history, until now.

Then her gaze landed on Jeremiah. They narrowed. "Where is your Alpha?"

Jeremiah merely shrugged. "Out on alpha business."

It was the one excuse no one, not even Jameson included, could challenge. An Alpha on duty was untouchable.

Roman scoffed audibly from his spot near the bookshelf. Everyone in the room knew that was a lie. Perhaps Jameson knew that too judging from the way her jaw ticked. But then, she said nothing.

Instead, she exhaled slowly, tamping down her rage. "So," she said tightly, "what the hell is going on?"

Elsie arched a brow. "You'll have to be a bit more specific, Principal Jameson," she said, her voice light with mock innocence.

Jameson didn't respond right away. Instead, she pulled out her phone, placed it on the desk, and hit play. The video began to roll, showing the exact moment Elsie spat in Violet Purple's face.

"Care to explain that?" Jameson asked tightly.

Elsie barely glanced at the screen before looking up again, offering a sugary smile. "Oh, that? I was simply dealing with a rogue who didn't know her place." she said dismissively. "It's nothing to worry about."

"Really? Nothing to worry about?" Jameson nodded her head, seeming to consider the words for half a beat before she lost it.

With a sudden burst of fury, Jameson swept her desk clean, the papers, files, and her phone scattering across the floor with a thunderous crash. Everyone in the room flinched. They had never seen her this furious.

She advanced toward Elsie who remained seated. Given Jameson's height, she loomed over her like a tempest about to break.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?!" she barked into Elsie's face. "This one—" she jabbed a finger toward Griffin, "nearly tore the school apart. And this one—" her hand shifted to Alaric, "would've electrocuted everyone if he'd lost control. Do you understand what that means? STUDENTS COULD HAVE DIED UNDER MY WATCH!"

At that moment, she didn't even care that her fury was close enough to spray spit on Elsie's face.

However, Elsie's initial calm vanished, her eyes flashing with anger as her wolf rose to the surface. In a low, threatening voice, she said, "It would do you best to step away from me. Now."

Jameson's jaw tightened, her pride as the principal and a higher authority flaring in response. But self-preservation kicked in and she backed off, anger brimming slowly.

Elsie smoothed her skirt and adjusted her tie like she hadn't just threatened the principal.

Jameson took a shuddering breath, then turned to the rest of them, scanning each one of the alphas with a look that could blister steel.

"You realize how much effort it took to keep this quiet?" Jameson said. "The only reason your parents, or the Alpha King, haven't caught wind is because we have Parents' Week next week, and I refuse to let them think I can't control my own school!"

At the mention of the Alpha King, the atmosphere changed. Griffin, Alaric and Roman visibly tensed. Only Jeremiah and Elsie remained unaffected.

And yet, Elsie had the audacity to speak again. "Perhaps you have indeed lost control. And maybe you won't have any until Violet Purple is removed from this academy."

Jeremiah snarled before he could stop himself. "Shut the fuck up, you awful bitch."

"No name-calling in my office." Jameson snapped, though she didn't even look at him, her eyes fixed on Elsie.

Elsie ignored Jeremiah's insult and said to Jameson. "Don't you see it? Everything was fine until Violet Purple showed up. She's the one wreaking havoc among the cardinal alphas. She. Has. To. Go."

Roman laughed harshly, "They call me the fox, but you're ten times more crafty. Maybe I should give you my crown, it fits you correctly." he remarked drily.

Griffin chimed in, his voice cold. "It's not Violet that's driving us apart, Elsie. It's your jealousy and toxic attitude."

Elsie's face contorted with rage, stunned that they would speak to her that way. Especially Roman of all people. Fine, they would sort this out later.

She turned her attention back on Jameson. "A competent principal would already know what to do by now," she said coldly, implying Violet's expulsion.

The corners of Jameson's mouth set in a grim line. "Oh, so you want my job now?" she challenged.

Elsie sniffed. "God, no. I'd never stoop to such a lowly position. But come to think of it, maybe it's time for a new principal. Perhaps a werewolf this time who understands our ways. After all, how can a human possibly run a werewolf institution?"

The room fell deathly silent. Jeremiah's voice cut through the silence like a knife. "Damn. You're one cold bitch."

Jameson didn't react to the curse this time. Her expression had become borderline terrifying

"Get. Out," she said, her voice like steel.

Elsie rolled her eyes, "Gladly." She rose with all the grace of a queen, and strutted toward the door.

The alphas took that as their cue. But before any of them could follow, Jameson's voice stopped them briefly.

"I don't care how you do it, but I want unity back in my school. This is your only warning. Now go."

Chapter 245: Uncovered

The moment the Alphas stepped out of Jameson's office, Alaric launched after Elsie like the storm he was, closing in on her. He grabbed her arm and slammed her into the nearest wall with such force the plaster cracked.

"What the hell was that back there?" Alaric snarled, his face mere inches from hers. His breath was hot with rage, muscles rigid beneath his shirt. Energy snapped in the air, the faint static hum of lightning beginning to bleed off his skin.

"You promised to leave her alone!" he seethed. "You said if I humiliated her like you wanted that you'd back off. That you wouldn't say her name to the Alpha King until graduation!"

His voice thundered in the passageway, and behind him, Griffin, Roman, and Jeremiah halted in place. Griffin, especially, his face was twisted with a dawning realization, like he was finally piecing together the broken puzzle of what Alaric had done and why.

Alaric had not hurt Violet out of raw spite, thank the gods. Because he had planned to hurt him in return, just fine.

Elsie blinked up at Alaric, her face incredibly calm as if nothing moved her.

"I never broke the deal," she said with conviction. "I'm just being proactive. If Violet pushes back, I need the authority to silence her before she ruins everything. I'm protecting what we agreed on."

"Protecting?" Alaric echoed with anger. "You call pushing for her expulsion protecting? You call making me do that to her protection?"

He slammed her harder against the wall, growling, "Don't fucking play games with me, Elsie."

Elsie's confidence faltered slightly beneath Alaric's fury, but she managed to hold her ground. "It's not a game, Alaric. It's reality. There can't be two queens in one kingdom. And in Lunaris? I am the reigning one, not that filth from the slums."

Alaric recoiled like she'd slapped him.

"You made me..." he choked out, the horror dawning across his features, "You made me become her nightmare. I destroyed her in front of everyone—her dignity, her trust— all for you."

"My bad," Elsie said, popping her lips, unapologetic. "It just needed to be done. Now she hates you enough never to bother you again and that's good enough for me."

Alaric's head lowered at once as if the fight had gone out of him, his white hair shadowing his eyes. But it did nothing to hide the storm boiling behind them. His whole body trembled with disbelief, then shame, right before fury ignited like a fuse.

When Alaric lifted his gaze again, his eyes were glowing with the dark promise of violence.

"You fucking bitch," he whispered, but there was nothing soft in his tone. "You used me. How dare—"

His claws burst from his gloves, lightning lacing through his veins, and he gripped her shoulders hard—so hard she gasped—blood blooming beneath his fingers.

"Ouch! Alaric! You're hurting me!" Elsie cried out, her face finally paling as she saw the storm truly build. The air trembled around them, its pressure climbing to a dangerous high.

"Oh shit—Alaric!" Griffin lunged and tackled him away just in time, intercepting the crackling bolt of electricity that erupted from his hand, aimed straight at her.

Griffin groaned, the blast striking his side as he anchored Alaric with a grunt. "Easy!" he growled. "She's not worth murder!"

Alaric fought him, but Griffin contained his lightning with his extraordinary strength.

Gritting his teeth, Griffin barked at Jeremiah, "Get her out of here!"

But Jeremiah merely raised both hands, stepping away. "Nope. Not touching the bitch. I don't want to catch whatever darkness is oozing out of her." He added, "Moreover, I'm all for thunderboy roasting her ass."

Griffin shot him a look that screamed, Seriously, now? He wrestled Alaric's arms down, fighting to keep the lightning from lashing out again.

With a harsh scowl, Roman strode over to Elsie and grabbed her wrist. "Come on," he snapped.

"Ow! You're hurting me, Roman!" Elsie protested as Roman dragged her down the corridor.

"Good." Roman offered no sympathy, his face twisted in an equal blend of anger and disgust. But at least he had enough control to stop short of murder, unlike the lightning prince.

The commotion must finally reach Jameson's ears because her door creaked open. She peered out with the expression of a woman two seconds away from a breakdown, only to find Griffin pinning Alaric to the floor, both struggling and snarling.

"What is the meaning of this?" she snapped, eyes sharp as knives.

Jeremiah, who had been enjoying the scene, replied without missing a beat, "Practicing reconciliation. Isn't that what you want?"

Jameson stared at him, then the two on the ground like she was contemplating early retirement, then slowly, with the weariness of a thousand lifetimes, shook her head and closed the door behind her. She was officially done for the day.

Meanwhile, Roman continued dragging Elsie out of the school building, not stopping even when she tried to slow him down. He didn't stop until they were outside, somewhere near a side building that offered privacy but not enough to shield them from a few lingering students.

At that point Roman didn't care if they were stared at. Privacy was a luxury Elsie had forfeited the moment she lit a match and threw it at the bridges they'd barely kept from burning.

He slammed her back against the wall with a thud that echoed off the brick.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" he shouted at her. "I made you a deal! Everything was under control, Elsie! And then you fucking went back on it. You went nuclear without even telling me!"

Elsie bared her teeth, defiant. "That deal was bullshit to begin with!"

Her voice rose, venom in her words. "Who the hell is Violet Purple that I should bend over backwards for her?! She's nothing—nothing! And don't think I haven't noticed the way you all look at her."

She laughed, a dark, humorless sound.

"You're all fucking obsessed with her! Like she's some rare gem and I'm just background noise. But I am the one who's always been here. I'm the one you're supposed to want. Not some girl dragged from the gutters of some district!"

Roman's face darkened, and for a moment, the rage in him stilled.

"So this is what I'd have to deal with in the future," the south Alpha said quietly, the realization heavy in his voice. "This is the kind of Luna you'd be to my pack, jealous, bitter, disrespectful, uncontrollable and dangerous."

Elsie flinched, just slightly. Then her pride rose like a tide. "That's if I even end up in your pack," she snapped, eyes narrowing with challenge.

Roman exhaled sharply, as though accepting a grim truth. He stepped back from her as if her presence sickened him now. "Knock yourself out," he said icily.

He turned and walked away.

"Roman! Roman!" Elsie shouted, eyes widening in belated regret. But he didn't turn around.

"Damn it," she cursed under her breath, running a shaky hand through her hair.

What had she done?

Fine. He needs time to cool off and then she'd apologize to him.

He'd come back to her.

He always did.

Chapter 246: Where is Asher?

~ Griffin ~

Alaric, for once, didn't resist as he steered him away from Jameson's floor and into one of the vacant classrooms. Classes had been canceled for the day, probably the only blessing in this mess. If Alaric went nuclear again, at least there wouldn't be any casualties.

Griffin watched as Alaric slid down to the floor with quiet resignation, his back against the wall. His cardinal brother pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around himself, his shoulders hunched, and his head bowed. The storm that had once threatened to destroy the school now sat like a broken boy, unraveling from within.

Despite how furious he'd been, seeing Alaric like this made his heart twist painfully. So Griffin sighed, walked over, and lowered himself to the floor beside him in silence.

Alaric lifted his eyes, glassy with emotion, and rasped out, "I fucked up big time, didn't I?"

He offered a succinct reply, "No point beating yourself up over spilled milk."

Alaric's throat worked. "She'll never forgive me. I broke her, Griffin. I destroyed whatever trust she had in me."

Griffin sighed heavily. "You're right. Violet might never forgive you. But she's not exactly heartless. If she finds out that Elsie—"

"That's no excuse," Alaric cut in sharply, shaking his head. "Some part of me wanted to hurt her, Griffin. Deep down, I was angry about her and Roman. I let my emotions get the best of me and Elsie used me just fine."

"You don't know that," Griffin snapped, eyes narrowing. "This could all be one big misunderstanding. And all of you need to sit down and talk it out with her before you ruin something that could've been real."

"Or maybe it's better this way," Alaric met his eyes, exhaustion etched on his face. "All we've done since Violet got here is to make her life miserable. Maybe she's better off without us."

"So you're fine leaving her to Asher? You know he won't give up on her," Griffin pressed, brow furrowing.

The way he looked away said it all. Alaric scrubbed his hands down his face. Guilt and rage warred in his expression.

"I have no idea what to do," he muttered, voice strained.

Griffin said to him. "I for one know what you must do. For starters, you need to apologize to Violet. Find her and make things right, even if your face is the last thing she'd want to see right about that and you're liable to get one or two punches, or the classic kick to the dick, but I'm sure you can take it. The point is, make things right." Then his tone turned cold. "But for now, we've got a bigger problem. Elsie Lancaster."

The moment he said her name, Alaric's face twisted with pure loathing. Whatever pity he once held for Elsie, it was gone after this stunt she pulled.

"It seems we've given her too much power since Lucille left," Griffin observed.

"You're right," Alaric agreed. "Lucille always knew how to keep Elsie in check. Unfortunately, Violet isn't Lucille, and she's too hot-tempered to be even half as crafty as that girl was."

Both of them sighed in unison. Then Griffin suddenly perked up, giving him a pointed look.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?"

Alaric was confused at first, only for his eyes to widen the next second. "No. No fucking way. Don't even say it."

Griffin shrugged. "I didn't say anything." He added mischievously, "But you were always her favorite."

"I'm not going near that crazy girl. What makes you think she'd give up whatever leverage she has over Elsie just like that? If even Asher couldn't get it out of her, what makes you think I can?"

"Fine, don't." Griffin conceded. "Besides, I don't even know where she is now."

"Good," Alaric whispered. " Just saying her name gives me PTSD," he added wryly, leaning his head against the wall.

"You're not alone, brother."

At that word, "brother", Alaric paused. Back in the hallway, when Griffin had punched him, he'd thought he'd lost that bond forever.

"I'm sorry," Alaric said, guilt written all over his face. "I should've told you what I was planning before pulling that dick move."

Griffin arched a brow, unimpressed. "We might be close friends but you don't owe me every detail of your life. However, pull another stunt like that, and I swear to the goddess, I'll pulverize your face so badly Zara and Caspian wouldn't be able to fix it even with their combined skills."

At the mention of his parents, both boys broke into unexpected laughter, sharing a rare moment of levity.

But it didn't last.

The door burst open so hard it nearly bounced off the hinges. Jeremiah stumbled in with a grunt, clearly shoved by someone.

And that someone was Roman, who strolled in right after him, calm and collected, and closed the door behind them with a soft click.

Alaric and Griffin jumped to their feet, eyes narrowed, confused. What was the fox up to now?

Jeremiah looked around like a cornered animal. "What the hell is this?"

Roman didn't answer immediately. He approached Jeremiah slowly, hands folded behind his back, looking every bit like a lion about to pounce on the poor mice.

When Roman finally reached Jeremiah, he clamped a hand on his shoulder, tight enough to make him wince.

"Isn't it obvious?" Roman said with a calmness that made it more menacing. "I kidnapped you for an interrogation."

Jeremiah's expression morphed into disbelief before turning defiant. "You want to know where Asher is, don't you?" He squared his shoulders. "Bring it on. I'll take your beating before I betray my Alpha."

Then, as if to drive the point home, Roman's skin shimmered as green scales slithered over his arms and shoulders. He smirked devilishly. "Oh, you won't just be facing my wrath."

Roman shared a look with the other alphas. At once, Alaric's palm crackled to life, streaks of lightning dancing between his fingers. Griffin at the same time, cracked his knuckles with a booming snap.

"Trust me," he said darkly, "you don't want me swinging at you."

Jeremiah looked between the three alphas, one scaled, one sparking, and the other built like a battering ram. He swallowed hard.

Shit.

Now he was in real trouble.

Chapter 247: Late Night Visitor

"You do know you're making me dizzy," Ivy muttered, glancing at Lila, who had been pacing back and forth in the living room for what felt like hours.

Okay, maybe she was exaggerating, but Lila's anxious stride was driving both her and Daisy nuts. Daisy, however, choose to stay silent on the matter.

As Ivy expected, Lila ignored her remark and continued pacing. Ivy turned to Daisy with an exasperated sigh. "Aren't you going to tell her to calm down?"

Daisy shot back, "She's worried about Violet. Just let her be. If you're that dizzy, you can go to bed."

It was late, and there was still no sign of Violet. They'd searched the academy all day to no avail. Eventually, Daisy had reasoned that Violet likely didn't want to be found. After the day's fiasco, it made sense that she'd need space. Everyone knew Violet was prideful, and after suffering a blow like that, she'd hide rather than let others see her pain.

"It's my fault," Lila said for what felt like the hundredth time. "I should've run after her instead of wasting time scolding Roman."

Earlier, when Violet had accused Roman of leaking the video, Lila had lit into him. By the time she finished, the corridor was too crowded to follow Violet. Then the chaos broke loose, and the rest was history.

"If I'd gotten to her first, I would've clawed out that bitch's eyes. Maybe snapped her pretty little neck too." Lila seethed, her fists clenched as if visualizing carrying out her words.

"Okay. That's... graphic," Ivy murmured under her breath, exchanging a look with Daisy as if to say, please do something before she commits a crime. But Daisy just shrugged. They both knew Lila wouldn't calm down until Violet showed up.

Then came the panic spiral.

"Oh no," Lila suddenly gasped, eyes widening, "what am I going to tell the Fae queen? What if Violet got hurt in all that chaos?"

"We checked the infirmary," Daisy reminded her. "No sign of her there."

Lila only grew more agitated. "What if some wolf took her?"

Daisy snorted. "I'd be more worried for the wolf that took her. Violet, in this mood? She'd likely flay him alive."

"But what if that's not the case? What if someone's doing something nasty to her? What if she needs help, and we're here doing nothing?"

At this point, even Daisy's confidence wavered, the dark possibility creeping in. An uneasy silence fell, until a sound at the door snapped all of their heads around. And in walked Violet.

"Violet!" all three cried, rushing forward so fast they nearly knocked her down.

Lila pushed past them all to hover anxiously in front of her. "Are you okay? Did someone hurt you? Where have you been? We were going crazy—"

But Violet forced a tired smile. "I'm sorry for scaring you like that. I just needed some time alone. To breathe."

They exchanged a relieved glance but steered clear of mentioning the incident. Lila cleared her throat, trying to brighten the tension. "Fine. You must be hungry. We actually have—"

"I'm not hungry," Violet cut in. "Micah made sure I ate before I left."

"Micah?" Daisy repeated, arching a brow. "You've been with him all along?"

Violet nodded.

"Makes sense," Daisy said. "That's one place none of us would've thought to check."

An awkward silence settled over them again. Violet took a slow breath and said, "Listen, I appreciate you guys worrying about me. I'm sorry for keeping you all on edge. But I'm exhausted. Can we talk tomorrow?"

They knew she was dodging conversation, yet they all nodded. "Sure," Lila agreed gently.

They watched as Violet retreated to her room, the door clicking shut behind her. Daisy laid a comforting hand on Lila's shoulder, aware of how deeply she felt responsible for Violet's well-being.

"She'll be better tomorrow," Daisy murmured.

Lila offered a shaky smile. "Thanks. Good night."

One by one, they headed to their own rooms, hoping the morning would be better.

Meanwhile, when Violet finally lay down on her bed, she was certain she'd spend the entire night staring blankly at the ceiling, her thoughts running amok. But sleep, quiet as a thief, swept her under before she even realized it. Perhaps it was the emotional exhaustion, but she hadn't noticed just how drained she really was.

Besides, she hadn't exactly rested back in Micah's office either. Comfortable as she might have been around him, trust was a different matter entirely. The man was an incubus, after all. She was not lowering her walls around him..

So when a soft meow echoed in her room sometime around midnight, Violet's eyes cracked open at once.

There, perched at the foot of her bed, sat a familiar green-furred British Fold cat. His big, round green eyes blinked at her, almost innocently.

Roman.

Of course.

Violet should have been furious and kicked him off the bed without hesitation for daring to show up uninvited. But she didn't. She didn't have the strength to be angry right now. Not to mention there was something oddly comforting about the sight of Roman like this. Small, quiet and soft.

Adorable little bastard.

With a tired sigh, Violet turned her head fully toward him. "You're pushing your luck, Kitten Roman," she muttered, voice groggy with sleep.

But kitten Roman, as always, took her dry threat as an open invitation. With the grace only a cat could master, he padded across the mattress and curled himself against her side. Before Violet knew it, she reached out a hand and lightly scratched behind his ears as he let out a quiet purr.

Her eyes drooped, the warmth of the cat pressing against her side more comforting than she cared to admit. With a drowsy sigh, Violet tugged the small creature closer.

Tomorrow, she'd be stern with him, Violet promised herself. She'd scold him for not respecting boundaries, for being an arrogant shapeshifting prick who thought affection could erase his betrayal.

But not tonight.

Tonight, she needed Kitten Roman.

Chapter 248: Return Of A King

In their wolf forms, the members of West House prowled the perimeter, their ears pricked and senses on high alert. Hence, at the sight of a lone figure approaching from the darkness, they bared their teeth and braced themselves to attack if need be until they caught the scent.

Recognizing who it belonged to, the wolves immediately relaxed, the growls vanishing into silence. One by one, they lowered their heads in submission, and moments later, a certain alpha appeared, bag slung over his shoulder.

Asher Nightshade had returned.

Asher moved like the king he was, stopping before them, his mere presence tensing the air. The wolves shifted into their human forms, kneeling with their faces full of surprise. They had not expected him tonight. But then, their Alpha Asher has always been known for his surprises.

"Alpha, you're back," Nigel said, straightening to attention. He was Jeremiah's gamma and Asher's third in command.

"Where's Jeremiah?" Asher asked, surveying the group.

There was a subtle pause, followed by a quick, uneasy glance that passed between Nigel and the others, an action that did not go unnoticed by Asher.

"He's upstairs," Nigel replied, carefully. "We're the ones on patrol tonight."

"Alright," Asher said.

He could sense they were withholding something, but said nothing. Whatever it was, he would find out anyway.

Without another word, Asher turned and made his way toward the West House. The front doors opened easily for him, as though the very building had missed him.

Once inside, the house prefect, Benjamin Holden, noticed him immediately. "Welcome back, Alpha Asher," he said respectfully.

Asher acknowledged him with a single nod, not breaking his stride. Although his boots made no sound against the polished floorboards, his domineering presence reverberated through every corner of the hall.

He ascended the stairs, and paused briefly on the floor where his purple flower had once lived. If only she was still around, he would have paid her a visit. Nevertheless, he was not discouraged. It would not be long now; claiming his queen would definitely happen.

Asher moved on, climbing higher, until he reached the top floor. He didn't even bother knocking, simply shoving the door open, the sound echoing like a thunderclap.

Jeremiah, quick as ever despite his condition, bolted upright, only to flinch and falter, pain flashing across his face as he dropped to his knees.

"You're back, Alpha," he rasped, lowering his head in submission.

Asher stepped in, closing the door quietly behind him. Then he turned on the light, the glow falling across Jeremiah's face, and his eyes narrowed at once.

He moved slowly until he crouched down in front of him. Jeremiah kept his head bowed until Asher reached forward and lifted his chin with a single finger, forcing their eyes to meet.

Jeremiah didn't need to explain, the bruises said it all. Even with a werewolf's quick healing, it was obvious he'd taken a serious beating.

"I'm sorry I failed you," Jeremiah said, his voice tight with shame.

"Which of them did this?" Asher asked softly, but his tone was underlined with a dangerous current.

There was a beat of silence before Jeremiah answered. "All of them."

Asher nodded in understanding.

"They wanted to know your whereabouts..." Jeremiah's voice trembled. "I swear, I didn't tell them anything. But they suspect it's related to Violet. I would never betray—"

"Shh." Asher hushed him gently, placing a hand on the side of his neck.

Jeremiah practically froze as his Alpha leaned forward, pressing his forehead to his. It was not an act of weakness, but a rare moment of acknowledgment. Of loyalty truly honored.

Asher shut his eyes for a moment, breathing in the smell of blood and anger.

When he did open them again, those slit-pupil eyes held the promise of vengeance.

"Thank you for your sacrifice. You'll be avenged."

Jeremiah's throat bobbed, gratitude and pride swelling in him at Asher's vow.

Then Asher stood, and Jeremiah followed him.

Asher had intentionally left his phone and vanished without a trail, ensuring the other Alphas couldn't trace him. But now, he wanted news, specifically about his "little human." So it was not surprising his next question was about her.

"I trust my little human is safe and well?" he asked, a trace of anticipation slipping into his tone.

Jeremiah's face went pale. He gulped audibly. "About that..."

Elsie Lancaster was having the best sleep of her life when something about the air felt wrong. Groggy and half-aware, she pried her eyes open, only to freeze at the sight of a figure looming near her bed. For a second, she thought it was a dream, until she recognized that face.

Asher.

Her eyes went wide, and she barely drew in a gasp before he moved. The bastard grabbed the spare pillow at her side and pressed it down over her face with terrifying force.

The world turned black.

Elsie tried to scream, but it never made it past her lips, instead, she was choked, and crushed beneath the weight of cotton.

Her hands shot up, clawing at Asher in panic. She kicked wildly beneath the covers, her legs thrashing, and her nails digging into his arms, his chest—anything she could reach. But it didn't matter.

Asher was a powerful Alpha, and she was just an ordinary female wolf. Even when her claws found his flesh and drew blood, he refused to ease up. The pillow stayed firmly over her mouth and nose, and her chest burned with the raw panic of suffocation.

So this is it, her mind raced. This was how she was going to die, strangled by one of her would-be suitors.

This was clearly retribution for messing with Violet. Elsie never thought Asher would actually touch her, not when she was covered by the Alpha King. Yet clearly, she'd underestimated him. Asher was crazier than she realized.

Just when her vision began to blacken and Elsie truly believed this was the end, as if he had been timing the whole process, Asher released her.

Coughing and spluttering, Elsie tossed the pillow aside. She gulped air like a drowning victim suddenly saved from the deep. Elsie clutched at her throat, her chest heaving as oxygen flooded back into her starved lungs.

By the time she finally caught her breath and looked around, Asher was gone. At first, Elsie was tempted to believe it was a nightmare the asshole planted in her mind. Except when she looked down, there was dark blood caked beneath her nails.

No, this was no dream. It was terrifyingly real.

Asher Nightshade just sent her a message.

He was back.

Chapter 249: Alpha's Retaliation

"You have got to be kidding me," Adele muttered the moment she stepped into the infirmary, only to find it crowded to the brim.

What the hell?

It was barely six in the morning, yet her space, which wasn't even designed for such emergency-level chaos, was bursting with injured students. The beds were occupied with patients such that some had to sit on the floor in pain.

There were broken limbs, twisted ankles, and bloodied faces. Bones stuck out at odd angles in ways that they shouldn't, but for all it was worth, Adele was thankful they were werewolves and not humans else this would have been another story.

Still, it was not the kind of welcome she expected for the start of her day.

Her infirmary wasn't meant for this. The hospital wards were only doors away, built for this exact reason, but this space had been assigned to her intentionally by Elijah to give her a purpose in the school.

Adele could never forget the scowl on Patrick's face after the decree. Unlike the hospital, which was all science, Adele practiced both science and tradition. Sure, her powers were a vital part of her practice, but she came from a long line of traditional doctors who healed with herbs and roots.

But of course, Patrick thought of her as outdated and annoying. Because the truth remained: while she was here to ensure danger didn't come to the heirs and her supernatural healing ability was handy, she was also there to keep an eye on the mad man. Not that it made any difference.

Adele could never understand Elijah or the things he did—which were rarely practical—and especially not his relationship with Patrick. To be honest, half the time, Adele felt like she was playing cleanup in his circus. But the good news was that she and the hospital had learned not to get in each other's way, even though they resided in the same building. Mostly.

Her gaze swept over the injured crowd, cataloging injuries as she went. And then she spotted Griffin, Alaric and Roman.

All of them huddled in one corner, deep in what looked like a heated discussion.

Roman was the first to notice her, and as soon as he nudged the others, they all turned towards her.

Adele marched up to them, demanding. "What is going on here?"

Immediately, the three alphas exchanged glances like guilty boys caught with their hands in the sacred cookie jar. She didn't miss the silent communication. The oh-no-who's-gonna-tell-her shuffle and how-much-exactly-are-we-going-to-tell-her look.

She narrowed her eyes. "Don't even think of lying to me."

Roman and Griffin both tilted their heads toward Alaric, collectively singling him out. He was Adele's favorite after all.

"Bastards." Alaric groaned under his breath. With a heavy sigh, he resigned himself to fate.

Alaric began, "This idiot—" he jabbed a thumb at Roman, "—had the brilliant idea to beat up Asher's beta to force him to reveal where Asher's been."

Adele's brows lifted. "You did what?"

Roman raised his hands defensively. "I guess he wasn't much less of an idiot than I was, since he jumped into the plan without asking questions." He added tauntingly, "Moreover, we all know Asher's gunning for you over what you did to Violet."

Alaric growled. "Don't try turning the heat on me when this entire thing started with you and your selfish agenda."

"Alright, that's enough!" Adele snapped. Then she turned to Griffin. "You talk. You're the most reasonable right now."

Griffin gave a helpless shrug. "We roughed up Jeremiah for answers. He still didn't crack in the end. Unfortunately, we didn't count on Asher getting back so soon and finding out. So this..." He gestured to the injured students sprawled across the room. "... is his payback. The asshole compelled my deltas to hurt themselves. Not just mine, his house—" he pointed at Alaric, "—and his," he pointed to Roman."

Adele blinked. "So let me get this straight. You idiots messed up. And now you want me to fix it."

Roman grimaced. "It sounds worse when you put it that way."

"Adele, please," Alaric started, attempting his most charming voice, "you know how much we—"

"No," Adele held up a hand, cutting him off. "I think you guys have officially abused the privilege of my gifts. And it's high time I reminded you all of that."

She locked eyes with each of them, her voice was as sharp as a blade as she made it clear to them. "My only purpose here is to keep the Alpha King's heirs safe. Period. Me helping the rest of you? That's a choice. A choice it seems you've taken for granted."

They didn't dare speak as she continued.

"I don't care if the hospital gives you bad memories or PTSD. I don't care if you run into Patrick and he gives you one of his chilling stares. No, that's your business, not mine. And just so you know, I'm a living being, not a tool you can just call up at the slightest issue to kiss your wound and make it better. "

Roman muttered, "You don't exactly kiss our wounds.... "

One look from Adele shut him up instantly.

Alaric lowered his head in shame. "I'm sorry for making such a demand. I wasn't thinking."

"No, you weren't," Adele snapped. "Sort out your drama yourselves this time. Either haul your pack member's broken limbs to the hospital or let them heal wrong and painfully. Your choice. And if you're wise, you guys would handle whatever disunity is between the packs before Elijah hears of it and intervenes. Understood?"

"Crystal." Alaric responded, although the scolding was meant for all of them.

With one final look, Adele turned on her heel.

"Oh, and one more thing," she tossed over her shoulder, "clean the blood off my floor before you leave."

And just like that, Adele was gone, her lab coat billowing like the closing act of a goddess who had no time for foolish boys.

There was a moment of silence between the alphas as they decided on what to do.

Then Roman said to the others. "So... hospital, then?"

Chapter 250: Poison Alaric

Asher Nightshade sat on his throne in the Silver Court with all the elegance of a lion at rest, enjoying breakfast. On his plate, he had roasted plantain, golden and caramelized at the edges, and smeared with a hefty dollop of unsweetened Greek yogurt mixed with tahini.

The food was an odd combination as it was

neither sweet nor fully savory, balancing somewhere in the middle. The yogurt-tahini sauce was creamy, tangy, and slightly bitter, sticking to the warm plantain like it was trying to be something it wasn't.

Most people would be put off by the taste. Not that it was revolting or something, it simply confused the tongue and definitely left them wondering why anyone would take a second bite. Asher, though, didn't mind. He devoured it all.

He dragged a slice through the food, letting the cream coat the roasted flesh, then shoved it into his mouth. The sauce smeared across the corner of his lips, pale and thick but he didn't bother to wipe it.

Usually, Asher Nightshade was the picture of orderliness even while eating, but at that moment, he didn't care. With half-lidded eyes and a cool, lazy kind of threat in his posture, the West House Alpha seemed to be savoring more than just the strange meal. He was relishing the moment. Perfect and ripe as he wanted it.

And it wasn't long before his cardinal brothers, Griffin, Alaric, and Roman appeared.

Just as he expected.

A subtle curve teased the corner of Asher's lips, but it was so faint it might have been imagined. Just as quickly, it vanished, his expression sliding back into its usual cool neutrality, revealing nothing.

Griffin, Alaric, and Roman had no idea what to expect when they came looking for Asher. Yet the sight before them startled them more than any tense confrontation ever could. There, laid out on the table before their individual seats were fresh, steaming breakfasts carefully prepared for each of them.

The three paused, exchanging surprised looks. It wasn't just the fact that Asher had arranged a meal for them as if he knew they were coming, but that the food was meticulously tailored to their individual preferences. The mind compelling bastard ordered their favorite foods.

Roman found himself staring down at bowl of savory soup. The spicy, red broth was filled with tender pieces of goat meat, mushrooms, and root vegetables, and followed by flat, chewy bread perfect for dipping. It was exactly the sort of thing he craved in the morning after a night full of activity — if you knew what he meant.

As for Alaric, his own tray was more indulgent. There was sweet pastries dusted with powdered sugar, drizzled with chocolate sauce was arranged beside a dish of candied fruits. Then a glass of sweet vanilla almond milk completed the setup. The sweet aroma wafted up like a siren call to his well-known sweet tooth.

And for Griffin, there was a plate of seared steak strips, succulent and still sizzling, paired with roasted peppers and onions. Just the kind of hearty, protein-packed breakfast he typically favored.

All three of them cast uneasy glances at one another, unsure whether to treat this as a peace offering, or a trap. This felt too good to be true. No, right now, Asher was giving the vibe of a witch trying to lure in children with goodies.

For his part, Asher said nothing. He only ate his food with the confidence of one who knew he would win in the end.

However, just to test him, Roman intentionally said, "Did we miss your birthday or something?"

"Fool" Griffin mocked him. "We were all born on the same day."

"Oh right, " Roman recalled, saying dramatically, "What great fate tying us together."

Then without a care, Roman pulled out his seat, no, scratch that, his throne and sat down. No other student possessed such regal seat as theirs, hence deserved its title.

He picked up a spoon, muttering, "If this is poisoned, at least I'll die happy."

Griffin grumbled in response, yet he pulled out his own seat and sat. They had come here to talk to Asher. The fact he even entertained their presence meant he was giving them a chance to talk things out. He hoped so.

Alaric was the most worried and the last to settle down. Even when he was seated, he stared down at his plate of sweetened perfection like it was laced with cyanide.

The food was everything his sugar-loving heart adored. And yet, he couldn't.

He lifted his gaze, catching Asher's stare from across the table. "Why are you not eating?" he asked knowingly.

"What?" Alaric said.

"Guilty?" Asher taunted him.

Alaric's face hardened at once and he was about to retort but Asher beat him to it, saying with a cold voice, "Eat your food. We've got shit to talk about."

Alaric didn't trust the West House Alpha further than he could throw him, but Asher wouldn't go through the trouble of laying out a meal only to poison it. That wasn't his style. If Asher wanted you dead, he'd look you in the eye and handle it with his own two hands.

With resigned acceptance, Alaric picked up his fork and took a bite. And he had to admit, it was good.

The three Alphas ate in silence, the kind that buzzed just beneath the surface like static waiting to erupt into a storm. The air was thick with tension, heavier than the silence itself.

As expected, Asher was the first to finish, and now, he leaned back in his throne, his fingers tapping against the table in a slow, rhythmic pattern.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

It wasn't rushed, but it wasn't relaxed either. It was measured, and calculated like a countdown.

The others tried to ignore it and keep eating, but under that haunting gaze, it became unbearable. It was impossible to stand Asher's unnerving presence. They would choke at this rate.

So one by one, they pushed their half-finished meals away. They weren't here to eat anyway.

It was time to talk.