

Defy 271

Chapter 271: Not A Vision

Violet's plan was simple. Once the three hours were up, she would sneak up to her bed and cuddle up to Alaric, sleeping beside him. Once he woke up in the morning with barely any recollection of what happened, she would spin a suitable tale to cover it up. He wouldn't suspect a thing. She would make sure of it.

So they all sat on the seats in the living room, streaming through some videos on their phones and chatting amongst themselves just to avoid falling asleep. As soon as the three hours were up, Lila happily retrieved the white paper, which had oddly turned a worn-out brown as if its essence—or whatever bad luck it possessed—had been stripped.

"I don't honestly support this, but if you say so," Lila said about her idea of sharing a bed with Alaric Storm. Then she placed a kiss on Violet's cheek and bid her goodnight.

"Good night, Violet," Daisy and Ivy also waved before disappearing into their various rooms.

It was already one in the morning, and they needed enough rest to continue with their plans tomorrow. Tomorrow, being Thursday, was the last day they had to discover whatever secret Elsie was hiding. In one word, they had to push Elsie harder—hard enough to force her to crack and reveal whatever skeletons she was hiding in her closet.

With a sigh, Violet headed to her room as well, stopping short at the sight of Alaric on the bed. It felt so surreal that she crept to the side and just stayed there, hand propping her head as she stared at him like some creep.

He looked so innocent, like an angel in his sleep, and not the devil who had ruthlessly torn her apart the other day.

"I'm so sorry," Violet whispered honestly, then crept into bed, cuddling against him.

She didn't need to pull the covers over them, not when his body was warm enough. Violet took in the ozone scent of his thunder, the smell so alluring it dragged her straight into sleep.

Violet honestly had no idea how long she'd been sleeping before her eyes suddenly snapped open, her brows furrowed. Something wasn't right. There was a strange urgency, an unsettling shift in her spirit, and a tugging sensation that had her climbing out of bed and leaving the room.

What the fuck was she doing? Or going? Violet had no idea, aside from the fact that something was pushing her to go. Go where?! She didn't know, and yet, her feet were moving as if they had a mind of their own.

Violet didn't even bother to put on slippers. She left the shack barefoot, not even closing the door behind her. Her entire body seemed to follow one command: Go.

She tried to resist. She ordered herself to stop this madness, but nothing happened. She was not in control here.

Not even the darkness, nor the ominous hooting of owls and other nocturnal creatures could stop her. Violet didn't stop, not even when stone pebbles bit into her feet. Not even when her skin prickled and the hairs along the back of her neck stood on end, as she sensed what felt like a thousand eyes tracking her.

She knew inwardly it was the wolves patrolling the academy grounds at night. Yet even the fear of those scary creatures didn't halt her pace. She was simply on autopilot.

Violet lost track of time while trekking to God knew where, until eventually, she saw it.

The West House.

Oh fuck. No!

She couldn't go in there. Not just because it was the house of the mindfucker, Asher Nightshade, but because she still bore the status of rogue, and walking in there was asking for trouble.

At the same time, Violet wondered if this was Asher's doing. If he had somehow gotten into her head again—despite his promises—then she was going to give him a piece of her mind.

Still, her feet pulled her along.

She walked up to the West House, passed through the doors, and climbed the stairs until she reached the fourth floor. Throughout her time in the West House, Violet had never known which room belonged to Asher, but somehow she stood in front of a particular door with absolute conviction that it was his.

Then, without her consent, her hand turned the knob, and she walked in, this time, thankfully, closing the door behind her.

Even in the dark, she could feel the enormity of the room. Yet Violet's gaze was immediately drawn toward the figure on the bed. She could hear him. Feel him.

He was grunting in his sleep like someone having a terrible dream.

Violet's heart ached, as if she could feel whatever pain he was going through. Then again, her feet moved of their own accord and she found herself climbing into the bed. She pulled up next to him, wrapping her smaller body around his, nestling her nose into his skin instinctively, offering comfort.

Except the moment their skin made contact, Violet gasped.

She was pulled into a vision.

What the fuck was going on here?

Where was she?

Violet asked herself that very question as she found herself standing in front of a strange room. She heard arguments from within and couldn't fight her curiosity. She pulled the knob and stepped inside the room.

Two men were in there, engaged in a heated conversation. Strangely, they didn't seem to notice her which filled her with the confidence to walk further in.

"Of all the gifts the Moon Goddess chose to give him, it had to be mind control?! She gave him power he could use to challenge me! To unseat me before my time is due, after all my sacrifices!" yelled one of the men, with dirty blonde hair and sharp features that might've been handsome if not for the terrifying scowl on his face.

Who was this, and why did it feel like they were talking about Asher?

"No matter what, he's your son, Henry. If you control him rightly, then your fears will never come to pass," the other man said to him.

Huh?

Violet's mind reeled. That was Asher's father.

How?

Why was she even seeing this?

Then suddenly, her attention was drawn to the door, and she caught sight of a boy, maybe five years old, peering out from behind it. But it wasn't until her gaze locked onto his slitted eyes that it hit Violet like a freight train.

Oh fuck.

This was no vision.

She was in Asher's memories.

Moon help her.

Chapter 272: King And Pawn

Little Asher continuously peered out the door, his eyes shining with a curiosity typical of children his age. However, Henry noticed him at that very moment, and his entire face flooded with rage. Violet had never seen a man that terrifying, and she'd bet her ass he was about to hurt him.

"No, don't!" Violet tried to stop him but her hands simply went through him like air. Oh right, she was seemingly a spectator in this quickly spiraling nightmare.

Henry marched over to where little Asher was hiding and grabbed him roughly by the clothes, yanking him into the office.

"What are you doing here?!" he roared. "Have you come to eavesdrop and plot ways to defeat me before my time?"

Asher, clueless as to what he meant, shook his head frantically. "I didn't mean to, Papa! Please don't hurt me!"

The boy must have unintentionally imbued his power into those words because Henry found himself releasing him without meaning to. And when Henry realized what had happened, his eyes darkened with rage.

"What have I told you about taking off the glasses?! How many times have I said I don't want to see those cursed eyes of yours!" Henry could only scold him furiously, seeing he couldn't hurt him—thanks to the command the boy had given.

"I-I'm sorry, Papa! I'm so sorry!" young Asher cried between bursts of tears.

"Henry, that's enough!" the other man called out, and that seemed to distract Henry just long enough for Asher to bolt out of the room before he knew what was happening.

Violet couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief as soon as Asher was gone. Then she turned to glare at Henry, her disdain for the man so strong it flowed through her like a living force. How she wished she could hurt him so badly!

But before she could take a step toward him, the scene shifted so abruptly, like someone had pulled the world out from under her feet, and the next moment, Violet found herself seated with no recollection of how she got there.

It was a dining table stretching long enough to seat at least twenty guests, its polished surface gleaming under the light.

At the head of the table, seated the stern and imposing Henry while adjacent to him, not quite at the head but close enough to speak intimately, sat a stunning woman with dark, flowing hair.

Violet, curiously, found herself seated directly opposite the woman. But unlike everyone else at the table, there was no plate before her, nor even a glass of water. She wasn't a guest at this meal, but a spectator as always.

Now what? Violet braced herself, dreading whatever memory she was about to witness next. Unlike other children whose childhoods were filled with rainbows and sunshine, Asher's was shaping up to be an epic horror movie. Her heart skipped, already fearing what might come next.

Then her gaze fell on a golden bell placed right beside Henry's hand and without hesitation, he picked it up and rang it, the sound slicing through the air. Violet's brow furrowed, a cold, crawling sensation twisting in the pit of her stomach. Something about that particular move felt wrong.

And just as she feared, the door creaked open and Asher stepped into the room.

Fuck her entire existence.

He was controlling Asher with a damn bell like he was some obedient cat. What the actual hell?!

It was clear Asher had grown since the last time she saw him. Eight? Nine? Ten? Violet couldn't tell, especially not with how thin and frail he looked. Yet, despite little Asher's sunken cheeks, there was something eerily mature in his expression.

The face behind the glasses didn't belong to a child. Whatever Henry had been doing all these years, it was finally beginning to show. Asher wasn't just playing the obedient son, he was becoming the perfect little soldier.

"You called for me, sir," he said, voice flat, cold and far too composed for a boy his age.

"It's time for breakfast. Sit." Henry's tone left no room for argument, his eyes gleaming with twisted satisfaction as Asher moved without hesitation to the opposite end of the table. The other head seat positioned perfectly to face Henry. So they could stare each other down like king and pawn.

"No," the dark haired woman suddenly said.

"Excuse me?" Henry's head whipped in her direction, his beaded eyes pinning her at the spot.

The woman swallowed fearfully, yet there was a defiance in her eyes as she said, "I want my son seated next to me today. I want him beside me," she demanded.

Of course. This was Asher's mother. No wonder. Violet should have known — the hair, the face — the resemblance was stark. Although, at this point, Violet was beginning to fear for her, because she had a feeling this nightmare was only just beginning.

Henry looked at her for a while, then finally blinked. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

However, Asher's mother got up to her feet abruptly, snapping, "I am so sick and tired of how you're treating that boy. He's our son, not one of your fucking soldiers!"

But Henry didn't even acknowledge her presence, calmly dipping his bread into his soup and eating without a care in the world. The blatant dismissal only fueled her fury. She stormed over to him and, in one swift motion, swept his plate off the table with a loud crash.

"I'm fucking talking to you!" she yelled, her voice trembling with rage. "Don't treat me like I don't exist! Like my opinion doesn't matter! I'm your wife, for the moon's sake! Your partner — you're supposed to treat me like one!"

The script was clearly written. With a man like Henry, Violet already knew how this was going to end. And yet, it still didn't stop the startled yelp that escaped her lips when Henry struck his wife hard across the face.

"You mouthy bitch!" Henry growled in irritation, "It seems you've forgotten who you're dealing with!"

Asher's mother cried out in pain, the sound seeming to get Asher off his seat and he obviously wanted to help his mother but Henry's face whipped to him and he commanded in a terrifying tone. "Sit your ass back down or your punishment will be worse than hers."

Violet could see the conflict in little Asher's eyes. He wanted to protect his mother but he was just a little boy. Violet didn't even blame Asher when he reluctantly sat down. After all, who knew what Henry had done to him in the past to keep him this subdued.

"Good boy." Henry smiled, his eyes glinting in such a way that told Violet he would ruffle Asher's hair if he had been close enough.

Henry continued, saying, "Perhaps, it's time I teach you something new. Think of it as a reward. You're a growing boy and would need it soon enough. You need to learn that women are dogs that need to be controlled. They are to be trained to be of use. Hence when they misbehave, it's your right as the owner to straighten them."

Henry then grabbed Asher's mother by the hair so violently that she screamed out in pain. But the sound didn't faze him in the slightest. Violet's eyes widened, a wave of nausea rising in her throat as she watched him bend the woman over the table and say to little Asher, "So watch and learn, boy."

Oh God. No.

It couldn't be what she was thinking.

But it was exactly what she was thinking.

Violet wanted to scream at Henry to stop, but just like Asher was paralyzed on the spot as Henry lifted the woman's skirt with her screaming at him to stop all to no avail.

Then she turned towards Asher with a look of terror, screaming, "Don't look son!"

And just as Asher wanted to obey....

"Look here!" Henry countered her command, "Watch exactly how women are conquered! Look carefully as I put her in her place!"

Asher did obey.

He watched obediently, his eyes trained on his father who thrust into his mother even with her struggles.

He watched as the fight was eased out of his mother's body with time, her protests finally turning into sounds of pleasure as she gave into her body's demand even as tears slipped down her face.

He watched his father shudder at last, an euphoric look on his face.

He watched as he slipped out of her mother, pushing her aside as if she were trash now she fulfilled his need.

He watched his mother crumble to the floor, broken.

He watched as his father walked up to him with a smug look on his face and patted him on the face.

"Good boy," Henry said, then left him to take in the rest of his mother's shame.

Asher watched all of this, the memory forever imprinting in his head.

The only difference was, this time, Violet Purple watched with him.

Chapter 273: Nightingale

The scene shifted again, and Violet found herself standing in front of a younger Asher surrounded by a handful of children around his age. They were clearly pack kids, judging from how familiar they were around him.

"Why don't you ever play with us?" one of them asked.

"Only children play," Asher replied with that now-familiar scowl, as if the question itself was offensive.

"But you're a child too," the child pointed out.

Asher narrowed his eyes at him. "I'm an heir. One day, I'm going to rule over all of you, so I don't need to waste my time like the rest of you," he said unapologetically.

Violet watched the scene unfold with an aching heart. This was supposed to be the age of wonder, of scraped knees and make-believe, but here was Asher, already robbed of his childhood, being forced to grow up far too soon.

"That's mean of you," the second child said, frowning.

A third boy chimed in sharply, "I don't blame you. My mom says you're miserable, and I don't want to end up like you."

At once, Asher's countenance shifted. "What did you just say to me?"

The boy's confidence wavered for a second, but the presence of his friends emboldened him. He said, "Your father beats you and your mother all the time. My mom says kids raised like that will grow up to be trouble."

"Is that so?" Young Asher gave a chilling smile. "Let's see who ends up being trouble, then."

His voice carried a dark promise that sent shivers down Violet's spine. She had known adult Asher, and if his younger self was even half as dangerous, then whatever was about to happen next was going to be trouble.

He stared down the mouthy boy and commanded, "Punch your friend in the face. Don't stop until I say so."

Immediately, the compelled boy turned to his friend. The first boy's face drained of color, and before he could even react, the first fist collided.

"No, what are you doing, Daniel?!" the second friend cried, stepping forward to intervene, but Asher stepped in and spoke again with power, "Don't make a move."

The second boy froze in place, watching helplessly as his friend unleashed a flurry of brutal punches. Daniel didn't stop, not even when his friend's face began to swell and bleed. Asher just watched, his arms crossed and his face twisted in cruel satisfaction.

His father was right, people only learn their place through power.

"Asher!"

A woman came running onto the scene, and for the first time, Asher's expression faltered.

Violet recognized her instantly and it was Maria, Asher's mother.

She didn't even need to ask what happened. The second she took in the bloodied boy and the frozen child, she stormed toward her son.

"Let him go right now!" she thundered.

"But he started it!" Asher tried to argue.

"I don't care!" Maria's voice cracked like a whip. "Asher Nightingale Nightshade, release him from your compulsion right now!"

With a pout, Asher did as commanded. As soon as Daniel was freed, he looked at his bloody hands, then at his friend, now a crumpled mess on the ground. His cries pierced the air as the horror of what he had done sank in.

Maria, ever the composed Luna, moved quickly. She calmed the crying boy, gave orders to the pack members now drawn by the commotion, and ensured the injured child was cared for.

Once the crowd had cleared, only Maria and Asher remained. She spun on him and grabbed his shoulders tightly.

"What the hell is wrong with you?! How could you do that to your friend?"

"They're not my friends," Asher muttered coldly. "Besides, he started it. I only taught him a lesson. If I'm going to lead this pack, they need to respect me."

Maria's face fell. "Is that what your father told you? Because if you go down that path, you'll end up ruling a pack of ghosts."

Her hands gripped his shoulders even tighter as she pulled him closer, forcing him to look at her. "Respect is not demanded, Asher. It's earned. And is that really the kind of Alpha you want to be? One who's feared? One who hurts his own pack members? Who his people despise?"

There was a flicker of hesitation in Asher's eyes. She saw it and pressed on.

"For the sake of the woman who might end up as your mate one day, promise me, Asher. Promise me you'll never raise your hand to her."

Young Asher didn't understand the weight of what she was asking, not fully. But for his mother's sake, he answered anyway.

"I promise you."

Maria exhaled shakily, her shoulders dropping as she pulled him into a hug.

"Good boy," she whispered.

And although it went against everything his father drilled into him, Asher leaned into her warmth. He didn't want to let go. If he could bottle this feeling—this softness, this safety—he would have. But if Henry found out he was softening, the punishment would be brutal.

So this would be their little secret.

Violet watched with a bittersweet smile tugging at her lips. If only Asher had more moments like this. But then, she must have jinxed her luck, because the scene shifted again, and this time, she was back inside the house, except now there was a huge ruckus.

Maria and Henry were fighting.

Asher was in bed, but his sharp ears could still catch his mother's screams as she was being beaten. He shut his eyes, curled into himself, and tried to pretend it wasn't happening.

He wished with everything in him for a different life. A peaceful family. A father who didn't hurt his mother. A home without fear.

Violet could barely breathe. Her own childhood wasn't perfect, but this was soul-crushing.

Asher must've drifted into uneasy sleep, because the next thing he knew, his bedroom door burst open. He shot up in fear, expecting his father, and his usual punishment.

Instead, it was Maria.

"Mama?" he blinked, his voice trembling.

Maria stood in the doorway, bruises marring her face, but her eyes burned with determination.

"Come on, Asher," she whispered fiercely. "We're leaving your father."

Chapter 274: Stolen Freedom

"Where are we going?" Asher asked his mother. They were walking briskly, and he had to keep up with her pace.

The only thing Maria had on her was a small bag which she clutched tightly to her side. Asher eyed it, noting the shape of its contents—it had to be stacks of cash. He knew where his father kept his stashes, and it seemed his mother did too. She hadn't packed any clothes which could only mean this was sudden and desperate.

"I don't know," Maria answered hurriedly, if not anxiously. "But it has to be anywhere other than here."

Asher could hear her heartbeat; it was pounding fast. His own pulse was picking up speed too. He knew what this was, they were trying to escape from his father. Even without being told, he understood how deadly this could turn out if it went awry. If Henry found them, he would punish the life out of him.

"Stick close," Maria warned, pulling him in tight against her side.

Asher didn't need to be told twice. He pressed himself against her, craving her warmth and familiar scent. She smelled like vanilla and amber—vanilla, the taste of the ice cream she had once secretly bought him, and amber, a scent that simply smelled safe. Cozy. Home.

She must have worked something out with Brian at the gate, because he let her out carefully, no questions asked. The next thing Violet knew, they were inside a car, driving away into the night.

Violet found herself in the car with them, invisible but very much present, hope surging in her chest at the thought of their escape. But then, reality hit her like a truck. Adult Asher still lived with his father.

Fuck. What had gone wrong?

It wasn't long before she saw.

Maria screamed in terror as a figure stepped into the middle of the road out of nowhere. She swerved to avoid him, but lost control and slammed into a tree with a sickening crunch.

It was Henry. He had found them.

Violet could never forget the terror on Asher's face. And worse, the moment when Henry yanked the car door open and began dragging Maria out by the arm.

"Come out right now, Asher!" he hollered.

Violet watched helplessly as young Asher stepped out of the car, his bare eyes blinking against the night. His glasses had been lost in the crash.

Thankfully, aside from a small cut on his cheek, he didn't appear to be seriously hurt. But his fate was already sealed.

"You were trying to leave me?! And with my damn son?!" Henry bellowed, his rage uncontained as he struck Maria across the face.

Maria fell to the ground from the force of the hit. But even then, she lifted her head, eyes blazing, and spat back with defiance:

"He's our fucking son, not yours alone! And if anyone has a greater right over him, it's me! I birthed him! I'm his mother!"

"Is that so? Let's see then." Henry said with a chilly hollowness in his tone that made even the hairs on Violet's body rise, despite her being nothing more than a ghost in this vision.

He grabbed Maria by the hair and leaned in, hissing into her ear, "You might be his mother, but I'm the one who fucked you dirty and put him in your womb! You're my wife! That means you fucking belong to me! Him too."

"Stop it, Henry! You're hurting me!" Maria cried out, struggling in his grip. But of course, he didn't care.

Instead, Henry straightened up and turned to Asher. "You. Come here!"

Violet swallowed, her heart pounding as dread flooded her chest. What sick punishment was he planning this time?

Asher stopped just a few feet away, his smaller body trembling.

"Closer!" Henry barked.

Asher obeyed.

"Closer still."

He did.

"More."

Another step.

"Good," Henry purred with sick satisfaction.

As werewolves, they could see clearly in the dark with their glowing eyes, and Violet, though a mere observer, saw it all with painful clarity.

"Compel her," Henry said coldly.

Even as a passive spectator, Violet felt the blood drain from her body. No. That fucking bastard couldn't mean it.

"I want you to compel your mama never to run away. To stay with you," Henry ordered. "Or do you want to grow up without a mother?"

Asher shifted uncomfortably, his throat bobbing with unease.

"Asher, don't. Please," Maria begged, tears brimming in her eyes. "You can't take away my free will."

"Shut the fuck up!" Henry hissed, tightening his grip on her before turning back to his son. "Think about it, Asher. Do you want to be left alone with me? Don't you want your mama here to take care of you? And tell me, who would you obey? Your mama... or me?"

The manipulation was venomous.

Violet couldn't take it anymore. She stormed toward Henry, shouting in his face, "You fucking dickhead! You don't do this to your wife! Your son's mother! Stop this madness!"

But it was useless. Her words dissolved into the air. She couldn't change anything. She was just an observer caught in a memory that had already unfolded.

Asher stood frozen, confusion written all over his young face. Violet didn't blame him. How could she? The poor child was trapped, emotionally torn apart between fear and morality.

"I... I don't know," Asher stammered, "Compelling Mama is wrong... I—I don't think I can—"

"Fucking do it, you dimwit, or I'll walk over there and make you!" Henry's Alpha voice lashed out, thunderous and commanding, making the boy flinch in terror.

Left with no choice, Asher stepped forward. Henry held Maria still, one hand locking her jaw, the other gripping her waist in brutal restraint.

"Asher, please..." Maria whispered through her tears.

But Asher, overcome by fear and desperation, shut down his emotions. He clenched his fists, and with all the anger, confusion, and broken trust inside him, he compelled her.

"You will always stay by my side as my mama. You will never leave me."

Maria closed her eyes, her heartbreak bleeding from her face as the compulsion took hold, her body stiffening in resignation.

Violet let out an anguished roar, pain ripping from deep within her chest.

Fuck this memory.

Chapter 275: The Broken Heir

Henry had Brian killed. Public execution style.

He brought the man out in front of the entire pack, dragging him like a sacrifice meant to appease the gods of his own paranoia. Then, with his usual flair for theatrics and that commanding voice that made people forget how twisted he was, Henry made his speech.

"If I hadn't been fast enough, I would have lost both my son and wife," he said, tone righteous, like he was the victim here. "I still don't know Brian's true intentions, but I suspect he planned to hand them over to my enemies.

"I know not many of you like how I rule. I don't care. I don't need your approval. My intention has always been to make the West House great again. And to do that, some thorns need to be pulled from the garden."

Then he ended with the words that made Violet's stomach churn.

"I am your Alpha. I know what's best for my people. And I will make the West House thrive."

Of course, some fools clapped. Some even cheered. But not everyone. Others stood frozen, confused, even shocked, while Brian's family sobbed quietly in the corner. It had to be set up, the sympathetic ones thought. Brian was kind. Loyal. A good man. And he would never have done something like that.

And yet he confessed his crimes right before Henry decapitated his head in front of everyone. And just like that, he was gone.

Some suspected foul play, but there was no proof, just their whispers, and a crowd too scared to voice them.

But the truth was this :

The same way Henry had Asher compel his mother, he also had him compel Brian too. He set him up for death.

It had never been about justice for Henry.

Only control.

The scene shifted again, and this time, Violet's eyes widened with horror as she spotted Asher with his arms suspended above his head, chained to the ceiling. He was completely bare, save for the black shorts he wore.

And right there, standing before Asher was his own father, Henry Nightshade, with a wicked-looking whip in hand, and a gleam of twisted anticipation lighting up his eyes.

The sight alone made Violet's skin crawl. No, no, he wasn't actually going to hurt him.

But of course, he was.

"Have I not taught you that women are merely a means to an end? And yet..." He shot Asher a look full of disdain, "you tried to run away with your mother?"

The first crack of the whip lashed across Asher's back, and though his body jerked slightly, he didn't utter a word. There was no scream. No cry. Just a quiet endurance that made Violet's chest feel like it was being crushed under a mountain of stone.

Violet couldn't look away from the punishment, even though her brains urged her to. She needed this moment burned into her memory as fuel for the fire of hatred she had for this monster that was Asher's father.

She watched the red mark bloom across Asher's skin, followed by the second and third lash. This time, they broke the skin. Blood ran in thin rivers, yet only then did Henry pause to give the boy some reprieve.

Henry moved in closer, grabbed Asher by the chin, and forced him to meet his eyes. Those slitted eyes were glassy from pain, yet still held on.

"You are my heir, Asher Nightshade," Henry said, voice like poison laced with honey. "This pack, this legacy, it'll all be yours one day..." Then his voice suddenly dropped, eyes narrowing. "And yet you were willing to throw that all away? For what?! A little moment of pleasure?!"

He backhanded Asher, splitting his lip. The boy staggered but didn't fall. Didn't even whimper. Violet couldn't tell whether Henry was more impressed or enraged.

"My sweet little soldier," he cooed coldly. "Pain is just a note away from pleasure. And you must learn to take it well."

Then, Henry lost himself, whipping the boy over and over again until Asher's body sagged, blood soaking his shorts and trailing down his legs. Until Henry's arms were tired, and his breathing came in short, ragged bursts.

Only then did he toss the whip aside and unshackle his son.

As soon as Asher was free, he stumbled slightly, but caught himself. And then, little Asher looked up and stared Henry dead in the eyes. That quiet defiance sent a shiver down Violet's spine.

But Henry was not scared. Instead, he leaned forward, pressing his forehead to his son's with eerie affection. "Always remember, you're my heir. And this is for your good."

Then he stepped back.

"Go to your mother," he ordered. "I'm sure she'd like to clean you up."

Asher nodded without a word and left.

The scene changed swiftly again.

Violet now stood in front of a half-opened door, cold dread seeping in before she even touched it. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

She stepped inside.

Inside, Asher stood motionless at the foot of the bed. So still he could be mistaken for a statue.

Violet stepped forward, her heart pounding, and gasped before she even reached the bed.

Maria.

Asher's mother lay on the bed, her eyes open, staring at nothing. Her wrists were slit. The blade was beside her, the sheets stained with blood that had already dried.

Beside her pillow was a note. Violet staggered toward it, her breath caught in her chest. She picked up the note with trembling hands, expecting answers, but it only read :

"Sing loud now, my little Nightingale."

The words punched a hole through her soul, her vision blurring with tears.

Her gaze flicked back to Asher. He hadn't moved and worse, was still bloodied from his father's beating yet he stood there, staring at his mother's corpse as if unable to process it.

"Oh, Asher..." Violet whispered, stepping toward him. She reached out instinctively to pull him into a hug, and froze.

This time, she didn't pass through him. Her arms wrapped around something solid. Real.

Violet pulled back slowly, staring at him. And for the first time, Asher was staring back at her.

What the...?

Before she could ask a thing, Asher's face twisted into rage, venom dripping from his voice.

"How the fuck did you get into my head?!"

Violet opened her mouth, but before she could explain—hell, before she could even understand what was happening—a powerful force slammed into her.

The next thing Violet knew, she was being yanked out of the memory and straight into reality.

Except her nightmare had only just begun.

Because a certain West House Alpha was hovering over her, his hand wrapped tightly around her throat and choking the life out of her.

Chapter 276: The Goddess' Game

The first thought that came to Violet's mind was that Asher wanted to kill her. That he had finally lost it and was ready to silence her for good.

But then she caught his glowing eyes in the dark and realized his pupils were unfocused. He wasn't seeing her at all.

Oh fuck. It hit her like a slap. He was still caught up in the nightmare. Asher was going to kill her, and he wouldn't even know it.

So she began to struggle, panic clawing up her spine. And that was when it hit Violet just how wide the gap between their strength really was.

Asher was like a boulder crushing her windpipe, and no matter how she pushed, nothing budged. It dawned on her that Asher had let her win that day in combat training, because right now, she couldn't even move him an inch.

"Asher, wake up! It's me!" Violet cried desperately, her fingers clawing at the arm crushing her windpipe. If anything, his grip only tightened, her vision beginning to blur at the edges.

Goddess help her, she was actually going to die.

Violet thrashed with all she had left, kicking beneath Asher in a fit of desperation. Then, summoning her last ounce of strength, she slapped him hard across the face.

"Wake up, you asshole! Wake up right now!" she screamed.

And it worked.

She caught the flash of panic in his eyes right before the tension drained from his body. Asher jerked back, horror dawning on his face as he scrambled off her, stumbling to the side table and flipping on the lamp.

The glow wasn't enough to light the whole room, but it was enough for her to see him clearly. Not that Violet could focus, not when she was busy coughing, and dragging in air into her raw, burning lungs. That was a close brush with death. Too damn close.

"Asher," she rasped, reaching for him.

But he flinched like she'd burned him. Asher backed away, wide-eyed and his chest heaving. Violet watched him slowly unravel, his hand raking through his hair over and over again. He was shirtless, dressed in nothing but black boxers, and he looked completely, utterly lost.

"How did you get in here?" he demanded, voice rough. "How did you get into my head?!"

"I don't know," Violet answered honestly, still trying to calm her breath. "I was asleep in my room when suddenly I started moving. At first I thought I was sleepwalking, but I couldn't stop it. I tried, but then I ended up here. You were having a nightmare, and I just wanted to comfort you... that's when it happened."

There was thick silence until Asher suddenly laughed. But it wasn't a kind laugh, rather it was hollow and bitter.

"These fucking powers," he said, his voice dripping with self-loathing.

Violet bit her lip. So it was true. He had called out to her. Yes, it was not intentionally, but his mental powers ensnared her all the same.

In the past, she would have been angry at the manipulation. But how could she after what she'd seen? She couldn't blame him. Not after the hell that monster of a father had put him through.

Asher had already suffered too much.

"Asher, I—"

"No. Don't." He cut her off, immediately, having sensed what she was about to say. He didn't need her pity.

"You should leave. Right now."

"What?!" Violet blinked in disbelief. Then her face hardened. "No. I won't."

She wasn't going to abandon him. Asher needed her. Violet knew it in her bones. He had summoned her right into his broken memories. That was a sign. He may not say it, but his soul had screamed for her.

"I'm not going anywhere," she told him fiercely. "You called me because you needed me. So I'm staying."

Asher blinked, as though her words genuinely shocked him. But then his expression hardened again, reverting to that cold, guarded mask.

"Fine," he said flatly. "Knock yourself out."

Before she could respond, he turned on his heel and stormed away.

Wait—what?

Violet tried to go after him, but he was already in the bathroom, the door slamming shut before she could reach it.

"Asher?" she called, banging on the door. "Asher, come on! You can't hide in there forever!"

Silence.

"You can't carry this pain alone! You brought me here! Isn't that proof enough you want someone to share it with? It's not a weakness to be vulnerable, Asher. It's human." Violet said, her voice gentler now.

And yet, there was still nothing.

"Fine," she muttered. "Suit yourself. Hide behind your damn ice wall. But know this, Asher—none of what happened was your fault. I don't blame you. And no one who matters ever will."

With those words, Violet stepped away from the door. She couldn't push him any further. As much as she wanted to help, the decision to let her in had to come from him.

Inside the bathroom, Asher leaned back against the door, breathing hard. Although he heard her footsteps retreat, the damage was already done.

Fuck. She knew. She knew everything.

Violet had seen it all. His past, his scars, his demons. The darkness he buried so deep inside it was now part of him. And now it was laid bare and she had watched it all like a damn movie.

Not even his cardinal brothers had gotten this close. All they heard was rumors and saw mere fragments when in company of his wonderful father.

So how could his powers betray him like that? It made his skin crawl.

Asher stumbled to the sink, turned on the tap, and splashed his face with water over and over again. He gripped the sides of the porcelain, chest heaving, and then he stared at his reflection in the mirror.

And what he saw scared him.

Asher Nightingale Nightshade looked afraid.

His right hand trembled. He clutched it to his chest to stop it, holding it with his other hand. But the trembling wouldn't stop.

And that's when it hit him.

Mary's prophecy.

"For tonight, your tonight will gleam."

Was this the truth she talked about?

Fuck his life.

That prophecy wasn't for him. It couldn't be. Even when Mary had whispered, "Blood of my blood" —a phrase only he would recognize. He had told himself it was coincidence and brushed it off.

But now, Asher was not so sure anymore.

His jaw clenched, his teeth grinding together as it became clear to him.

The goddess was playing a cruel game with him. And he didn't know the rules.

Chapter 277: Blurry Lines

If there was one trait Violet thrived on, it was being stubborn. And for the first time, she was glad for that. Violet Purple never left Asher's room. No, she sat her ass right there. Asher couldn't hide his own ass forever. Moreover, she had come here under the influence of his power.

Unfortunately, she wasn't brave enough to return to the shack at this ungodly hour. It was three in the morning—she'd checked Asher's phone, seeing as she came here with nothing—and the way back home was terrifying. Violet wasn't a chicken, but there are just some stupid risks you don't take.

Not all the wolves liked her, and she could still remember the phantom weight of those unseen eyes watching her on her way here. If she left now, any of them could take this opportunity to harm her, and no one would come to her aid. If Asher wanted her gone, then he should be the one to walk her back.

And if he wouldn't? Well, then she'd sit her ass right here until morning when the path back would be safer. Damn the consequences of being seen.

Unfortunately, the night had already been rough so far, and sitting alone on that bed just staring up at the ceiling, waiting for Asher to come out, it wasn't surprising that sleep eventually claimed her.

Violet jerked awake the moment she felt a hand wrap around her throat. The trauma from earlier was still fresh, and her eyes flew open in alarm at the contact. So imagine her shock when she saw Asher hovering over her again.

Violet would've panicked immediately, if not for the fact that his grip wasn't as suffocating as before, and his eyes were fully alert, locked on hers with unshaking clarity. But there was something unsettling

in the way Asher looked at her—like he wanted to kill her. Both in the literal and not-so-literal sense, if that made any twisted kind of sense.

It was the kind of look that said he was torn between silencing her forever to protect his secret and being unable to lay a single harmful finger on her. That inner battle played out in his hands, fingers tightening around her neck one moment, then loosening the next.

So Violet decided to make it easier for him. "You're not going to hurt me," she said, calm and certain.

Violet meant it. No, she believed it with a conviction so unwavering it was almost maddening.

But Asher wasn't the type to let things go unquestioned.

As if to challenge her resolve, to remind her just who the hell he was, his hand tightened. That same suffocating pressure returned, cutting off her air inch by inch.

Still, Violet didn't panic. She didn't claw at him. She didn't even flinch. She just looked up at him, that unyielding trust swimming in her eyes. It rattled him. Maybe she was as crazy as he was broken.

Asher's brows pinched together with confusion, war, and disbelief. He didn't understand how she could put that kind of faith in a monster like him. So, he tried to break it. He squeezed harder, pushed until her breath fled her throat—until she was just moments away from losing consciousness.

But still, Violet didn't fight.

She surrendered to him, her hands limp at her sides, her gaze locked with his as if silently daring him to finish what he started. To prove her wrong.

And then he broke.

Asher let go with a strangled growl, and Violet gasped, lungs burning as she dragged in air like it might save her soul. But he wasn't done. Asher grabbed her again, this time pulling her onto his lap with a force that bordered on desperation, his voice exploding out of him.

"Are you fucking out of your mind?!" Asher roared, eyes wild, and hand tight around her hip. "Don't you know what I'm capable of?! You're supposed to stop me, not encourage me!"

He looked unhinged, terrified even. Asher was furious, the veins in his neck taut, and those haunting, slitted grey eyes blazing with something between fire and devastation.

But Violet simply laughed, breathless, raspy, alive, and unafraid.

"I'm well aware of your tendencies," she said, meeting his gaze, "but if there's anything I can always trust, it's that you, Asher Nightingale Nightshade, could never afford to lose me."

She had said his middle name. The one no one should've known. The one even he forgot sometimes belonged to him.

Asher stared at her, stunned, and completely speechless for the first time.

Something shifted between them. The air thickened, molten, and charged. That invisible line they'd always toed? It was burned away completely.

"Nightingale," Violet breathed, like she was tasting the word for the first time. Her fingers brushed against his face, slow and reverent, as if memorizing him through touch. "It's a beautiful name, Asher."

Then her golden eyes met his slitted ones. She didn't need to say it, but Violet did anyway, because that was who she was—wild and reckless and unapologetically brave.

"Just like every part of you."

Then she leaned in and kissed him.

Asher responded immediately, because that was who he was. Shameless. Greedy. Always aching for his purple queen.

He cradled the back of her head with one hand, the other sliding down to palm her ass, possessive and hungry. Her nightgown had bunched around her hips, exposing warm, smooth skin that begged to be touched. And he didn't hold back.

Violet moaned, heat pulsing low in her belly, gathering like a storm at her core.

Asher kissed her like he had nothing to lose, his mouth demanding, his tongue claiming her with reckless abandon. Every movement branded her, like he was inscribing her soul with his name. And she met him flame for flame, kissing him back with equal hunger, losing herself in the fire he ignited.

He didn't just set her aflame, he burned through every barrier she'd built, melted every no into a yes, every hesitation into need.

And in that moment, Violet knew—knew with every trembling breath—that she needed Asher just as desperately as she needed air.

Chapter 278: Made Love....

And yes, first of all, Violet needed air. So she broke away from the long, dirty kiss that had her so wet her panties had practically melted off.

Breathless, she took one good look at Asher. The soft glow of the lamp highlighted his features, making him look more handsome, more mysterious, like one of those ancient gods who descended to earth just to ruin women in myth and legend.

Asher was staring back at her with awe and wonder. But that wasn't all there was. There was lust — thick, heavy, and darkening his eyes with an intensity that made her already pounding heart nearly combust. She could feel him too. Hard as stone beneath her, and throbbing for action.

And action it would get tonight.

Violet leaned in again, this time kissing along his neck. Once. Twice. She then trailed lower, down to his chest, the part of his body that carried the aftermath of his pain. His scars.

Henry had been cunning by choosing to hurt Asher in places that weren't easily seen unless his shirt came off. His back was worse, crisscrossed with lash marks and wounds no child should ever bear. But Violet couldn't reach his back in her current position, so she gave tender, reverent attention to his front.

Werewolves weren't supposed to scar, not with their fast metabolism which always assured healing was complete. Which meant only one thing could leave behind wounds that deep.

Silver.

Violet didn't need confirmation, she just knew it. Henry must have escalated his cruelty after Maria's death. When Asher was younger, he obeyed blindly. But teenage age came with rebellion and the sick, insecure and controlling Henry must have found new, crueler ways to bend him back into submission.

The thought of that monster hurting him made Violet's heart splinter. So she did the only thing she could. She kissed each scar one by one with trembling lips and devotion. She scoured his body with the kind of attention she wished someone had given him all those years ago. And even the smallest mark didn't escape her touch.

Asher growled his satisfaction, one that made her heart leap in response, thrilled and undone.

Violet leaned back and, in one fluid motion, grabbed the hem of her nightgown and pulled it over her head, her breasts bouncing from the effort. Asher let out a low, animalistic growl, his grip around her waist tightening to a bruising hold.

Violet smirked, already reaching for the band of his pants only for Asher to hiss, "What are you doing?!" He caught her hands mid-motion, stopping her instantly.

Violet furrowed her brows, stunned. Had she misread the moment? But that didn't seem to be the case. In fact, the raw hunger in Asher's eyes made her breath hitch. He looked like he wanted to devour her.

completely, and without mercy. She could feel the tension in him, coiled tight like he was holding himself back by sheer will.

Then it hit her. Oh, this was a game. One the puppet master must enjoy immensely. A sly smile tugged at Violet's lips. Fine. She'd play along.

"What do you think?" she purred, her voice sultry, rolling her hips slowly over the hard outline of him.

"Violet." Asher warned, her name coming out low, rough, like it cost him something to say it. "Stop."

Violet's smile faltered.

She frowned, voice tinged with vulnerability. "I don't understand. Don't you want this? Or..." her voice dropped, quieter now, "don't you want me?"

She could feel the desperation creeping into her chest, the fear that maybe, just maybe, she was alone in this. But that didn't make sense. She could feel how much he ached for her. So why was he pulling away?

"Of course I want you, my purple queen with every fiber of my being. Every breath I take," Asher said with ferocity, grinding into her to make his point. Violet moaned. Both of them were down to their underwear, the flimsy barriers practically nonexistent between them. They could feel each other. Every throbbing inch.

"Then why?" Violet whispered, her golden eyes searching his.

Asher reached out and cupped her face with a tenderness that contrasted the fire in his eyes. "I told you before. When I take you, it'll be because you offered yourself. Because you begged for me." His words were like silky seduction wrapping down her spine slowly.

"I'm begging now," Violet protested, voice cracking with need. She ached for him like he was life itself.

"No." Asher shook his head stubbornly.

"Asher!" Violet was fed up with the teasing. She made a move to touch him only that Asher was faster and caught her wrist in a firm grip.

"You're not free from my manipulation," he said tightly. "I brought you here, Violet. Who's to say you're not acting under the influence of my power?"

He pulled her closer, his voice dropping into a dangerous rasp. "Let it never be said that I was cowardly enough to make you mine through my powers."

Then he leaned in, mouth brushing a hot trail toward her ear. And with a whisper so dark and filthy it made her toes curl, he said, "When it's time to have you, Violet Purple, you won't be begging for more—you'll be begging me to stop. Because I'll fuck you so hard you won't know your right from your left, won't know where your pleasure ends and mine begins. You won't leave my bed, at least not for a week. And if there's anything you should fear, love, it's me putting a babe in you. Because there's not an inch of you I won't claim."

Violet whimpered at the intensity of that dark promise. Those words should have scared her, but instead, they only aroused her, her nipples aching, her core pulsing with need. Asher didn't just speak; he made love with his words.

"What about now?" she breathed with desperation at the edges of her voice.

Asher caught the meaning instantly. His eyes darkened with delight, and his lips curved into that dangerously wicked smile he was known for. "Then let's leave tomorrow's matters for another time," his voice dipped lower, "and take care of tonight."

Before she knew it, Asher gripped her waist and moved her slowly—almost tortuously—over him. Her breath hitched, eyes widening at the deliberate gesture.

Asher smirked, saying in a rough voice, "You might want to hold on, love. This ride's going to be anything but gentle."

Violet didn't need to be told twice. She wrapped her arms around him, her breath catching in quick, shallow gasps as Asher picked up the pace, guiding her body with a rhythm that stole her sanity.

She was so wet, the friction sparked through her nerves, every movement delicious and sinfully wanton. Violet moaned aloud. It felt so good.

Then Asher's hand found her breast, gripping, fondling, rolling her nipple between his fingers while his hips bucked harder, deeper, with a relentless rhythm that turned her bones to ash.

"God, I think I'm going to come!" Violet cried out, stars bursting at the edges of her vision.

"Then come for me, my little purple queen," Asher commanded, "Break for your king."

Maybe it was his filthy words. Maybe it was the maddening rhythm of their friction, or the way his fingers tormented her nipples like he was sculpting pleasure into her skin, but the orgasm hit her like a crashing wave.

Violet shattered, grabbing Asher's face and kissing him fiercely, letting him devour the sound of her pleasure like it was his final meal.

Chapter 279: Wake A Girl

~ Asher ~

Morning had come, but Asher made no effort to stand or sneak Violet back to the Rogue House. It was too late for that anyway. So he might as well shamelessly enjoy whatever precious sliver of time they had left together.

He should have told Violet about her mother already, but the timing wasn't right. He knew she'd be furious—he had looked into her background without permission—and he didn't want to ruin this. This moment. It was too perfect. Just him and his purple queen.

She didn't loathe him. Didn't think him a monster for what he'd done. She had been willing to offer him her virginity last night, and that alone made his chest swell with a pride so fierce, it nearly bordered on arrogance. He would rub it in their faces. Those cardinal brothers of his.

Perhaps when he finally took her, he'd send them the blood-stained sheets. A memento. Proof that he had claimed her first. Seen her first. Chosen her first.

It was only fair.

Hmmm. It didn't sound like such a bad idea, actually. The look on their faces would be worth it. He would think about it.

Violet was lying on one side of his body, deep asleep, her breast squashed against his chest. Asher stared at her, noticing small details he wouldn't have otherwise unless she was this close—like the beautiful mole on her back near the dip of her waist.

No matter how many times he pinched himself, the scene still felt like a dream to him. So Asher carefully reached for the nightstand and grabbed his phone. He stretched out and took a picture of them together.

The picture came out beautifully. Violet looked cute and innocent, asleep with her lips slightly parted, a little drool at the corner, and those purple strands of hair sprawled across her shoulder, some falling onto his chest.

Without hesitation, Asher set the picture as his wallpaper. He wasn't scared that anyone would see it. Not that anyone in their right mind went through his phone, unless they had a death wish. Well, aside from Roman. The one had a special talent for challenging him, and getting under his skin. Not to mention, Asher fully intended to show it off.

He would imprint this moment in his mind forever. Each time he lay in bed unable to sleep, he would simply look at the picture and drift into dreams where it was just him and his purple queen. And every time he was trapped in one of those terrors, he would imagine his fearless little tigress swooping in and saving his ass.

A woman saving his ass? Henry would definitely have an aneurysm if he could hear his thoughts right now.

The mere idea of his father soured his mood, and Asher tightened his grasp around Violet.

Henry would never like Violet. She was the type of woman he loathed—loud, outspoken, brash, and strong. He liked his women submissive, controllable. Violet was anything but those.

That alone was enough reason for Henry to want her away from him—his perfect heir. But Asher was determined. He would protect his queen. He might have let Henry win in the past, but not anymore. Not when he finally had something to lose.

It was seven on the dot, and Violet needed to wake. Not because he wanted her gone—God, no. He could spend forever with her—but because she needed to eat, and it was only a matter of time before the others came looking for him.

Parents week would officially start tomorrow, which meant his day was packed. Not just him. All of the cardinal alphas. The success of the event were on them and they had a lot of things to plan.

So he murmured softly into her ear, "Wake up, little purple."

But nothing. Violet didn't move an inch. She was passed out like a dead log.

So he tried again, this time shaking her gently. "It's time to wake up, Violet. The day has broken."

The movement, however, was more of a nuisance to Violet, who only pushed Asher away with one hand and turned over, slipping right back into sleep.

Asher Nightshade was left dumbfounded, only for a small, disbelieving smile to tug at his lips. It seemed someone loved her sleep, just like a certain cardinal alpha. Alaric Storm hardly slept, but once he did, waking him up was damn near impossible.

But Asher wasn't deterred. If anything, the challenge thrilled him. Violet was now sleeping on her back, which meant her chest was on full display, and he could shamelessly ogle her breasts in all their tantalizing glory.

Asher reached for her nipple, rolling it between his fingers until it peaked into a hard, sensitive point, eliciting the smallest whimper from her lips. But that was all. Her eyes were still closed.

Well, not for long.

With unholy intentions, Asher leaned over and took not just her nipple, but her entire areola into his mouth, sucking fervently while his hand massaged her other breast.

Violet's eyes flew open at once, a moan already escaping her mouth. Her hand tangled into Asher's thick, silky hair, having no idea whether to push him away or pull him closer.

"What a way to wake a girl," she gasped.

Asher laughed, the vibration sending sparks straight through her nipple and shooting heat to her core. Violet moaned again, eyes fluttering shut as she melted into the sensation.

Asher relentlessly suckled, licked, bit, fondled, and massaged each breast until Violet was burning with need, her panties thoroughly soaked. Only then did he finally give her reprieve.

The West House Alpha leaned up and kissed her before she could stop him—Violet briefly panicked, realizing she hadn't brushed. But Asher didn't care. He caressed and stroked her tongue with his own like she was his first taste of heaven.

"Good morning, love," Asher murmured against her lips with a smile.

"Good morning," Violet smiled back sleepily.

Except... that smile froze.

Wait.

It was morning?

It was FUCKING morning?!

Asher must've seen the panic on her face because he chuckled smugly. "Tried to wake you. Not my fault."

"ASHER!!!!!"

Chapter 280: A Rogue's Punishment

Where was her fucking head?!

It always seemed to vanish whenever it came to these cardinal alphas. Violet internally berated herself. She hadn't intended to sleep here until morning. The plan had been simple: catch a little shut-eye, then have Asher sneak her back to her place by five, quietly and without any witnesses. Hopefully.

Unfortunately, the Asher she had pinned her hopes on had failed her. Utterly. Instead of waking her, he had indulged her.

Now, Violet was pacing up and down the West Alpha's room, mentally spiraling over what to do next. Sure, Asher had said he'd handle it, but she was beginning to worry about "how" he planned to handle it. After all, his methods were rarely what one would call conventional.

Not to mention, the bastard didn't even seem half as concerned as she was. He was in the bathroom, casually taking a bath with the door wide open, no less. It was an invitation to join him if she dared. That absolute rascal.

So now Violet was alone with her thoughts, stewing in her paranoia, until she stopped herself.

Why the hell was she even scared?

She was Violet Purple. She'd slept at the West House. So what? What could they possibly do to her that would hurt more than what they'd already tried?

With that, Violet forced herself to calm down and wait. She could handle the consequences. And Alaric. Fuck her life!

Almost immediately, Asher strolled out.

"What's your—" Violet's words cut off the moment her eyes landed on him.

Holy creator of the world.

Her jaw nearly hit the damn floor.

Violet never thought a man could look that sexy fresh out of the shower, until now.

Asher stood there with nothing but a towel slung low around his hips, his body still dripping from the shower. Moisture clung to his tousled dark hair, then trickled down the sharp angles of his face, neck, and along the planes of his chest. It slid over the ridges of his abs, and her eyes followed the tantalizing trail of the deep V etched into his hips—down, down, down—until it disappeared beneath that dangerously small scrap of cloth.

Violet swallowed hard, her brain wandering somewhere it absolutely shouldn't have.

It wasn't like she hadn't seen him naked before. Not just during the Games, Asher often shifted during training, like most wolves, leaving nothing to the imagination. Nudity was normal to them.

But being alone in his room, with him looking at her like he knew exactly where her thoughts had gone, left her flushed, heat crawling up her neck.

"Ogle me all you want, little queen," Asher said shamelessly, gesturing to his body. Then he added with a teasing tone, "Should I take off the towel as well?"

Violet scowled, but he only laughed aloud, the twinkle in his eyes revealing how much fun he was having. Though she was thoroughly annoyed, Violet couldn't help but feel a bit of relief. Asher had so many dark memories she wouldn't mind adding even one joyful moment to his life.

Without warning, Asher leaned in and smooched her once. Again. And again. And again, until Violet realized he was doing it just to tease her.

With a chuckle, she pushed him away. "Go away! Get dressed!"

Asher laughed smugly. "Someone's shy."

Violet arched a brow at that. And to prove a point—without thinking it through—she lifted a hand and smacked him across the ass.

"You!" Asher gasped dramatically, his eyes going wide. Then he smirked darkly. "I'm going to get back at you for that."

Violet rolled her eyes, though a smile tugged at her lips as Asher disappeared into his walk-in closet to get dressed. And Yes, he had a walk-in closet.

These damn cardinal alphas were living the posh life, with their large, lavish rooms, so unlike the shared dorms the rest of them had to live in. A room she and her roommates once had until they were expelled to the shack to live like some animal.

Ever since last night, something had shifted between them. A shift that both scared and excited Violet. Would things get better from here on out, or would it all spiral into tragedy?

Would being this vulnerable with him come back to bite her, especially considering she was still going ahead with her plan to expose them to the world?

Asher might have gone through hell, but all four of the cardinal alphas had done things that they needed to be held accountable for. This mission was no longer just about her. It was about the welfare of every human in this school.

Hopefully, they would understand her intention at the end. Maybe even forgive her and move on. Kind of. Violet sighed. Why was everything getting so complicated?

Thankfully, Asher didn't waste time. He returned, impeccably dressed in his full uniform, every button fastened, and his tie perfectly knotted.

Out of all four cardinal alphas, Asher was the only one who actually respected the school's dress code. Alaric came in second on good days while Roman was by far the worst offender. No, he was a lost cause.

Violet couldn't recall a single time he'd worn a tie, and he always had his shirt unbuttoned just enough to show off that annoyingly perfect chest of his, letting the girls ogle him shamelessly. And yes, he relished the attention.

Asher, on the other hand, was a perfectionist. No doubt a trait hammered into him by his father. He had to be in control. Unruffled. Perfect. So rigid it was like the concept of fun had never entered his world. At least the "right" fun.

Violet's lips twitched into a smile. One of these days—if things were good between them by then—she'd show him how to loosen up and actually enjoy himself.

"Let's go," Asher said as he reached for her arm, his grip gentle yet guiding as he moved to steer her toward the door.

But Violet pulled back.

"What's your plan?" she asked with concern.

Asher paused and studied her face, noticing the worry in her eyes.

He said to her, "Don't worry, no one's going to get hurt. Although..." he added, "I might have to be a little rough with you. Think you can handle that?"

"Asher—"

"Oh, right," he said over his shoulder before disappearing into the other room.

Violet blinked, confused, until he returned a few seconds later with an oversized shirt in hand. He didn't even wait for her to argue and slipped the shirt over her head, letting it fall over the nightgown she still wore. It swallowed her frame, covering the skimpy fabric that clung too closely to her body.

"Better," he said, clearly satisfied. "Now trust me. Let's go."

Violet sighed, but she followed him anyway, choosing for once to trust him. As soon as they stepped out into the hallway, she swallowed.

A group of werewolves were already gathered in the corridor, laughing, barking out jokes, a general camaraderie hanging in the air. But that was, until their eyes landed on her.

Silence fell like a guillotine.

Right. This was the male floor. Although there were a few girls hanging around with them, they didn't look like her. Not in a nightgown hidden beneath Asher's oversized shirt. Neither were they being led out by the Alpha like a caught criminal.

As if a switch had flipped, Asher transformed into someone else entirely.

His expression hardened, and his grip on her arm tightened, not enough to hurt, but enough to sell the scene.

"Move along, rogue," he snarled with disdain, dragging her forward.

If he hadn't warned her beforehand, she might've believed him. He was so convincing with his act. Hell, she might've punched him for the manhandling.

Yet despite the harshness of his tone, Asher was still careful with her. Subtly so. He steadied her whenever they reached a step, ensuring she didn't stumble on the way down. But none of that mattered to the onlookers, because all they saw was the Rogue Queen being dragged by the West Alpha like a mutt who'd broken the leash.

Floor by floor, their audience grew. By the time they reached the main floor, an entire sea of curious West House students had formed in the foyer.

Asher came to a halt at the center of the room. With every eye trained on him, he raised his voice and said, "This rogue broke the rule last night by sneaking into the West House."

Then with a cruel smirk, he added, "But don't worry. I captured her and punished her accordingly."

The gasp that tore from Violet's mouth was real when Asher smacked her ass unapologetically, and loud enough to echo.

She blinked, mortified while around them, mouths dropped open. The slap had stunned them. But what truly fried their circuits was the ambiguity in Asher's words. Punished her? What kind of punishment? Did he mean...?

Yet no one dared ask. Not with the West Alpha standing tall, a glint in his eye daring them to voice what they were thinking.

"Jeremiah," Asher called.

The Beta appeared almost immediately, as if waiting for the cue.

"Escort the Rogue Queen back to her house," Asher ordered. "And hopefully, she's learned her lesson. Unless, of course, she has a flair for punishment."

The double entendre hit the crowd like a bomb. Violet swore someone audibly choked. Others were just unsure on how to process the surreal moment.

Jeremiah, ever the professional, didn't flinch. "As you wish, Alpha Asher."

Then he took Violet's hand and led her away from the scene, leaving behind a house full of wide eyes, dropped jaws, and minds racing with dirty conclusions.

Just as Asher intended.