

Defy 441

Chapter 441: Natalie's Truth

By age fourteen, Natalie had fallen in love with Kate. Or so she believed in her twisted head. She was a loyal puppy who would do anything she wanted as long as she got rewarded in the end. She became highly protective of Kate, craved Kate's attention like a drug, and couldn't do without her.

By age fifteen, Natalie had begun to resent her father. David had no right to Kate—she, Natalie, was the one who she loved. So the quarrels with her father started.

David could not understand where all the attitude was coming from. Of course he couldn't. Not when Natalie kept a tight lip on what the problem was. So one night, Natalie's jealousy got to a fever point. She took a knife and attempted to stab David while he was asleep with Kate.

Natalie wasn't scared of Kate finding out what she did. She did it for her. Because she loved her.

Unfortunately, the wound was shallow, and David had been quick to wake and overpower her, thus saving his life. The incident was kept under wraps, but the damage had been done.

David sent her to Lunaris Academy. Yes, the school was her punishment and prison. Her father could only feel safe knowing she would be back only on holidays.

Being away from Kate was hell, and like a junkie, she suffered withdrawals. It got so bad that she escaped from school one day just to see Kate, but the woman had sent security who bundled her back to school and ensured she couldn't escape again.

Natalie felt betrayed. She could have done anything for Kate. And yet, she treated her like that.

Settling down in Lunaris Academy, she got to hear about the Counselor that made one's problems go away. Natalie was in a bad place, and she just wanted everything to go away, even if it was for a second.

So Natalie booked a "session" with him. Mid-passion, unknown to her, Micah stole her memories. However, it was so twisted that Micah blurted, "You fuck your stepmother?"

Just like that, the truth was out.

He knew what she did.

And she knew what he could do.

Unknown to most people, Micah was a real counselor, even though he had a "side" job. He was the one who helped her realize the wrong path she was on.

Not once did he ever judge her. Perhaps an incubus with a thirst for sex and a human in a forbidden relationship with her stepmother had too many similarities, and made the best friendship after all.

For the first two years at Lunaris, her relationship with Kate was "on" and "off" during the holidays. Kate resented her for trying to kill her husband—yet she still couldn't keep her hands off her. Micah tried to help, but the urge was stronger. No matter how hard Natalie fought it, she kept giving in.

So Micah gave her a strategy: stay away from temptation, aka home. Aka Kate.

It was hard. Natalie had been entangled with Kate for a long time. Letting go of that kind of bond wasn't easy. But Micah stayed by her side. And she was winning, until now.

Kate's voice turned into a purr, soft and coaxing. "I know the past years have been tough on us, and you resent me for agreeing with your father and sending you away to Lunaris Academy. But I'm sorry now. I just miss you so much."

While Kate spoke, her hand was already sliding along Natalie's thigh. Natalie stiffened, goosebumps breaking out across her skin.

"Stop this!" She roared, but it was only in her head. Why couldn't she just say it out loud? What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she just stop her?

"And I know you missed me too, beneath all that tough exterior," Kate whispered, her palm now sneaking underneath. She tugged Natalie's panties aside and ran a finger through her slit.

Natalie's breath hitched in her throat.

It wasn't just repulsion that hit her. It was the memories. All of them. Everything they'd done, everything she'd allowed. Everything Kate had made her think was love. She was caught in the sensation again.

The passion was rising until a sharp and jarring knock ripped through the moment.

Natalie jerked back to herself.

She shoved Kate away, scrambled for the door and opened it to Jameson's expectant face.

"What's keeping you—"

But Natalie brushed past her without a word.

She didn't return to lunch. Natalie didn't even look back. She took off so fast that no one even realized she was gone until they'd waited long enough.

Natalie couldn't breathe. She needed to get away. Away from all of them. She flagged a taxi and went in without even verifying the face of the driver. It sped through the city, but the suffocation didn't ease. She felt sick to the stomach.

When it stopped outside Lunaris Academy's gate, she jumped out and left the door swinging.

"Hey!" The driver yelled, "Where is my money?"

But Natalie didn't care and the security at the gate stopped the man from entering. Natalie ran the rest of the distance and students watched her with surprise. This was totally unlike her.

But Natalie didn't care about the stares. No, nothing mattered as she bolted for her dorm and up the stairs. She didn't even bother closing the door to her room and rushed straight to the bathroom.

Then she grabbed her toothbrush, smeared it with paste immediately, and began to scrub hard.

Natalie brushed and brushed until her gums bled and her mouth burned. And that's when Micah found her.

Of course, he found out.

"Natalie!" Micah shouted, rushing to her. He grabbed the brush from her hand and flung it away. His arms went around her just as she broke down.

"I feel so dirty!" she cried, her whole body shaking. "I feel so dirty!"

"Shh," he whispered, holding her tight. "You're not dirty. She's the dirty one. It's high time you told the truth, Natalie."

"I don't know, Micah..." she sobbed. "I'm so scared. I'm so scared."

Chapter 442: Celebrity Mates

There was a situation. Where was Violet going to stay?

Not that there weren't enough rooms in the lodge. But the real question was—who was she going to stay with?

The lodge was built in a grand U-shape, with three main wings enclosing a wide stone courtyard, where a heated fountain bubbled gently at the center. It held about thirty rooms, including several luxurious suites, spread across two floors.

Upstairs, long balconies overlooked the courtyard, offering a sweeping view of the surrounding landscape. But even with all its elegance, the owner likely hadn't anticipated the arrival of a group with a relationship as unconventional as theirs.

There were three private cabins scattered deeper into the woods for anyone wanting a more authentic communion with nature.

Yeah, no thanks. Definitely not happening. That screamed girl-goes-on-mountain-vacation-and-ends-up-in-a-thriller-murder-mystery energy, and Violet wasn't signing up for that.

Technically, she should've been rooming with Griffin, he was her mate after all. But they've spent enough time already, and to settle the growing argument, Violet made the executive decision to stay alone.

As flattering and thrilling as it was to be surrounded by her men, a little breathing room was necessary. The sheer volume of testosterone was choking sometimes, and she needed a clear head.

To her surprise, none of them fought it. There was no sulking, no arguing, just their mutual agreement. That alone was suspicious, but Violet let it go and took it as a small win. Maybe, just maybe, there was hope for their group dynamic after all.

Her room upstairs was nothing short of indulgent. Warm amber lights glowed from wrought-iron sconces on the walls, casting a golden hue that made the place feel enchanted. The wood floors were dark and smooth beneath her bare feet, with a plush burgundy rug spilling out from under the bed.

The bed itself was hand-carved from raw timber, wide enough to hold two or three of her men, if they squeezed. Not that she was planning anything. Yet.

The red bedsheets were soft and smelled faintly of cedar and warm linen, the kind of scent that made one want to fall into them and sleep their trouble away.

To the left, a pair of wide glass doors opened onto a private balcony, where crisp mountain air slipped through the crack she'd left open. From there, Violet could see the thick pine forest stretching for miles, mist swirling through the treetops. The cold bit against her skin, but the view was breathtaking.

In the corner of the room sat a vintage-style chaise lounge beneath an old framed painting of the lodge from years ago, and beside it, a small table stacked with books that probably none of the guests ever read but looked great anyway.

The bathroom was nearly as large as the bedroom, all stone and brass, with a tempting clawfoot tub that could fit a small army.

Yeah, it was confirmed. She was going to enjoy her time here.

It was tempting to just jump into bed and sleep the evening away, but there was a slight problem. They had come with nothing, and Alaric had lent her his clothes since hers were soaked from the rain. But that wasn't going to cut it if they were staying here longer. She needed clothes, and a few personal essentials.

The same went for the others, and they were all ready to go shopping as soon as Violet joined them downstairs in the lounge.

"Do you have a car here? Because ours is wrecked, thanks to the thunderstorm you summoned hours ago," Asher added with dry sarcasm. "And, you know, Griffin's size."

"That's body shaming, asshole." Griffin flipped him off.

Alaric scratched the back of his head. "Yeah, sorry about that. And yes, I do have a ride."

As usual, Asher drove with Griffin seated beside him. Violet was sandwiched between Alaric and Roman, who held both of her hands. Although it was clingy, it was also sweet and sent butterflies fluttering in her stomach, especially with the way Roman stroked the top of her palm at intervals. That guy was too much.

Although Alaric's rain had disrupted most of the day's activities, now that it was over, people were up and about. They arrived at the boutique's parking space, but none made any effort to move.

"We're going to cause a stir in there," Asher pointed out. Their goal was to remain low-key. That was the whole reason they were on vacation in the first place.

Unlike District One, where the cardinal alphas might not be easily recognized, this was Aster City, and her men were practically celebrities. It wasn't until now that it hit Violet how way beyond her league these men were, and how lucky she was to be dating them.

"I'll handle it," Roman said, already slipping out of the car with the kind of confidence that should be illegal.

Violet watched as he strolled toward the store like it belonged to him already.

"What's he going to do? Charm them into compliance with his sex appeal?" she joked, although a pang of jealousy hit her at the thought of him flirting with other women.

"That, and eventually buying out the whole store for the duration of the time we'd spend there," Alaric explained to her.

Violet lifted a brow. "You guys do have a lot of money to spend. Perks of having rich parents, I guess?"

Alaric shrugged, "That, and the fact we make our own money. For instance, I'm the richest," he said proudly.

"Alaric Storm..." Violet leaned in closer to him, purring, "Aren't you afraid I'm dating you because of your money?"

But Alaric let out a deep masculine chuckle that made her tingle in places a lady shouldn't mention.

"What's the point of being rich if my woman doesn't get to spend it?"

Violet stared at him, thrown. "Okay, who is this and what have you done with Alaric Storm?" Violet couldn't help but laugh. Roman was usually the one who did the flirting, not him.

Alaric laughed too, but then his eyes flicked to her lips, and the sound halted, his gaze darkening.

The air changed at once, and like magnets drawn to each other, their lips crashed together. Asher and Griffin in the front seat knew what was going on, but ignored them, giving them their time together.

Alaric kissed her with an intensity that practically had her pants melting off. She didn't object when he grabbed her waist and made her sit astride him. They kissed once. Twice. She suckled on his bottom lip, tugging at it while her hips ground slowly against him.

The door was opened as Roman arrived. "I have—" He froze at the scene.

"Seriously, who started a party without me?!"

Chapter 443: Sore Loser

With four of her boyfriends on both sides, Violet felt like the main character of some movie. Although right now, one of her men was sulking like a child.

"It was just a kiss, Roman. Nothing else," Violet said, trying to cheer him up, but he only pouted harder.

She let out a sigh. The guy was insufferable.

"Fine. Once we're inside, you can have your kiss."

He didn't say a word, but the frown on his face finally started to ease.

They had barely stepped inside the store when Roman grabbed her waist, tilted her head, and kissed the living breath out of her.

Holy creator of the universe.

The kiss was hard and possessive, and had Violet's head swimming, heat rushing straight to her core. But just as she began to melt into it, Roman pulled away.

"That was satisfying." Roman smiled at her. "I'm good now." He moved on.

Violet was stunned, her feet glued to the floor. Roman's emotional rollercoaster was giving her whiplash, but that wasn't the real emergency here. No, her real problem was that she was horny.

It was the kind of horny that made her question her morals. These guys kept kissing her like she was dessert, and now her hormones were staging a full-blown rebellion.

But Violet wasn't the only one stunned. The store manager, who had come to welcome them, stood frozen, his mouth open.

He had just watched Roman kiss Violet, and now his gaze flickered to the television. As if the universe was bent on testing them, it turned out that Griffin and Violet's mate bond news was being played on the screen.

Yep. How could someone with a mate bond kiss another guy? That was an abomination.

Violet knew what was going on in his head. The shock was written all over his face.

But before the store manager could say a word, Asher was already in front of him. "You will not whisper a word of what happened to any soul. And if any employee does, you'll shut them down. Understood?" he compelled.

The manager, dazed under hypnosis, nodded slowly.

Asher turned to leave, then paused. "You'll also forget we ever stepped foot in this store. Delete the footage, everything that could implicate us after we're done."

"I will forget everything," the manager repeated like a zombie.

Only then did Asher step away.

"My hero," Violet teased him.

But Asher didn't crack a smile. If anything, he seemed on edge now, his beautifully slitted eyes sweeping the store, silently counting every employee in sight.

"I'm afraid money might not do the trick. I'll need to compel each and every one of them. We're not taking any risks."

Not that they intended to hide their relationship forever. However, all it took was one phone call and the press would swarm their temporary lodging. They needed to figure things out before outside interference. The press wouldn't go easy on them, and once the truth came out, it would be a feeding frenzy. Their harem needed to be strong to withstand whatever may come.

Violet nodded in understanding.

This was a luxury store, racks of clothing, both male and female, sparkling under mood lighting. An attendant appeared hurriedly, clipboard in hand, ready to assist.

"H-hello, my name is Vera, and I'm here to assist you with your shopping," the lady introduced herself, flustered. She obviously knew who they were.

"Hello," Violet responded politely.

"Perhaps to help Lady Violet make informed choices, may I take her measurements?" Vera asked sweetly.

Roman stepped forward before Violet could answer.

"You don't need to worry about that..." He gestured to himself. "I'm a master at this."

Violet rolled her eyes. The pride of this guy could reach heaven.

"Really?" the assistant was intrigued.

Roman announced confidently, his gaze slowly roaming over Violet's body. "32B breasts, obviously. Waist? Thirty-seven inches. Hips... maybe thirty-nine."

If Roman wasn't bluffing, then Violet had to admit she was impressed with his ability to guess her size with just one glance.

Asher, who had been examining the fancy eyeglasses nearby, scoffed.

"She's a 34B."

The silence that followed was almost spiritual.

Asher turned to Roman and said, "You can check if you don't believe it."

The temperature in the room suddenly rose as a stare-down ensued.

"Does it even matter?" Violet asked, rubbing her temples. "This is the dumbest argument you two have ever had—"

"Debatable," Alaric said from the corner. He was also interested in the result.

Griffin crossed his arms and raised a brow. "You both sound like idiots."

But Roman argued. "No. Just like he said, we're going to settle this."

"Sure, go on." Asher's voice was cocky now. He addressed the assistant. "Go ahead. Confirm it."

The assistant was utterly speechless, caught in their weird little power play. What was going on here? Yet she had no choice but to step forward with a soft tape in hand. Violet sighed and lifted her arms, letting her get it over with.

"There is seriously no need for this." She shook her head, not in pity for them, but for herself. How did she even get involved with these men in the first place?

Just a quick wrap around her bust, a gentle tug, and the verdict came out.

"She's a 34B," the assistant announced.

Roman froze. No way he was wrong.

"Even cats gain weight." Asher smiled, smug as hell, and walked off deeper into the store.

Alaric let out a low whistle and reached out to pat Roman's shoulder. "Solid guess, champ."

Roman slapped his hand away, scowling. "Don't touch me."

"Alright, alright." Alaric raised both hands like a saint and casually strolled toward the cologne section. Drama queen, he thought. Roman really could be a sore loser.

Violet approached him. "Satisfied now?"

Roman touched his heart. "It hurts so bad. But there's something that can heal me." He leaned toward her, lips puckered for a kiss.

But Violet rolled her eyes and pinned his lips with her hand before they could make contact. "Not happening. Now come on already," she said, grabbing Roman's hand and dragging him down the next aisle.

He followed with a dramatic groan. "I still think that tape was rigged."

"Only you would."

Chapter 444: Princes Of Inspiration

Violet should have known better than to let four overgrown, egotistical wolves with minds of their own take her shopping.

They'd been picking out outfits for her for the past thirty minutes with half of them absurd, half scandalous, and a dangerous few that had no business existing in public. Yeah, most were Roman's doing, or chosen by the others under his corrupting influence.

After mock-fighting over what looked best on her, they finally struck a truce: Violet would try on one outfit selected by each of them.

"How did my life get to this point?" Violet murmured, eyeing the mountain of bags now dumped across the plush velvet couch in the boutique's private fitting suite.

The boys had even gone as far as labeling the bags with their names so she wouldn't mistake who picked what. Her heart went out to the staff who had to endure their antics.

"Well, let's get this over with," Violet mumbled, rifling through Roman's bag first. Alaric had insisted his be last.

"I want it to be the grand finale," he'd declared.

Well, she had no choice but to grant his royal highness his wishes.

Violet slipped into the deep crimson romper Roman had chosen. The plunging neckline practically dipped to her navel, and had an open strappy back that made her feel like a walking scandal. The material barely reached mid-thigh and yeah, it hugged her pecky ass perfectly.

She stepped out, already regretting her life choices.

Outside, Roman let out a low whistle. "You're my favorite shade of danger."

Griffin's brows shot up. "Shit, baby girl. You tryna send someone into cardiac arrest?"

Alaric gave an appreciative nod. "I hate to agree with Roman, but damn. That's a look."

Asher didn't speak. His eyes simply swept over her slowly like he was committing her to memory.

"You good?" Violet asked him.

"I'm fine," he replied with a tight voice, his breathing shallow.

Violet tried to ignore how warm her skin felt under their gazes. She spun half-heartedly in the mirror, then glanced at them.

"Well?" she asked for their collective vote.

Asher said. "We're buying it."

Okay... that was surprising.

"No, we're burning it," Griffin shot back.

"Burning it after I take a photo," Roman chirped, phone already in hand.

"She'll wear it at home," Asher added. "With us. Alone."

Why would she even hear this expensive piece of clothing at home? Violet wondered. But whatever they said.

"Supported." Roman grinned wolfishly, taking more photos of her.

"Try the next one." Alaric called excitedly.

He obviously was really pumped up for this.

Violet groaned. "I'm going to regret this vacation, aren't I?"

"Too late," Asher murmured, still watching her like a man half-starved.

"Well," she said, trying to breathe normally. "Let's see who else tried to make me public indecency material."

Back in the dressing room, Violet peeled off Roman's death-trap of a romper and slipped into Asher's pick which was a soft lavender two-piece that consisted of a cropped wrap top and a silky high-slit skirt. And okay, not to play favorites, but she loved this one.

When she stepped out again, her men were floored.

"There you are, shutting up every room without trying. " Asher said proudly, as if he knew from the onset how good she'd look in those.

Roman grunted. "Not fair." He narrowed his eyes at Asher. "How'd you make her look like someone's dream and someone's threat at the same time?"

"It's called using your brain and not thinking about sex 24/7," Asher replied smoothly.

Roman mimed shooting him with finger guns. Violet ignored them both.

"Griffin?"

Griffin, mouth full of the chocolate-covered nuts he'd found in the store's snack corner, simply gave a thumbs up.

"Alaric?"

"You look perfect, my darling." He blew her a kiss.

"I know," she said, admiring the look. "I like it."

"Next!" Roman yelled on purpose.

It was Griffin's turn.

This time when Violet came out, she was wearing ripped black jeans, a fitted leather jacket, and combat boots. The effect was instant.

"Oh hell yes," Griffin beamed. "There she is. No one's messin' with you."

"I love the boots," Violet said, stomping the floor to test them.

"I love that jacket on you," Alaric added. "Hate that you're about to take it off."

"That's a Violet who punches problems in the face," Asher said.

"Don't tempt me," she warned, mock punching the air.

"Last one!" Roman clapped, dragging her back in.

When he turned, all three alphas were glaring at him.

"What?"

"You do know you're a problematic fellow?" Griffin deadpanned.

But Roman made a face and went back to his seat. Although he seemed carefree, deep down, Roman was anxious. Didn't Violet like his gift?

Next, Violet stepped out barefoot, wearing a flowy white sundress. It was so simple, so sweet and deceptively angelic.

As soon as Alaric saw her, he smiled so widely it must have hurt. "No one suspects the devil in white," he said.

"Well?" Violet asked the room.

Roman blinked. "You're like a mirage. A sin in cotton."

Griffin clutched his chest. "My angel."

"It's technically illegal how good you look in everything. You should be arrested, Violet." Asher made an attempt at a joke.

Violet laughed genuinely, and then spun. The skirt flared like it had wings while the guys looked enraptured.

"Thank you so much for all you do for me."

Four men snapped to attention.

"It's nothing."

"No problem."

"Not at all."

"You're welcome."

They all answered at once, trying not to squirm at the visible reactions forming in their trousers. Hopefully, she didn't notice.

"Although!" Violet clapped. "Now it's my turn. I'm picking outfits for you next."

Silence fell in the room. They were surprised at first but came to accept it. All except Asher who technically looked like someone just told him the moon exploded.

"No," he said, already backing up. "I don't do fashion,"

"You do now," Violet said sweetly. "No chance against me, darling."

Roman laughed. "I am so loving this."

"Let me change, then the torture begins." Violet was going to enjoy this more than she let on.

She turned and disappeared into the changing room.

Barely a second passed before Roman was on his feet.

"Roman?" Asher warned.

"Cool off, papa. I just want her to feel inspired for her next show." He said, yet his grin was anything but pure.

He moved on.

Alaric stood as well, Asher and Griffin sharply turning towards him.

"Don't say it," Griffin said.

"Too late. I also want to... inspire her."

And off he went too.

Griffin covered his face in shame.

Chapter 445: Too Hot To Handle

Music from the store filtered softly into the fitting room where Violet stood changing. She had decided on wearing the lavender two-piece, not because Asher had chosen it, but because she liked it, especially that slit in the middle.

She'd just slipped on the skirt and was reaching for the cropped top when the curtain snapped open.

Violet turned and froze.

Roman slipped in first, his grin positively sinful, while Alaric followed after him with a quiet sort of elegance, closing the curtain behind them as if they'd rehearsed this.

"Seriously?" Violet hissed, trying to cover her chest with her arms, her cheeks going up in flames. If she didn't know these men, she'd be screaming bloody murder right now.

Roman only smirked. "You left the curtain half open. That's practically an invitation."

Violet cocked her head. "Even you too, Alaric?" This was more Roman's behavior, not his.

But Alaric only shrugged, far too casually. "Evil communication corrupts good manners," He said.

Violet was rendered speechless.

Roman, of course, didn't mind being labeled the corrupting influence. He chuckled, wearing the title like a crown.

Then his eyes dropped to her chest and the slow burn in his gaze made her swallow.

"What are you hiding there, little purple?" he asked, his tone sultry as hell.

Violet hesitated. But then again, what was she hiding? These men had already seen her in her worst.

So with renewed boldness and a pinch of defiance, Violet let go. Her arm dropped, and her breasts bounced slightly with the movement.

The atmosphere shifted immediately, air sizzling with sexual tension.

Roman's eyes darkened with lust, and heat rushed straight to Violet's core. Alaric swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing as he stared.

For a long moment, no one moved. Then, Roman dropped to one knee with a soft thud and began crawling toward her, slow and unhurried, like a predator savoring the hunt.

When he arrived, Roman pressed his nose to her mound, inhaling deeply like he was memorizing her scent.

"Roman—" Violet began, her voice catching in her throat.

Although there was her skirt in her way, it might as well have been nonexistent. Violet felt her clit throb, wetness pooling between her legs.

Even with his jaw still pressed against her, Roman lifted his allow-me-fuck-you eyes. "Would you let me worship you, Princess Violet?" he asked, voice hoarse with need.

It knocked the air right out of her lungs. That had to be one of the most dangerously sexy things anyone had ever said to her. She couldn't speak—not because she didn't want to—but because she was afraid of just how much she wanted it.

"I'll take that as a yes," Roman murmured, already slipping beneath her skirt like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Violet's chest was heaving, her heart pounding faster as anticipation coiled tight inside her. Roman hiding beneath her skirt only intensified the tension, every second dragging like a fuse about to ignite.

He didn't go in immediately. Instead, his fingers grazed the insides of her thighs, slow and deliberate, keeping her suspended in maddening suspense.

Then, without warning, he tugged her panties aside. Her eyes widened the moment his tongue slid between her folds, beginning to feast on her hot dripping core.

"Holy god!" Violet gasped, her knees buckling.

Alaric came up behind her that moment, holding her steady. He brushed her hair aside, trailing kisses along the soft space beneath her ear. Violet had no choice but to grip Roman's hair for balance, her other arm hooking around Alaric's neck from behind because the two of them were driving her insane. Whoever put them up to this clearly wanted her dead. A sweet, sinful kind of death.

One thing about Roman was that he was enthusiastic in everything he did. Anything. And right now, he was devouring her like she was the best thing he'd ever tasted.

Alaric, in turn, moved one hand to her breast, the other sprawled across her stomach to anchor her. Then he squeezed her breast with such tenacity that Violet moaned, the edge of pain only heightening her arousal.

Then Roman slid two fingers deep inside her, licking and sucking her clit with relentless hunger while she writhed from the pleasure.

"You should see how beautiful you are right now," Alaric whispered into her ear.

Then he gently turned her head so she could look at her reflection in the mirror.

What Violet saw was pure, unfiltered debauchery. Roman was beneath her skirt, doing sinful things to her, while Alaric kissed her shoulder, and she looked utterly flushed, reveling in every second of it.

Then he turned her head again, capturing her lips from behind. Violet sighed into the kiss, their mouths locking greedily, tongues tangling in a desperate war. At the same time, Alaric rolled her pebbled nipples between his fingers.

Goddess help her.

Violet moaned into his mouth. The sensations were coming from everywhere, yet somehow, they all converged into one overwhelming point of ecstasy. Her movements grew fevered, and in turn, Roman fucked her harder with his fingers, his tongue ruthlessly assaulting her clit.

She broke away from the kiss with Alaric to squeal out a breathless, "Fuck, yes."

Only her moans reverberated through the fitting room, and probably carried beyond it. Not that Violet cared in the slightest. She could feel it now. Her climax was near, her muscles tightening around Roman's fingers.

And it didn't take long.

Alaric's lightning charged fingertips brushed across both nipples, and Violet tumbled over the edge with a scream.

"Oh God!" She grabbed Roman's hair hard, not that he minded, and pinned him to her pussy. Roman didn't stop, still thrusting into her, dragging out her climax for as long as he could. It wasn't until her body had nothing left to give that he finally stopped, licking her clean before pulling back with a dirty, satisfied smirk.

"Do you feel inspired now?" Roman was ever confident.

Violet didn't answer. Not that she could. Right now, she was dizzy, flushed, and trembling in the best possible way. If this was what only Roman and Alaric could do, then she didn't dare imagine what all four of them might do to her combined.

At this point, she wasn't so sure she could handle all four of her men.

Chapter 446: Alphas' Exhibit - 1

Roman and Alaric swaggered out of the fitting room to the sharp glares waiting for them—Griffin Hale's, in particular.

"You do know..." Griffin began, his voice gruff and his breathing heavier than usual, "I can feel everything when you mess with that mating rune."

Roman raised a brow, clearly intrigued. "Interesting," he murmured, a wicked thought already forming at the back of his mind.

Still, he gave an easy shrug. "I had the main course, that's on him." He tossed the blame without shame, gesturing casually to Alaric.

Alaric didn't even deny it. "I'm not even sorry. Our girlfriend had a good time." He looked far too pleased with himself.

As if summoned, Violet appeared, and just like that, four pairs of eyes locked onto her at once, drawn like moths to flame.

Violet paused, slightly taken aback by the intensity of their stares, then she squared her shoulders and walked forward confidently.

Still, just to be sure, Violet asked, "Do we have a problem?"

Griffin, ironically the first to complain earlier, was also the first to reply, "Never." Right now, Violet was glowing, her skin kissed with a flush that made her look so sweet he could practically eat her. He swore she'd taste like strawberry rose tartlets drizzled with white chocolate. Yummy.

"No," Roman and Alaric answered almost in sync.

Asher, of course, didn't bother joining in the chorus. He just said, "You look good."

Thanks to the little moment back there, Violet had ended up changing into a pair of black jeans Asher had chosen, a designer shirt from Griffin, the wristband picked by Roman, and the shoes from Alaric. In short, she was wearing pieces of all of them, quite literally.

Violet trusted their relationship, but she wasn't stupid. It wasn't difficult for doubt or misunderstanding to creep in. She was dating four different men, all with their own baggage. No way she was going to leave room for unnecessary drama.

"Thank you," she said brightly, before clapping her hands and grinning. "But flattery isn't going to save you from what's coming next."

Asher groaned, and Violet smiled at his reaction. Honestly, it was kind of cute.

"So, who's going first?" she asked.

"Me!" Roman was already standing in front of her like a kid called for recess.

"Alright," Violet chuckled at his enthusiasm. "Let's start with sunshine-boy."

She took his hand and dragged him forward as he practically skipped beside her.

Fifteen minutes later, Violet emerged from the fitting area with her masterpiece behind her.

"Hello, co-boyfriends!" Roman dramatically strutted out from behind her with a pose, one hand on his hip and the other tossed behind his head.

Griffin, who was sipping a milkshake—where in the world was he even getting all the food from?—spat it out in shock.

"Dude, what the fuck." Alaric burst into laughter, clutching his stomach. God, this was funny.

Even Asher, who tried his best not to show it, couldn't hold it in anymore. He covered his face, clearly feeling the secondhand embarrassment.

Could one blame him? Even Violet, the mastermind of the whole thing, was failing at stifling her laughter.

Roman Draven was wearing a deep sapphire-blue satin shirt, unbuttoned halfway down his chest to reveal smooth, sun-kissed skin. The sleeves were snug and cuffed at the wrists, a silver chain glinting under the store lights.

He paired it with white, tight, high-waisted pants that shimmered faintly with a metallic sheen. They hugged every inch of his long legs and sinful hips, flaring slightly at the ankles.

On his feet were black platform boots with a silver star embossed on the side. The finishing touch was a pair of tinted aviator sunglasses perched on his nose, hiding his eyes, but not the cocky grin on his lips.

Roman twirled. "Yeah, I know. I look like a disco prince."

"More like a dancer," Alaric jibed.

But Roman, surprisingly, didn't take it to heart. "Oh yeah?" he said with a cocky smirk, then launched into a dramatic hip swivel, rolling his shoulders and snapping his fingers to an imaginary beat. He threw in a cheeky body roll, then spun on one heel. Smooth.

Violet was the only one who clapped at the performance. The others didn't.

"Jealousy," Roman said, snapping his fingers toward each of them, "is a disease. Get well soon. As for me...."

He reached for Violet's hand and twirled her right into him.

"I'm the best." Ruman declared.

Violet, laughing so hard she could barely breathe, played along. "Okay, okay," she gasped between giggles, "you win. You're the best."

Roman grinned, sweeping her into a final dip. "Obviously. I was born to shine."

Asher rolled his eyes. "Born to blind, maybe."

Griffin raised his milkshake. "To our peacock in platform boots."

Alaric took a picture of him. "I can't wait for when this goes viral."

The only problem was he couldn't post it yet. But one day, he would make sure the whole world saw it.

"If you guys are so perfect, why don't you try yours? I'm sure Violet has something special for each of you," Roman said, his voice thick with dark anticipation.

At that, Violet smiled sinisterly. "So, who's next?"

None of the men said a word.

"Don't make me choose," Violet sing-songed.

The guys looked at each other, waiting to see who would willingly sacrifice themselves.

Finally, Griffin sighed. "Fine. I'll go," he offered.

"Way to go, big guy." Roman slapped him on the back, clearly delighted, before settling into the spot Griffin had just vacated.

Violet took Griffin by the hand and winked at the others. "We'll be back shortly."

Then they left.

Alaric asked, "What do you think she's dressing me up as?"

Roman stretched in his outfit and said. "I have no idea..." He casually reached over, grabbed Griffin's half-finished milkshake, and took a slow, obnoxious slurp. "But I'm going to enjoy every piece of it."

Asher didn't say a word, but the small twitch at the corner of his lips gave him away. He was definitely curious too, even though he'd rather die than admit it.

Minutes later and Griffin stepped out.

Asher took one look and completely lost it.

"You have got to be kidding me," he wheezed, the words exploding out of his mouth before he doubled over with laughter.

For once, even the perpetually composed West Alpha couldn't help himself because standing there was Griffin Hale, dressed in something no one saw coming.

Chapter 447: Ashers' Exhibit - 2

Griffin Hale towering at well over six feet, muscles bulging under frilly fabric, was dressed in the most tragically accurate French maid outfit any of them had ever seen.

Black satin and white lace clung to his broad frame, the puffed sleeves pitifully trying to contain his biceps. A tiny apron was then tied around his waist, while a frilly headband was clipped onto his buzz cut.

If that wasn't enough, he had on thigh-high stockings that stretched over his thick calves like they were holding on for dear life, and on his feet, he wore glossy black Mary Jane shoes. How in the world did the store even have that size?

"I think I'm going to die." Alaric was practically choking on his own breath, bent over in laughter.

Roman slid off the couch in tears. "Why are your legs shinier than Violet's? Griffin, what the hell is this?!"

Griffin stood there, his arms at his sides, and his face blank.

"I will kill you one day," he said darkly. "I swear it."

"You can't threaten people while wearing that outfit," Roman cackled. "It cancels out the intimidation. You look like you're about to vacuum my soul instead."

Griffin was speechless. What could he say anyway when his mate did this on purpose?

"Too late," Alaric said, using his phone to zoom in on the stockings. "You're officially the house favorite."

"Yo, are those lace ruffles on your apron?" Roman howled, absolutely no remorse in sight.

Griffin looked down slowly, and sighed in defeat. "I hate all of you."

"Don't say that," Alaric replied solemnly. "You clean up so well."

Asher recovered enough to add, "If I ever see a feather duster in your hand, I'm resigning from this harem."

Roman was already composing a caption in his head for his future post. "'Griffin Hale: Beloved Alpha, Domestic Goddess.'"

Violet laughed out loud this time.

Griffin turned to her with a groan of resignation. "I'm taking this off."

"Sure, sure, go on," Violet said, then rewarded him with a brief kiss on the lips. Griffin brightened at once.

"Told you I'm the best," Roman said, relishing the fact that he was still rocking his disco outfit.

"So who's next?" Violet turned with an evil smile.

Alaric and Asher turned to each other at once, mutual dread flashing in their eyes.

"You go first," Asher said flatly, folding his arms.

Alaric blinked. "Excuse you? No, you go."

"I'm the oldest here," Asher declared.

Alaric scoffed. "By what exactly? We were born at the same time or have you forgotten in that thick-skulled, conniving mind of yours?"

"Oh, I remember. I just happen to be the better cardinal alpha."

"In your dreams, Professor grumpy-ass ."

While they were still bickering like kids, Violet signaled Roman with her eyes and he caught it immediately.

As Asher was giving a pompous speech about how he was always first at academics, training, social hierarchy, that was the moment Roman struck.

He grabbed Asher by the waist with both arms, and without warning, hoisted him clean over his shoulder like a sack of grumpy potatoes.

"What the—Roman!" Asher barked, his legs flailing behind him. "Put me down, you glorified snake!"

"No can do, Your Majesty," Roman said with a grin. "Orders from our queen."

He winked at Violet, already heading for the dressing area with a very offended Alpha over his shoulder.

Roman had chosen Asher on purpose knowing Alaric would zap his ass if he has tried. Asher had been a safer choice — even though he'd have his revenge later.

Violet waved sweetly. "See you soon, Alaric."

Just like the rest of the chaotic fashion parade so far, Asher eventually emerged from the dressing room, face stone-cold like he was walking into a war zone.

And honestly, he kind of looked like he was.

Because striding stiffly into the boutique, Asher Nightingale Nightshade —heir to the West pack, the most terrifying mind manipulator, puppet master of their time—was wearing a full-blown "Superman" costume. A popular hero from the old world movies.

The skin-tight blue bodysuit cleaved to every inch of Asher's tall frame, complete with the iconic red-and-yellow "S" emblazoned across his broad chest. A crimson cape fluttered behind him, dramatic as hell. And yes, the infamous red pants were right there, and worn proudly on the outside like the old-world hero had done.

There was a long second of stunned silence before Griffin, Roman and Alaric

whipped out their phones in unison and captured the moment without shame.

Asher didn't even blink. "Delete it," he said flatly, already done with them.

"Not happening, brother. You had your fun, now's our turn." Griffin declared, relishing every moment of his misery.

Alaric laughed hard. "I swear, I'm not going to survive this vacation."

But Roman was the one who truly lost it because he was on the ground. Yeah. Dramatic, much?

"Why in the moon's hairy ass," he gasped between laughter, "did the old-world hero wear his pants on the outside? Was modesty some kind of optional setting back then?"

Asher rolled his eyes. "It was symbolic from what I watched."

"Symbolic of what?" Roman fired back. "Extreme constipation?"

Alaric snorted in laughter. "I can't breathe."

"I hate all of you," Asher muttered darkly.

"You look great!" Violet called from behind, far too gleeful for his liking. "You're a hero."

But Asher replied darkly. "We both know I'm not. I'm the Villain, Violet."

A silence ensued.

Roman whistled. "That turned dark quite quickly."

Asher reached for the cape. "As fun as this was, I'm getting out of it."

Roman declared. "And I'm still standing. Goodbye Captain Briefs."

Asher gave him the middle finger.

Violet turned slowly, expectantly, to the last remaining "victim".

Alaric.

Unlike the others, he didn't groan or argue and simply walked toward her.

"Oh?" Roman blinked. "No threats? No objections?"

"He's pretending to be noble," Griffin chuckled. "Give it time."

But Violet only smiled, taking Alaric's hand. "Come on, Thunderboy. Let's see how well you clean up."

They disappeared behind the curtain.

Ten minutes passed and they came out.

"Are you kidding me?"

"No way!"

"This is unfair!"

Chapter 448: The Secret Footage

Alaric Storm looked like a page ripped straight out of an old-world mafia movie, except he was far more cuter than should be.

He wore a jet-black trench coat that hung open just enough to reveal the tailored, double-breasted suit inside. His crisp black shirt was buttoned up tight, save for the top, where his pale, flawless throat teased the eye.

A black leather gun holster lay snug around his shoulder, while he held a toy gun for effect, and on his head sat a black beret-style flat cap, tilted just right to cast the faintest shadow over one eye.

To top it all, he had a cinger in his mouth to complete the aesthetic, blowing a puff of smoke like he'd been doing this his whole life.

"Well?" Alaric said with confidence. "Do I look like trouble?"

"Foul play!" Roman declared dramatically, standing. "This is foul play. I want a recount. Where's the judge?"

Griffin paced once like a man trying to do math. "This is unfair, Violet. You gave him a mafia look, like straight-up organized crime Prince Charming, and gave me ruffles and lace!"

"You looked adorable, Moreover, I couldn't help but wonder what he'd look like leaning to the dark side." Violet said.

"I wore a superman's outfit." Asher argued.

Griffin scowled at him. "Try wearing mine."

Alaric removed the cigar with a slow grin. "Not my fault I cleaned up fine as a villain."

"Oh, go to hell," Roman muttered, flopping onto the couch like a scandalized Victorian woman.

"Guys, come on," Violet pleaded. "This is all for fun. Remember, I did wear the clothes each of you chose for me?" She reminded them.

At once, the boys groaned, muttered, and exchanged long-suffering glances.

Roman dragged a hand down his face. "She's got a point."

Griffin sighed. "Yeah, yeah. Fine."

Asher looked tired. "Let's just get it over with."

Violet clapped once, delighted. "So ten out of ten for the mafia prince. You'll be wearing that again."

Alaric bowed slightly with a gleam in his eyes. "Only if you promise to be the one interrogating me, officer."

Unfortunately, that earned a gasp and an eye-roll from everyone at once, especially Roman. He couldn't believe Alaric pushed him off his throne.

And that marked the end of the shopping spree. It was time to go.

"I'll be right back," Asher said, vanishing without explanation. Violet didn't need to ask—she already knew.

A few moments later, Asher reappeared, giving nothing away. But Violet knew he had taken care of their problem. And perhaps that was why she liked Asher, always willing to sacrifice without making a show of it, even when the person he helped might not bother to show appreciation.

"Let's move." Roman hoisted his share of the mountain of bags. None of the boys allowed the boutique attendants to carry their selections and thanks to that, each had their arms full.

"You guys do know I'm not disabled, right?" Violet asked because she was the only one walking out empty-handed.

"It's our treat, woman. Move that ass," Roman said without thinking.

Violet paused mid-step, her brow lifting slowly in challenge.

Roman immediately caught himself. "Please?"

"Better." She flashed a sweet, innocent smile and turned forward again.

Before the security team could even react, Violet was already ahead, swinging the doors open for each of them to pass through. She waited until the last of them exited before shutting the doors behind them like a proper lady escorting her beloved men.

The security men were taken aback by the action. That was a first.

Griffin, watching her, muttered under his breath with a crooked grin, "Isn't she just the damn best."

Alaric said proudly. "Amazing."

Violet blushed. This vacation was the best thing that has ever happened to them.

Meanwhile.....

Alpha King Elijah sat behind his obsidian desk, flipping through a stack of reports, while his beta updated him.

"The interview went without a hitch as expected. Natalie Avax would be the face of the humans at the school and the fifth house will be officially installed as agreed."

Elijah didn't look up. "Finally, the humans managed to wiggle their way in." he muttered, his jaw tightening. The thought of humans gaining a foothold in their world was a bitter pill to swallow, one that left a sour taste in his mouth.

Marcus continued, undeterred by Elijah's frustration. "I know you might not like it, your majesty, but public opinion about Lunaris Academy has risen favorably to ninety percent since the interview. The humans just want a voice."

Elijah gave a scoff, his gaze still on the reports in front of him. "A voice today, a seat tomorrow. Humans greed to dominate never ceases, in case you don't know that, Christian."

The beta hesitated before adding, "Well, it's nice to know that Elsie's scandal has been completely drowned out. Right now, the only thing anyone can talk about is the matebond between Griffin Hale and Violet Purple. The fact that Violet is a human seems to appeal to them. Although as usual, there seems to be a minority who are concerned we've stolen one of their own as usual."

Elijah's attention caught at the mention of the Matebond. "I take it they had the interview then?" he asked.

The beta cleared his throat. "About that..."

Elijah set the document down and narrowed his eyes. "What is it?"

"Not just Griffin and Violet, sir," the beta said grimly. "None of the Cardinal Alphas were present at the interview today."

At once, Elijah leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking under his weight. "What have I been missing out on?" he asked, a hint of irritation slipping into his tone.

He had been so consumed by the betrayal from Patrick and the relentless maneuvering of President Roy that he had neglected the very heirs he was meant to "babysit".

"The alphas are away from school," Marcus replied, his voice steady. "All of them." He paused, allowing the information to sink in. "So when I didn't see them at school, I looked into it. You should see this." He handed Elijah a tablet, the screen showing a paused footage.

Chapter 449: Prepare For War

Elijah took the device, his heart racing with intrigue as he pressed play. The video aired before him, and his eyes widened in disbelief.

There in the video was Roman kissing Violet in some store.

"What the hell?" he cursed, his voice rising in pitch. "Violet is mated to Griffin! So then, how...?" it was simply unbelievable. No, he was shocked out of his mind. This shouldn't be.

Christian took back the tablet, his expression grave. "This was the only footage I could capture since the others were destroyed by your competent heir, Asher. One of the staff managed to record this on her phone."

Elijah fell silent, his mind racing as he tapped his fingers against the desk thoughtfully. The implications of what he had just witnessed were staggering.

"Look into Violet Purple," he commanded. "I knew there was something off about that girl. I need to know what it is."

"Okay," Christian replied, nodding. "At the moment, I have my eyes on them."

"Tell your men to back off," Elijah said. "Asher is too smart, and I wouldn't want him to suspect I'm onto them. Whatever secret they're hiding about the girl, I'll find out. And keep me updated once they return to the academy."

As Christian nodded and left, Elijah relaxed back in his chair, thinking hard. While he was busy sorting out the mess on his plates, the alphas were keeping secrets from him? Fine, he'd see how that would work out for them.

East Pack Territory.....

Arion stood by the stove shirtless with Irene beside him. Her hands coated in flour, while an apron was tied around her waist.

"Now gently fold it in...," Arion said, leaning closer under the guise of culinary instruction. His hand covered hers, guiding it, but it was his press of his hips that made the real point.

Irene snorted. "You're a nuisance, you know that."

"And you're distracting," Arion murmured, voice low in her ear as he rolled his hips again, this time slower, testing. "I can't believe you're an Alpha of such a large pack. You're so easily flustered."

"I'm not flustered," she said, trying not to laugh as she elbowed him lightly in the ribs.

"Oh? What do you call that little twitch in your shoulder?" His grin was maddening.

Before she could retaliate, a cold voice cut through their drama.

"You both are disgusting."

Kaia stood in the doorway with her arms folded, her face a twisted portrait of teenage horror. Her nose wrinkled as if the domestic flirting physically pained her. She had come to check if dinner was ready, but now, the appetite was long gone.

Arion, unfazed, simply tossed a wink her way. "Hello to you too, sunshine."

Kaia didn't answer. She turned on her heel with a dramatic scoff and stormed out, muttering something about needing bleach for her brain.

Irene sighed heavily. "One day she's going to fall so hard for someone, I just hope the Moon Goddess grants her a mate who's twice as annoying as you."

"I'll drink to that." Arion chuckled, reaching for the salt like he hadn't just been caught dry-humping her near the risotto.

Irene's phone buzzed from her apron pocket. She wiped her hands on a dish towel and pulled it out. It was a message from Griffin, followed by several media files. Her heart missed a beat, hoping nothing had happened again.

Nonetheless, she clicked on the first one and promptly burst into laughter. "Oh Goddess."

"What is it?" Arion leaned closer and Irene turned the screen so he could see.

Griffin, stood in the middle of a fitting room in a black-and-white maid outfit. The outfit apart, the expression on his face was hilarious. Her son looked like he was contemplating his life choices.

Irene didn't need anyone to tell her that this was Violet's handwork. Griffin was kind but he had his pride too, and Violet was probably the only girl that could convince him enough to pull off something like this.

Arion whistled low. "Now that's a sight. Should we start calling him Griffinette?"

Irene burst into laughter again. She would show Aeron this once he was back from his meeting. That husband of hers needs more laughter else his face wrinkled quickly from all the frowns.

Irene was already swiping through the rest of the images when she froze. There wasn't just pictures of Violet and her son, Griffin had also sent pictures of the other boys.

Her laughter faded slightly, her thumb hovering particularly over Asher's picture. She didn't exactly hate the boy but the apple doesn't exactly fall far from the tree and she was skeptical about this boy being a part of that harem.

Nothing good ever comes out of anyone aligned with that surname, "Nightshade". She might not have been friends with Maria, but she heard what happened. If Asher turned out to be worse than his father, not just Violet, her son Griffin would be affected too.

Arion noticed. "They look happy," he said gently, nodding toward the phone.

"They do," Irene agreed quietly, though her eyes lingered. "I just hope the Moon Goddess knows what she's doing. Because even I'm afraid, Arion."

Arion didn't answer right away. Instead, he turned down the stove and wrapped his arms around her waist from behind again. He was not teasing this time, just comforting her sincerely.

"She does," he said with conviction. "But even if she doesn't, we'll make sure to be there for those kids."

Irene pulled apart to say, "So our pack might as well start preparing for war?"

"I did not say that...." Arion sighed at the look she gave him. "We should just have a little faith. If the goddess have spoken, then she must be up to something."

"Then the goddess better protect my son, because if anything happens to Griffin in this game of hers, not even the heavens would be safe from me." Irene declared, her eyes flashing with grim determination.

For a moment, there was nothing but silence until Blaire's voice rang from the passage way. "Daddy, I'm hungry. Where's the food already?"

"Coming princess!"

Chapter 450: ABC Family

Violet was in the kitchen alone with Griffin. Technically, he was doing the cooking while she just watched.

And it was for good reasons.

Griffin was standing by the counter shirtless, while a black apron hung around his waist, flour dusting his arms and chest. His hands worked the dough with slow, firm motions, pressing, folding, and kneading. The movements made the muscles in his arms flex, the veins in his forearms shifting like ropes beneath his skin.

And gods, how could Violet not stare?

Griffin hunched forward, gripping the dough tighter, his forearms taut, and biceps clenching. Then he slapped the mound hard, the sound cracking in the kitchen.

Violet bit her bottom lip. That was sexy as hell. She pressed her thighs together on instinct as heat rushed between them.

He did it again. Slap. Knead. Slap. And all Violet could visualize was Griffin doing that to her body—handling her just like he slowly rolled the dough beneath his palms.

"Someone's eye-fucking the man meat."

Violet jolted, nearly knocking over the bowl of fruit on the counter.

"Roman!" she hissed, whipping around to glare at him.

He was already grinning like the devil, arms folded as he leaned in the doorway with all the satisfaction of a man who'd caught her sinning with her eyes.

Griffin didn't say a word, he just kept kneading dough with the casual dominance of someone who knew he looked good doing it. His smile was lazy, knowing, and smug enough to heat her cheeks all over again.

"Get lost, Roman," Violet snapped, trying and failing to sound unaffected.

"As you wish, Princess." Roman gave a dramatic bow, strutted to the fridge like he was on a runway, retrieved a bottle of water, and moonwalked his ass out of the kitchen.

Violet exhaled deeply. She had her hands full with that one.

Griffin finally glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "Enjoying the show?"

Violet didn't answer right away and sauntered toward him, stopping when she was close enough to smell the heat of him, flour and musk mingling in the air.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you? " she asked, crossing her arms. "Sexualized the dough to make me all hot and bothered?"

"I'm just a humble man making bread, princess," Griffin replied, utterly unconvincing. The wicked gleam in his brown eyes said otherwise.

And what was it with her men suddenly calling her "princess"? She hadn't told them the truth so they could start throwing titles around. It wasn't supposed to be a big deal, just a fact. Nothing more.

Nonetheless, Violet narrowed her gaze. "Uh-huh. Humble, shirtless, flour-covered, apron-wrapped sexy man."

Griffin's grin widened. "You forgot to add strong, dominant, and slightly sweaty."

Violet chuckled despite herself. "God help me."

"Even God would agree you need no help, darling," Griffin said, slapping the dough one final time and the sound echoed between them.

Violet bit her lip again. Damn him.

Griffin noticed and smiled. Then he said, "Wait..."

Violet's brows arched as Griffin turned and walked off to the corner, only to return moments later with a small plate in hand. The scent of rosemary, thyme, and garlic wafted toward her, making her stomach grumble in anticipation.

"Figured you might want a taste," he said casually, holding up a skewer. The herbed chicken glistened slightly and was still steaming, charred in just the right places.

Violet eyed it suspiciously. "You're feeding me now? What's the catch, big guy?"

Griffin merely shrugged, then pulled off a single, tender piece of chicken between his fingers and brought it up to her lips.

"Open."

Her brows arched. "Seriously?"

"Dead serious." His voice dipped. "Come on, Princess."

Violet rolled her eyes, but her lips parted anyway. The moment the chicken touched her tongue, her eyes fluttered half-closed. The flavor was warm and juicy, packed with herbs and the tiniest kick of pepper, and it hit all the right places. Her moan came out before she could stop it.

Griffin's grin stretched wider. "Good?"

"Holy gods, this is food orgasm," she mumbled, still chewing. "I should have married you when I had the chance."

Griffin laughed heartily, his eyes sparkling. He looked so happy and Violet felt so satisfied.

"Who taught you to cook like this? Irene?" Violet asked, genuinely curious.

"God, no!" Griffin said quickly, like the idea alone was offensive. "If my mom ever stepped into the kitchen, it was probably to sharpen the knives for cooking. While other girls were learning how to boil rice, Irene was brawling and learning how to lead a pack."

Violet snorted.

"I actually learned from my dad Arion, he's the real master chef. Aeron dabbles sometimes, but it's considered a celestial event if he does. And even then, he can't hold a spatula to his brother."

A thoughtful silence settled over Griffin as he paused, his eyes distant as he savored the old memories. It was jarring how fast life moved. Just yesterday, he'd been a boy looking up to his fathers, now he was on the verge of starting a family of his own. The thought was both exhilarating and terrifying.

"It's reassuring to know you had the best childhood experience," Violet said softly. "When we all settle together, I'll need someone who can hold everything together."

Griffin understood what she meant. Asher had the worst childhood. Roman and Alaric, in their own ways, had grown up with absent parents, and probably knew next to nothing about what real family looked like.

"We'll figure it out as we go," was all Griffin could offer. He already saw the road ahead, rugged, and demanding. His mother had handled two men; now his load was doubled. It would be hell at times, but he'd give everything he had to make this harem work.

"Alright, feed me another," Violet said, expectantly.

Griffin obliged, tugging another piece of chicken from the skewer. "You're such a big baby."

Violet didn't care. She moaned as the flavor burst across her tongue, loud and utterly indecent.

Griffin's eyes darkened. "You keep moaning like that, and we can forget dinner altogether."

As tempting as that sounded, Violet forced herself to behave.

"I plead dinner," she said, licking her lips.