

Defy 451

Chapter 451: Life With The Alphas

Dinner went smoothly with no surprises, unless you count Roman being Roman and the usual round of playful banter.

Right now, Violet lay on her bed, all alone. She had thought having the space to herself would be nice, maybe even liberating. But strangely enough, she couldn't sleep. After over thirty minutes of turning and tossing to no avail, Violet knew just what to do.

Grabbing her pillow, she quietly got up and padded to the door. She opened it slowly, peering out into the hallway. When no one was in sight, she slipped out and closed the door behind her with a soft click. Violet paused for a moment, listening for sounds. When the coast stayed clear, she tiptoed toward a certain room.

When Violet arrived, she turned the knob and it gave in. Thankfully. She eased the door open and stepped inside, closing it gently behind her.

"I knew you'd come."

Violet's heart nearly leapt out of her chest.

She whirled around to find Asher standing there like a ghost in the dim light, holding a tray with a pitcher of water and a glass.

"I couldn't sleep," Violet admitted immediately.

"Thought as much. Come here." Asher shifted the tray to one hand and reached out with the other.

Without hesitation, Violet placed her hand in his. He laced their fingers together, his touch warm, and led her to the bed. He set the tray down on the nightstand, then pulled back the covers and tucked her in before slipping in beside her.

They lay on their sides, facing each other, though a small space remained between them. So Violet scooted closer until their bodies pressed together and she could feel his warmth seeping into hers.

Asher didn't sleep with a shirt on, which wasn't surprising. Roman and Griffin practically lived in their birthday suits at night. Maybe it was a werewolf thing. Either way, Violet wasn't complaining. She liked the feel of him like this: warm and close.

She reached out and cupped his face, her thumb brushing the edge of his jaw.

"How are you feeling, Asher?"

"Better," he said softly, catching her hand and kissing her knuckles. "When I'm with you, I feel like I can live again."

Those words should've thrilled Violet. But the fact that he hadn't been living before made her chest ache.

"I'm sorry I nearly killed you," she whispered. "I wouldn't have forgiven myself if you'd died."

"No, that's on me, Violet," Asher said, shaking his head. "I knew the risk and still went ahead with it. I didn't think about how that might affect you. For that, I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry for. I never blamed you. And I promise you, this time no matter what happens, I won't leave you behind."

Asher smiled, then pushed up on his arms and kissed her.

Violet welcomed him, her fingers tangling in his hair as she kissed him back with the same ferocity, as if sealing the vow they had just made.

The kiss was passionate, but short-lived. Asher pulled back, then pressed a soft kiss to her temple.

"Sleep."

Not that she could've slept even if she wanted to, because the door flew open, banging against the wall, and in stormed a very flustered Roman Draven and Alaric Storm.

"You trickster!" Roman wagged a finger at Asher accusingly. "I knew I'd find her here when her bed was empty. You broke the pact! We said hands off tonight!"

"I came to his room, not the other way around," Violet said flatly.

Roman clutched his chest like he'd been personally betrayed. "You chose him over us? Violet, how could you?"

"Because he actually lets me sleep. Unlike you." She folded her arms, then narrowed her eyes. "Also what exactly were you two doing in my room?"

There was silence.

"We came to check on you," Alaric covered up at once.

"Yes, check on you," Roman backed him.

"With pillows?" Violet raised an unimpressed brow.

Roman froze while Alaric blinked. They both looked down at the very objects incriminating them.

"We brought them in case you needed extras." Alaric didn't even blink as he delivered the lie.

"Yeah." Roman nodded way too quickly. "Neck support. You never know with these mattresses."

"Moon goddess give me strength," Violet groaned, covering her face.

Alaric and Roman together were a dangerous duo of mischief and zero shame. Putting them on the same side of a plan was like handing grenades to toddlers and telling them to behave.

Asher finally spoke up, "There's only space for one."

That did it.

Alaric and Roman both turned to each other sharply, tension spiking through the room like the very lightning the north Alpha wielded. Roman's eyes narrowed, but Alaric shot him a pleading glance, one that said, Don't abandon me now, buddy. We've survived too much for you to fold.

Roman grinned, completely unfazed. "I have a better solution."

Before anyone could ask what he meant by that, Roman had already transformed into a tiny, vivid green snake. He slithered right out of the pants puddled on the floor, his serpentine form smooth and glossy.

Alaric, utterly unfazed, bent down, scooped him up with one hand, and dropped him gently onto the bed like it was a normal thing.

Snake-Roman slithered up the sheet until he reached Violet's lap, his little forked tongue flicking out with a smug hiss.

"I think we know the plan now," Alaric said, as if this was perfectly reasonable behavior.

Without hesitation, he climbed into bed beside Violet, wrapping one strong arm around her waist. Asher gave a long sigh, then followed suit from the other side.

Then Snake-Roman made his next move by wriggling under the hem of her nightgown.

"Roman?" she warned, instantly squirming at the sensation that was silky, teasing, and maddeningly ticklish.

Snake-Roman didn't answer, of course. He just coiled himself lazily in the soft valley between her breasts, poked his small emerald head out through the neckline, and laid it smugly against her chest like it was his throne.

Wasn't this wonderful?

So now Violet was lying in bed, sandwiched between two territorial alphas, with a tiny green snake curled in her cleavage like a living brooch.

Yeah, this was her life. Completely unhinged, utterly impossible yet somehow kind of perfect.

And honestly? She wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

Chapter 452: You Can't Run Forever

Where the hell was she?

Violet Purple stood in the middle of an unfamiliar hallway, her senses on high alert. Strange looking lights lit up the path toward a bold red door ahead that pulsed slightly as though it was waiting for her.

Her brows furrowed. What the hell is this?

A hand landed gently on her shoulder and she spun around on instinct, already halfway to a defensive strike until she saw the familiar face.

"Asher?" she breathed, stunned to see him. "What are you doing here? What's going on?"

Before Asher could respond, there was a loud grunt and a dull thud.

Roman and Alaric materialized from thin air, crashing to the floor in a heap.

"Dude, why are you so heavy?" Roman wheezed from underneath Alaric.

"Speak for yourself," Alaric muttered, pushing off him.

But before either could fully stand, a third body fell right on top of them.

It was Griffin.

"I think I just broke a spleen," Roman grunted again, his face mashed against the floor.

"What is going on right now?" Violet muttered, flabbergasted as she stared at the literal pile of alphas.

Griffin rolled off the others, dusting off his pants like he hadn't just crash-landed on two people. "Where are we?"

"You're welcome," Roman muttered, staggering to his feet with a scowl aimed at Griffin.

Alaric stood up with a tight expression. "Okay, what the hell is going on? Asher?" He already suspected this was his handwork.

"Don't look at me." Asher growled at him. "I can only link with one mind at a time and I didn't initiate this. All of us being here at once is not something I can pull off. If anything this feels like a —".

"A dream," Violet finished for him. "Think about it, the last thing I remember is falling asleep."

"Same," Alaric said.

"Well, technically, you fell asleep with us," Roman grinned, wiggling his brows like that was the best part of the night.

"Wait," Griffin said to Violet. "So we're in your dream?"

"How is that even possible?" Alaric asked. "Griffin didn't even lie down with us."

"He's right." Griffin said. "I didn't leave my room. I figured you guys needed space. I thought maybe if you all spent more time together, more mate bonds would be triggered."

Asher nodded in agreement. "Griffin's her mate. It makes sense that she dragged him along notwithstanding the distance. We don't even know what Violet's capable of and the extent of her powers yet."

Roman gave a low whistle. "So we're all stuck inside Violet's dream. What juicy secrets are you hiding in that subconscious of yours, sweetheart?"

And with that, he dashed off toward the red door.

"Roman—wait!" Violet called out, but it was too late.

He twisted the knob and yanked it open. At once, a searing light exploded from within, forcing all of them to shield their faces as the brightness swallowed the hallway whole.

When it faded, they found themselves in a vast, sterile white chamber. But that wasn't what stopped Violet in her tracks.

"What in the name..." she whispered.

At the far end of the room was Lila, or what was left of her.

She was tethered to a twisted tree, her limbs sunken into the bark like it had grown around her. Her once-vibrant skin was now ghostly pale with strange green veins pulsing unnaturally in her skin.

Her eyes were shut and ringed with massive dark circles. Her lips were cracked, dry, and colorless while her fae grace was gone. Lila looked starved and terrifyingly hollow.

No one spoke a word. They could not. The sight of Lila, half-consumed by a tree silenced even the talkative Roman.

"Lila...." Violet gasped out, stepping forward only for Asher to grab her arm.

"We don't know what we're dealing with here," he shook his head in disapproval.

But Violet shrugged out of his grip and walked towards Lila while the boys exchanged concerned looks. They did not trust what was going on but there was nothing they could do.

Each step felt so heavy that by the time Violet reached there, her body felt like lead.

"Lila?" She called out but there was nothing but silence.

"L-lila?" Violet choked out, lifting trembling hands to feel her face. She was so cold to the touch.

"No..." Violet rasped, tears beginning to blur her face. "That can't be." Lila can't be dead. She had gone to the Fae realm to see her mother, not this.

"Lila, who did this? You have to tell me so I can avenge you atleast."

As if she had heard her, Lila's eyes suddenly snapped open and Violet flinched.

"Lila?" hope crept into her voice.

Lila looked disoriented at first only to gain focus. "Violet?"

"Yes, it's me." Violet announced happily, except Lila did not share the same excitement as her.

"You can't be here!" her face further paled as she realized what was going on. "You're dream walking."

"Dream walking, is that what it is?" Violet asked out of curiosity.

Lila looked behind her to notice the alphas. "And you brought the alphas with you too. An admirable feat for a first timer if it wasn't a foolish one. You know nothing about dreamwalking, Violet. You're making yourself vulnerable to attacks. Baron can get hold of you like this. Go now!" She thundered.

"Baron?" Violet picked up. "Is he the one that did this to you? I'm going to kill him!"

"My overconfidence blinded me and I fell into his trap. And it's that same foolishness to think you can stand up to Baron." Lila said with regret.

"Then how do I get you out of here? What is this?" Violet reached for the tree, trying to pull her free all to no avail.

"It's a carnivorous tree and you cannot free me. " Lila told her.

"What about my mother? I'm sure she's powerful enough to get you out of here if she knows your situation. How do I reach out to her?"

"That is what Baron wants and you won't fall for that. So listen to me carefully, Violet..." Her voice was serious now. "The situation at court is more dire than I thought. I don't know how Baron did it but he's siphoning powers from Queen Seraphira. That is why she's weakened. I believe he's somehow manipulating the life force between them. "

"What can I do? "

"You do nothing!" Lila warned her. "The queen would soon realize my absence and would come for me. That is why you must leave now! You cannot give chance for Baron to.... "

Lila was still speaking when she suddenly gasped, her eyes rolling to the back of her head. When they focused again, something had changed. Her demeanor was sharper now and the look in her gaze wasn't Lila's.

"So we finally meet, princess."

The voice came from Lila's lips, but Violet knew it wasn't her anymore.

"Baron," Violet spat, disgust curling in her voice. She didn't need confirmation. Lila had already called him out.

"Lilarin has done well cloaking your appearance," he mused. "Even here in the dream realm, I cannot see your true face. It keeps changing... shifting. "

His tone was calm. Far too calm. There should have been frustration, anger, but instead, there was something far more unsettling : patience.

Baron tilted Lila's head slowly, wearing her face like a second skin with his eyes glittering with cruel delight.

"But Lilarin should have warned you," he said with mock sympathy, "about the dangers of dreamwalking without experience."

Before Violet could respond, the tree in front of her creaked. One of its thick, bark-covered trunks shifted, groaning unnaturally as it lashed forward and coiled around her throat.

Violet gasped, hands flying up to pry it off but it was no use. The bark was rough and unrelenting, crushing into her windpipe. Her vision blurred at the edges.

"Perhaps I don't even need to find you in the human realm," Baron mused, his voice calm, and cruel. "I'll just end you like this."

At his words, the trunk constricted tighter.

Panic seized Violet's chest, her nails tore at the wood while her feet scrambled for leverage that didn't exist. Her lungs screamed for air, and her body began to tremble. She was going to die at this rate.

Then she heard them.

"Violet!"

"Violet?!"

Her mates were shouting from behind, their voices piercing the fog of darkness that was threatening to drag her under. They sounded far away, distorted and frantic.

And then there was Asher screaming at her. "Take my hand!"

Violet didn't even look, her fingers simply reached toward him desperately. Her vision was fading and her body was failing, but somehow she found him.

Their hands touched and in that instant, the tree let go. The pressure vanished as well as the dream fractured.

Not just Violet, but all of them disappeared.

But just before Violet was pulled from the dream, Baron's final words slithered into her mind like venom.

"You can't run forever, princess."

Chapter 453: The Fight

Violet jolted upright with a loud gasp, like a drowning victim breaking the surface for air. Her chest was heaving, while her eyes were still wide and unfocused with panic.

Beside her, Asher, Alaric and Roman—who had apparently slipped out of her nightgown and shifted back into his human form sometime during the night — also woke.

There were shouts of her name, but Violet was too busy feeling her neck, which throbbed with a sore, burning ache. The boys' eyes were now fixed on her too, their gazes dark with dread.

She didn't wait. Violet jumped off the bed, rounded the corner, and stormed straight into Asher's bathroom. Violet froze the second she saw her reflection on the mirror and the breath left her lungs.

Holy shit.

Large, angry bruises bloomed across her neck, raw proof of the pain she felt.

It might have been a dream, but the consequences were brutally real.

Had Asher not severed the connection in time, she would've died. For real.

Violet would have spent more time in the bathroom if not for the sudden shouting that came from the room. She rushed out just in time to see Asher land a solid punch to Roman's jaw.

Oh God. No.

Griffin must've arrived while she was inside because the only reason Asher hadn't launched a second blow was because he and Alaric were holding him back. Not that it helped calm him in the slightest.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" Asher roared, eyes blazing. "Your impulsiveness nearly got her killed! This was already dangerous, but what if something worse was waiting behind that door? You could've walked us all to our deaths! Why can't you think with your damn head for once?!"

"Alright, that's enough!" Violet cut in sharply, stepping between them just as she saw the flash of hurt across Roman's face. Asher's words had bite far too much and she wasn't about to let him draw blood with them.

Roman whimpered as if in pain, then turned without a word and stormed out of the room completely naked.

"Roman!" Violet called after him, but he didn't stop.

"That was harsh," she said, turning back to Asher.

But Asher let out a defiant growl. He didn't share the same opinion.

Violet sighed. "I'm going after him."

Asher still didn't look her way. His jaw tightened, his expression unreadable like he couldn't care less if Roman jumped off a cliff right now.

"Roman?" Violet called as she stepped into his room, but there was no answer, nor sign of him either.

She checked the lounge, the dining room, and even the hidden corridors of the lodge, yet there was nothing. That's when it hit her that Roman had a habit of disappearing into the woods whenever he was upset.

Of course.

And just like that, Violet found herself trudging into the pine forest.

The morning mist was thick in the air, swirling around her ankles and drifting like smoke between the trees. The ground was soft beneath her feet, still damp from yesterday's rain. Hence, it was no wonder the cold and crisp air stung her skin.

"Roman?! Where are you?!" Violet shouted, cupping her hands around her mouth.

Silence.

"Roman! Please talk to me!"

Suddenly, something whipped past her, rustling the trees. Violet turned sharply, her

heart racing.

Roman. He was here. She could feel it.

Well, she hoped that was him or she was toast.

"Roman?" she tried again.

There was still silence.

Fine. If he wouldn't come to her, then she'd make damn sure he had no choice but to face her.

So Violet let herself slip just slightly and landed on the forest floor with a convincing "Ow!"

Right on cue, Roman burst through his hiding place.

"Are you okay?" he asked with a voice full of concern, and eyes that scanned her body as if he expected to find bones sticking out in odd places.

Violet tried to keep a straight face but she just couldn't hold it in. She burst into a loud, wicked and guilty laughter.

Roman stiffened as it hit him what just happened. Just like that, his expression shifted from panicked to downright betrayed.

"You—" He was speechless. Then Roman growled, turning on his heel. "I'm done."

"Wait! Roman!" Violet scrambled to her feet to follow him except this time, it wasn't a trick. Her leg seized up with a vicious sting and she fell with a loud cry. "Shit—Roman! Help!"

But Roman didn't bother and kept walking, not even glancing back.

"Roman!" Violet hissed in disbelief. "Oh my God, this is actually happening—" she groaned, holding her calf. "Why do I do this to myself?"

For a moment, it seemed Roman planned to leave her there out of pure pettiness. But then, he suddenly paused, then turned with a guttural groan that was half frustration, half surrender. Roman's face was screwed up like it physically hurt to care.

Violet grinned like a fool. She knew it. He could never really leave her.

In a moment, Roman was crouched beside her, grumbling, "What is it?"

"Cramp."

"Where?"

"My calf. I think."

With a heavy sigh, Roman reached for her leg, muttering under his breath about helping her else he's blamed for this. Violet frowned at those words but said nothing. His fingers found the knot of pain and began to knead slowly and firmly. Violet tensed at first, but then melted into his touch.

Unable to help the warm flutter in her belly, Violet stared at him. Roman looked quite sexy with that focused look on his face.

"Don't look at me like that," Roman warned, not meeting her eyes.

"I'm just making sure you're doing the right thing." Violet said, her gaze still trained on him.

Roman shook his head knowing she wasn't going to stop. Violet Purple was hellbent on bothering the life out of him.

"Alright," he muttered gruffly. "It's done. You should be able to move now."

He began to rise, clearly ready to vanish back into the woods and brood like the emotionally constipated wolf he was.

But Violet wasn't done. The second she felt Roman start to pull away, she threw her arms around his neck with a dramatic gasp.

"Oww—it still hurts," she cried, clutching him tighter. "I don't think I can walk. You have to take me back to the lodge."

Roman froze.

Of course, he could see through her act. Violet was trying to get him back to the lodge and a grim line carved into his jaw at the thought of seeing Asher's obnoxious face.

But then, he couldn't keep hiding out here in the woods like a kicked puppy, licking wounds that weren't going to heal in silence. And maybe this was her way of offering him a way back without forcing him to admit anything.

Roman let out a long, soul-deep sigh that said, I hate this but I'll do it anyway and slipped his arms under Violet, carrying her as if she weighed nothing.

Violet blinked, caught off guard by how quickly Roman gave in, but said nothing as he hoisted her against his chest. Aww, this was so sweet.

And just like that, Roman strode back toward the very place he'd stormed out of just minutes ago.

Chapter 454: Dreamwalking

There was silence in the main lounge. The thick, heavy kind of silence that seemed to stretch into every corner of the room. All four alphas were seated comfortably, yet there was nothing relaxed about it.

Asher and Roman sat directly across from each other, both of their arms folded and jaws clenched. The air between them crackled with tension and neither of them would meet the other's eyes.

Griffin and Alaric exchanged a glance that was equal parts awkward and wary. Although Violet had brought them together, it didn't erase the fact that Asher and Roman had been the closest, hence seeing them fight like this was simply weird.

Violet in question stood in the middle of it all, looking like the only adult in a room full of sulking, power-packed man-children.

She exhaled, loud enough to break the silence.

"So." She said the word plainly, her tone clipped. "Does anyone have anything to say?"

She didn't need to clarify. The question was aimed directly at Asher and Roman. And as expected, the both of them said nothing.

Violet then clapped her hands, saying,

"Well, since none of you is willing to talk, let me then."

"You." Violet started with Asher, her eyes blazing. "You punched Roman in the face, which is completely out of control and absolutely unacceptable. I will not tolerate violence in this harem, no matter how heated things get."

Asher's jaw flexed, but he didn't argue.

"And bridle your tongue, Asher," Violet added, her tone cooling into steel. "This is going to be a healthy relationship. No one is dragging the other down with words I'm sure they don't even mean."

Asher let out a reluctant groan, and looked away in shame. Violet knew she'd struck the chord, he hadn't meant the words he said, and it was eating at him. Okay he meant it. Just a little.

Before he could get comfortable in his guilt, Violet turned.

"And you." She pointed now at Roman, who looked like he might slink under the nearest cushion. "You've been accused of being impulsive. And God, how true is that."

Roman opened his mouth, probably to defend himself, but Violet pressed her finger against her lips in a hush. He stopped instantly. She had given them the chance to speak, he didn't, so it was her turn.

"I love your spontaneity, Roman. I do," she said, "but if it turns into recklessness, especially when it puts others in danger, then we've got a problem. You have to learn how to curb it."

Roman swallowed, his head dipped in shame. "I'll work on it."

"Good," Violet nodded, then turned back to Asher expectantly. "Well?"

For a moment, it looked like Asher might stay stubborn, but then he muttered, "Fine. I'll be less harsh."

Violet raised a brow, grinning. "Aren't you just a ray of sunshine."

Then, before either of them could catch on, she said, "Alright. Kiss and make up."

"What?" Asher and Roman chorused in horror.

"I meant it literally," Violet said sweetly, folding her arms.

Asher recoiled like she'd asked him to lick a toilet seat. Roman, on the other hand, lit up like a firecracker and he stood immediately.

"Oh, hell no," Asher backed away, pointing. "Roman. Stay back."

But Roman kept coming, his eyes gleaming with the delight of a man on a mission.

"Don't you—Roman, I'm warning you—"

It was too late because with a feral grin, Roman lunged and tackled Asher to the floor in a heap of limbs and smooched him right on the lips.

Violet doubled over, howling with laughter while Griffin clutched his stomach and Alaric let out an actual wheeze. Asher shoved Roman off him like he'd been lit on fire, his face contorted in sheer horror.

Roman lay sprawled on the carpet, grinning smugly. "That's for the punch."

Asher sat up, swiping at his lips with the back of his hand like he'd been poisoned. Then he looked at Violet laughing and said, "So are we going to talk about that now?" he referred to the bruise on her neck.

The laughter ceased and the atmosphere shifted immediately. Way to go, Asher.

"I still don't get how I ended up there," Violet muttered, touching the bruise. "One second I was asleep and the next, I'm standing in the hallway, all of us."

Alaric glanced at Asher and said.

"What if it wasn't random? What if you didn't just dreamwalk on your own?"

Violet raised a brow. "I don't understand."

"Not consciously," Alaric replied, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "But you said it happened when you were sleeping near him"—he nodded at Asher—"and your powers are still unstable and undefined. If they're rooted in the mind, and you were lying next to someone whose whole thing is mental manipulation—"

"You think I caught it like a flu?" Violet asked dryly.

"More like your power synced with his," Alaric said. "Think of it like a tuning fork. His mind vibrated at a frequency, and yours fresh, and reactive mirrored it. Maybe for a moment, your subconscious borrowed the framework of how he connects and built your own."

Violet blinked. "So I created that world with Asher's help and I choose to visit Lila's dream?"

Asher looked at her, amazed. "So she dream-walked not because she meant to but because she wanted to with my help. Subconsciously."

"Exactly," Alaric said. "She just didn't know the door was open until she walked through it."

Roman lifted his hand. "Can someone explain in lame man understanding, please?"

"Second that." Griffin concurred.

Alaric said. "It's a theory, alright? But it's solid. I think Violet's at risk of dream walking especially when she's sleeping close to Asher since he's the only one with mental powers here. If Violet's awakening psychic abilities, even subconsciously, then he's basically acting like a live wire. He touches her, she sparks."

Violet squinted at him. "So what? You're saying I should stay away from Asher now? Seriously?"

"I didn't say that," Alaric replied, voice calm but firm. "I'm just saying proximity could be a trigger."

"Well, I'm not avoiding him. We need each other right now more than ever. I'm not pulling away just because things are messy."

Asher then said. "Then let's figure it out together. I'll teach you how my powers work. Everything I know. Maybe that'll help you control it, or at least not get dragged into some freaky fae dreamscape again."

Chapter 455: Noble Guard

Thanks to the incident, Asher had made an executive decision: she was not going to be alone anymore. Not even in the bathroom.

"What if you suddenly manifest another ability?" he had said. "Someone has to be there. To do something. Anything."

Why were her powers suddenly manifesting now? Alaric believed the binding her mother placed on her was finally loosening. Asher thought it was the matebond with Griffin. Griffin was a strong wolf, and it wasn't surprising if her instincts were pushing her to match him. More often than not, strength called to strength.

Either way, she was going to have each of the guys around her at all times. Although she wondered how this would work out once they returned to school on Monday. Others can't know they're together yet. It would cause commotion and disrupt the Matebond they were trying to trigger here.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was how Alaric Storm ended up standing right outside her see-through shower stall with his back turned, arms crossed, and jaw tight as he stood guard while she bathed.

Unfortunately, that was awkward as hell.

"Greetings, noble guard." Violet purred, her voice lilting with mischief as she stepped forth from the misty confines of the stall.

Alaric turned at the sound only to freeze, thunderclouds gathering in his eyes.

She stood there unashamed, glistening with droplets that clung to her naked skin.

Her hair, soaked and clinging to her temple, framed her flushed face. But his gaze, traitorous as ever, dropped down and traced the rivulets that trailed boldly down her curves, one rolling across her breast and curling beneath the rosy peak of her nipple. His growl was low, and feral, a crackle of lightning dancing at his fingertips.

"Careful now," Violet said lightly, her tone teasing yet edged with warning. "I'd rather not be roasted alive in thine attempt to keep watch. There's water everywhere, after all."

Violet had learned the old English and it was quite a delight when he responded in the same fashion.

Alaric cleared his throat. "Hast thou need of aught?" he asked, voice gravelly and forced.

Violet tilted her head, eyes glimmering with a wicked glint. "This lady doth wonder, noble knight, wilt thou not join her in this bath of steam?"

Alaric's jaw tightened. He knew this game. "A thousand pardons, my lady," he replied with feigned solemnity, "but Lord Nightshade hath charged me with thy protection. Should I stray from duty, it shan't be but my honor forfeit, but perchance my very head. And thou knowest how wrathful thy lord may be."

Ooh, he was good at this. Sweet.

Violet laughed. "Surely, thou dost not tremble at the shadow of another man?" She leaned against the stall's edge, droplets sliding down her body like temptation made flesh. Her gaze smoldered. "And is it not unseemly to leave a lady in... need?"

She lowered her voice to a sultry whisper. "Mayhap we make this our little secret, dear noble guard." Violet punctuated the invitation by slowly rolling her nipples between her fingers, her eyes dark with wicked promise as she shot Alaric a look that said come ravish me now.

And that was it. That seemed to break through Alaric's control.

He burst into the shower stall, walking Violet backwards until her back hit the wall. Alaric Storm wasn't as broad as the others, but he was an Alpha and filled out well enough and right now, the stall felt too small with him in it.

Not just that, his scent—ozone and rain-soaked earth with a lingering warmth of amber—saturated the space. It was all she could breathe in, and it made her heady.

Then Alaric latched his mouth onto her breast, and Violet's head lulled back in bliss. Yes. That felt so good.

He pulled the whole of her areola into his mouth, making deep noises at the back of his throat as he sucked her nipple relentlessly, his hand squeezing her other breast with firm possession. Violet moaned, her fingers digging into his hair as her core throbbed with aching need.

She wanted him badly.

Alaric's hand trailed down her body, finding her moist heat, and slipped two fingers inside her.

Violet shuddered, clinging to him like her legs alone weren't enough to keep her upright.

Alaric pulled from her breast, his eyes shining with a glint as he pleasured her with his fingers, saying, "Is this what mine desires?"

"Y-yes...." Violet was still speaking when Alaric suddenly curved his fingers just right, hitting a spot deep inside her.

"Oh god, yes... oh please don't stop." She mewled, her body completely at his mercy.

Then he crushed his lips against hers in a hard kiss while his fingers thrust deeper inside of her.

Alaric murmured against her lips, "I can't wait for the day I'm buried deep inside you. Trust me, you won't want to stop, and neither will I."

"Mmhmm," Violet couldn't agree more, lost in the heavenly sensation rippling through her.

Alaric was pumping into her faster now, and when he pinched her nipples, she was a goner. Violet cried out, shattering around his fingers.

He didn't even wait for her to recover before commanding, "On your knees now, my lady."

Violet's mind reeled from the suddenness of it all, yet she didn't hesitate. She dropped to her heels, already salivating in anticipation. The shower streamed over them, but neither cared because the heat between them outmatched the water, and the moment burned with wild urgency.

The moment his soaked pants hit the floor, Alaric guided his cock toward her waiting lips and Violet took him in without hesitation.

A raw groan escaped him, his entire body tensing from the sheer pleasure.

She eased him deeper, her mouth adjusting to his size. Griffin may have been the largest, but Alaric's length and smoothness had their own appeal. It was something she savored with slowly as if indulging in a forbidden treat.

It was maddening. The slick heat of her mouth, the way her tongue curled around him, the warm water cascading around them, all of it morphed into a sensory overload.

But Alaric did not have patience for it.

He thrust deeper into her mouth till he hit the back of her throat, loving the fact that Voliet always had a good gagging reflex. She took him like a good girl.

"Gods, yes..." Alaric groaned, his voice ragged as he picked up the pace, muscles tightening, the veins in his neck straining with each surge of pleasure. The rhythm turned frantic, driven by need and the heady thrill of control slipping from his grasp.

"Fuck!" Violet heard Alaric cursed as he released all of him into her mouth and that was always the best part since she took him all without letting a drop spill.

"God, you're so sexy when you do that, my lady," Alaric expelled through a harsh breath, his chest heaving.

Then he helped her to her feet, a slow grin spreading across his face. "I trust that was to your taste, my lady?"

"Very much," Violet murmured, kissing his chest, then teasing his nipple. "Now onto round two?"

"But we'd incur Lord Asher's wrath," he warned, though there was mischief dancing in his eyes.

"Exactly the point," she smirked.

Chapter 456: The Perfect Trainer

"You're late," Asher said, his voice clipped, the moment she entered the room.

"Sorry about that," Violet replied, not

even pretending to be apologetic

"Alaric was just getting me primed

for the fight." She smirked, her words dripping with innuendo.

Asher's glare shifted immediately to

Alaric, who only chuckled and

stepped back with his hands raised.

"Sorry, but I'm weak."

Asher gave up at that point. Was there anyone in this group who could get the damn job done without letting their dick get in the way?

But then again, Asher always forgot that they were alphas, yes, but also hormonal teenagers with a libido stronger than their brain cells. Not everyone was like him who was raised with ironclad will and discipline drilled into him from birth.

Violet did a double take the moment her eyes swept the room. She had expected to see a sparring ring or maybe a rack of weapons so Alaric could teach her those sexy ninja moves. But instead, Violet was met with metals, mirrors and machines. She wrinkled her nose, this was the lodge's gym.

Admittedly, it was a luxurious one featuring dark-stained wooden floors that gleamed beneath the harsh overhead lights. State-of-the-art equipment lined the walls: squat racks, dumbbells, punching bags suspended from chains, a full-length track circling a center turf field and a few machines she couldn't even name. The air smelled like sweat, pine, and testosterone. Lots of it.

Violet blinked slowly. "You're kidding."

"Nope." Griffin walked in behind her, dressed in loose black joggers and a sleeveless shirt that hugged his torso, highlighting those sexy ridges of his stomach. His arms were already glistening from whatever pre-workout hell he'd put himself through. Dear lord, this mate of hers was bred to ruin her.

"Get your head out of the clouds and listen to his instructions, Violet." Asher told her firmly.

Violet scowled at Asher. If he wasn't so obsessed with her safety, she'd swear he just didn't want her to have a sex life.

Roman and Alaric chuckled from the corner, both relishing her embarrassment.

Griffin pointed to the treadmill. "We'd work on your stamina. First."

Violet turned to him, one perfectly arched brow lifting. "That thing won't help me against Baron."

"That 'thing'," he said patiently, "is about to humble you."

"Well, I have stamina, thank you very much."

Griffin made a noise that sat somewhere between a laugh and a scoff. "You mean the same stamina in bed, or the one you've been using to laze around for the past week? That stamina?"

Violet's cheek flushed and she shot back, affronted. "That is a personal attack, Griffin. Moreover, I was having a short break. Not to mention, I've been fit my whole life. Do you want to test that?"

"Sure," he said, voice saturated with sarcasm.

Violet narrowed her eyes.

He smiled, and it was the dangerous kind. "Alright then. Let's test it."

She straightened, her chin lifting. "Test it how?"

"If you can outrun me for one minute..." Griffin stepped toward her, his eyes gleaming with challenge. "We skip this and go straight to combat training. No treadmill. No laps. Just me and you, fists to fists. You win."

A slow, mischievous grin tugged on Violet's lips. "You're on."

"Good." He took one step back. "Now."

"What?"

"Now!" Griffin said again and lunged at her.

Violet yelped like the girl she was, bolting forward as adrenaline shot down her spine like lightning. She zipped around the gym, weaving between equipment, ducking beneath the monkey bars, and hopping over a rogue yoga mat like her life depended on it. Which, given the mad gleam in Griffin's eyes, it might as well have.

For someone his size, he was faster than she had given him credit for. Griffin Hale was not just strong, he was predator fast, the kind of fast that made her legs burn and her breathing turn ragged within just thirty seconds. He wasn't chasing her like a man. No, he was chasing her like an Alpha on the hunt, and every instinct she had screamed that she run faster.

Violet lungs burned while sweat gathered at her temples. She decided to play dirty by

shoving a rolling weight bench in his path. But not surprisingly, Griffin vaulted it with a laugh.

"Getting tired yet, Purple?" he taunted, close. Too close.

"Eat. My. Ass," she hissed, dodging behind a punching bag. Well that didn't sound like an insult now she thought about it considering he had done that already so many times. Well whatever.

Suddenly, Griffin slid around the other side and closed in before she could double back. Violet squealed when his arms wrapped around her waist mid-turn, and then she was airborne briefly before the world tilted and she hit the turf floor with a muffled thud, Griffin's full weight pressing her down.

She was pinned.

The air whooshed out of her lungs. His hands caged either side of her head, his body flush against hers, hot and heavy and solid.

"Time's up." Griffin announced with glee.

While she was panting, he was smirking and didn't look as if he had broken a sweat at all.

But things wasn't so bad.

"This," Violet managed between breaths, her voice husky, "is nice."

His scent wrapped around her, a rich blend of sun-soaked woods and warm amber, infused with hints of fresh summer citrus. Her core pulsed, a rush of heat flooding her so fast her cheeks flamed. Violet loved how good he felt on top of her and her hips arched up.

Griffin noticed and his pupils darkened.

"You're a bad student.", he murmured.

"Can't blame me when I have a sexy hulk above me."

Griffin dipped closer so his breath ghosted over her mouth. "You're lucky I'm not in the mood to claim my reward right now."

"Who said I wouldn't give it willingly?"

At that statement, the air turned molten.

Griffin leaned in and Violet tilted her chin up, the bond between them aching, humming and begging to be satisfied.

"Ahem."

The moment shattered.

Griffin's head jerked up, and Violet craned her neck just enough to see Asher standing over them with his arms folded, and his expression carved from stone. He looked homicidal.

"I'll be taking over her training from here." Asher announced.

Noooooooo!!!!

Chapter 457: Unexpected Visitor

Asher Nightshade was a monster.

And no, Violet didn't mean that literally, though that didn't mean she meant it in a good way either.

Six hours.

Six grueling, soul-sucking hours.

That was how long he kept her in the so-called foundation class.

Apparently, Asher Fucking Nightshade had not appreciated the fact that she'd been breathing like a buffalo with a deviated septum after just a one-minute chase from Griffin.

And in his own words, not hers:

"You think your enemies will wait while you catch your breath? This isn't a game, Violet. It's a fight for your life. Now move."

"But I have the power to decimate them on the spot!" Violet had snapped back, glaring.

"Oh, you have powers? That's cute," Asher had said, his voice as flat as his patience.

"You mean the same powers you can't summon at will? Powers mean nothing if you collapse after two minutes in a fight."

"He's right, princess," Griffin had chimed in with zero remorse. "Your enemies won't care how powerful you are if your knees give out before your magic does."

"Not to mention," Alaric added, lounging like he wasn't secretly invested, "what if you're in a situation where your magic is suppressed? It's the skills you build that'll save your ass."

And of course, Roman, who couldn't resist putting his voice in the mix, said,

"Powers will get you attention, princess. Stamina will keep you alive."

Then, to top it all off, Asher had looked her dead in the eye and said, "So tell me, would you rather keep whining or start training? Your choice, Princess."

His voice had practically dripped with sarcasm.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was how Violet found herself roped into the most torturous training session of her life, all thanks to one discipline-drenched, emotionally constipated Alpha named Asher Nightshade.

Nonetheless, Violet understood it was for her own good even if she didn't like it one bit.

And that was how she ended up collapsed on the long couch, freshly showered but still feeling like she'd been steamrolled by a stampede. She hadn't felt the ache while in the bathroom probably because her body had gone temporarily numb and no, she hadn't offered any noble guard to join her. Asher had taken that position all on his own — and she was too tired to tempt him.

Now, with her muscles screaming and her limbs stiff as stone, reality was back with a vengeance.

Asher, of course, hadn't taken Lunaris Academy's training schedule into account.

According to the alphas, combat class was good but not thorough. If they'd relied solely on Commander Malakai's curriculum, they wouldn't be the good fighters they were today. Each of them had been trained for the role of Alpha because it was their birthright.

Commander Malakai was skilled, no doubt, but Violet wasn't like them. She was a conscripted student, shoved into the academy only in her final year. She'd missed everything that came before.

"Do you think she's sleeping?"

Violet heard Roman's quiet and cautious voice from the corner, as if he was afraid he might actually wake her if she was.

"Don't think so. Her breathing—"

Violet rolled over before Alaric could finish, cutting him off and drawing both their attention.

"Oh. There she is."

She flopped onto her back with a tired sigh just as Roman and Alaric eased onto the sofa. Roman settled near her feet, and Alaric guided her head gently to rest on his thigh.

"How do you feel?" Roman asked, brows raised.

"Horrible," Violet groaned, exhaling dramatically. "I can't even lift a finger."

"That's as expected," Roman said with a shrug. "Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

Violet made a grumpy, guttural noise at the back of her throat knowing getting used to this meant she'd have to do it every single day.

"I know how to ease the pain," Roman said suddenly, and Violet lifted a brow that no doubt questioned those very words.

Roman rolled his eyes then took her leg without permission and hauled it onto his lap.

"I'm not trying to get into your pants." Roman said.

"Mmhmm," Violet didn't believe him and was about to say something when Roman's thumbs pressed into her calf muscle and the breath left her body in a traitorous sigh. God, this felt good. His hands were good. Roman was unfairly skilled at this.

"Yes," Roman murmured, his voice silky like seduction, "Relax and let the professionals work."

Before she could ask who had credited him in the art of massage, Alaric's fingers slid beneath the fabric of her shirt to knead at the sore muscle near her collarbone. A jolt of warmth shot through Violet and her entire body tensed, only to melt like butter in the sun.

"Just relax and let us take care of you." Alaric told her, pressing deeper into the knots.

Left with no choice, Violet groaned in surrender and shifted, sitting up just enough to lean back against Alaric's chest. His arms bracketed her as he dutifully rolled the knots from her shoulders with the kind of pressure that made her toes curl.

These two men would be the death of her.

Roman moved to her other leg, still circling his thumbs into the tight knots and Violet sighed, her head tipping slightly to the side, eyes fluttering shut.

This was bliss. Absolute, treacherous bliss.

But that moment lasted until Roman's hands slid higher up her thigh. Quite too high to be overlooked.

Violet's eyes flew open just in time to lock with Roman's, shivers creeping up her spine. He was already watching her, smirking like he knew exactly what he'd done. The devil.

And just like that, Roman withdrew his hand like he hadn't just danced on the edge of temptation.

Violet stared at him, stunned, her cheeks flushed and heartbeat quicker than normal. Most of all, she was definitely not protesting.

But neither of them said a word and Roman just resumed massaging her outer thigh carefully, and respectfully now, while Alaric continued working her back and shoulders.

Small sighs, and occasional breathy moans that made Violet want to slap herself escaped her lips. But gods, it felt too good to tell them to stop. Roman and Alaric's hands moved in sync, tugging tension from every inch of her body, coaxing her deeper into their rhythm.

At some point, her muscles gave out and her mind drifted. Her body was completely relaxed now, sinking fully into Alaric's warmth.

And before Violet even realized it, she fell asleep.

And just like last night, she was not alone in the dream space.

"You are quite powerful, little sister. It took me quite a lot to walk into your dream."

"Micah?" Violet was stunned when she saw her half brother waltz into her dream space like he owned the place.

Micah was tall, broad-shouldered, with a muscled build that made it far too easy to understand why he easily got into the pants of nearly the school's entire female population. His dark wavy hair was tousled effortlessly, while his hazel eyes flecked with gold and green was totally bewitching. Micah was sex incarnate.

But in the dream, though, something was different about him.

Micah was dressed in dark clothes, the kind that didn't reflect light but swallowed it whole. And his eyes that were usually warm and complex seemed darker now. Like something buried inside him had clawed its way closer to the surface. He looked like the same Micah and yet not. Like a version of him that had stopped pretending to be soft.

Like the demon side of him.

"How are you doing this?" Violet blinked, stunned. This was supposed to be her doing this, not the other around.

"I'm an incubus," Micah said with a shrug. "Dream manipulation is kind of our thing. How do you think we got the reputation?"

Violet scowled. "Okay, point taken. Still, what are you doing here, Micah?"

"Can't I visit my little sister?" he asked, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. "We didn't exactly part on great terms. This was the only way I could talk to you without the Alphas' interference."

Violet crossed her arms, not sold but not pushing him away either.

"Alright," she said. "Talk."

"Believe it or not, I came to check up on you." Micah replied casually.

Violet narrowed her eyes at him. "You mean to check if our father has taken hold of me?"

Micah didn't flinch. "That as well."

He continued. "You have to go back to the academy, it's the safest place for you."

"I'll go back," Violet said, "as soon as I'm done here."

Micah's expression didn't change, but his eyes darkened. "By 'here' you mean spending time with the others who aren't your mate yet?"

Violet didn't answer. She didn't have to. Micah had always been too good at pulling truths out of silence.

He stepped closer, his voice dropping. "I don't know how it's even possible you can stand to be around them like this, maybe because you're different. But unless the Moon Goddess has suddenly decided to mate you to all four of the cardinal alphas, you shouldn't dream of keeping them. Not all of them. It would cause political instability."

Violet clenched her jaw.

"If you think Elijah banishing me to the school is much then wait till he realizes you're a threat" Micah laughed without humor. "You don't want Elijah's eyes on you, Violet. Trust me on that."

"I can take care of myself."

Micah was about to say something but then he stopped. He signed. "And your other boyfriend is here. Be safe, Violet."

And with that, the dream snapped shut.

Violet's eyes flew open only to connect with Asher's.

"Who was it this time?"

Chapter 458: Sense Me

"Who was it this time?" Asher asked, his gaze boring into hers with unnerving intensity. He looked like he was a breath away from committing murder.

Violet shook it off and sat up, stretching her sore limbs before answering. "It was my brother. Micah."

"What does he want?" Asher asked grimly. The fact he hasn't asked how Micah infiltrated her dream proved that he knew what his ability was.

"He came to check up on me." Violet paused, then added, "He wants me to return to the academy. He says it's the safest place for me."

Asher's jaw tightened. "No place is truly safe but he's right. Baron can't touch you there, neither can Elijah. Not without risking public eyes or sentiment."

Violet's face fell slightly. "But we can't leave yet. I haven't spent enough time with the others. The mate bond still hasn't triggered."

"Who said anything about leaving?" Asher gave her the "look". That dark, alpha glare full of fire and determination. "No harm will come to you here, Violet. I swear it. I'll protect you, even at the expense of my life."

Violet reached forward, cupping his face with both hands. Her thumbs brushed along his cheekbones, soft and grounding.

"I don't need you to die for me," she whispered. "We protect each other. That's how this works."

For a moment, Asher seemed to melt completely, leaning into her touch until he snapped out of it entirely.

"I don't like how easily people are walking into your mind," he said with a clipped voice. "We need to build your shield. Now."

Violet groaned inwardly. That damn alpha tone only meant pain was coming. She had barely slept off the previous training. So this was her fate now.

"I'm going to compel you," Asher said suddenly, already locking eyes with her.

Panic flared in her chest and perhaps it was the trauma from the last time but Violet's instincts kicked in, slamming down a mental guard before she even realized what she had done.

Asher's mind hit the wall she'd thrown up so hard, it was like he'd smacked headfirst into stone. He recoiled with a sharp hiss.

"Fuck," Asher growled, lifting a hand to his nose as blood spilled down.

"I'm so sorry!" Violet reached for his face, eyes wide as she tried to examine the damage, still completely baffled by what she had done. Or more accurately, how she had done it.

"It's okay. It's okay," Asher said quickly, lifting a hand to stop her.

He tilted his head back, pinching the bridge of his nose as blood dripped sluggishly. With his free hand, Asher pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his nose while Violet hovered nearby, watching him with guilt twisting in her gut.

"Just as I thought," Asher muttered, blowing into the cloth. "I can't get into your head anymore. Not unless you let me in."

Violet blinked. "Wait, so I can control my mental ability now?"

"I'd say you're more aware of it than before." He finally settled, his tone more teacher than Alpha. "And as expected, your powers are tightly tied to your emotions. Tell me, how did you put up that shield just now?"

She shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. You said it so suddenly that you were going to compel me and all I could think was, God knows what you'll make me do this time, and I just didn't want that."

"So you enacted the wall subconsciously." Asher nodded, impressed. "It was instinct but it worked. Still, it was a stroke of luck and I want you to be able to do it again next time without fumbling."

He tapped his temple thoughtfully. "One thing that helps, especially for beginners, is visual imagery. That works for both mental ability users and non-mental ones."

"Henry's not even a mental user, yet he's built his walls so high I can barely get in without distracting him. For someone like you, just imagining a wall can help block trespassers. The strength of the wall will determine how well it holds against an intruder."

Violet frowned. "So I have to imagine a thick, solid wall in my head all the time?"

"At the beginning, yes," Asher replied.

"It's like muscle memory. The more you train, the more instinctive it becomes. Eventually, your brain will know to put it up whether you're aware of it or not."

He went ahead to say. "Another thing you need is mental awareness. You have to know when someone's trying to get into your head, or your dream."

Violet's brows were knitted together as she listened attentively.

"When I use my ability, some people don't even notice until I've already got them wrapped in my hypnosis before they realize anything's off. That is if they do at all. For others, it feels like an itch at the base of their skull or a faint nudge. I think it varies from person to person."

He looked at her, dead-on. "But the point is you need to be able to sense it. Whether someone knocks before coming in or just busts the door down, you have to recognize both."

Violet inhaled slowly. This was starting to feel less like training and more like battle prep.

"You'll have to lower your shield now," Asher added. "I need to get into your head. But this time, your job isn't to block me. It's to feel me."

"Feel you," Violet repeated, eyeing him warily.

"Not like that. But don't worry, I'll be gentle." Asher said with a serious expression even though it somehow managed to sound like a flirt.

That shouldn't have made her heart skip, and yet it did.

Violet nodded, letting out a shaky breath. "Alright."

Asher's gaze locked with hers. Neither of them moved and just stared at each other.

"Concentrate," he murmured. "Sense it."

Violet forced her breathing to slow, eyes fixed on his. She let her shield fall and dug deep into herself. And then she felt it.

Like smoke curling at the edges of her mind, it wrapped around her like velvet and danger. And it reeked of him.

Smoked cedar. Dark spice. A sharp undercurrent of iron. It was powerful. But just when it should've overwhelmed her, jasmine bloomed in the center, soothing and intrusive in the kindest way.

Violet's heart began to race and she didn't realize how close they'd gotten until the air changed between them. Her breath mingled with Asher's and he leaned in slowly.

His hand hovered near her cheek, while hers was twisted into the fabric of his sleeve. Their lips were seconds from brushing when someone clapped suddenly and Violet jerked back.

"Oops. Sorry."

Roman stood away from them, a smugly apologetic smile on his face and absolutely no regret in his eyes.

"I just came to announce we're partying hard tonight!"

Then Roman took off while Asher glared daggers at him.

Chapter 459: Party Night

Violet purple was ready to party.

Right now, she stood in front of the mirror staring at the reflection.

The dress she wore was sinfully short. A black, body-hugging thing that clung to her like it had been stitched onto her skin. The neckline dipped so low Violet had no doubt she would have all the boy's attention till the night was over.

Tonight wasn't for soft tones or sweet girl energy. Tonight was for setting fire. So she painted her lips in a dangerous, blood-red hue, the kind of red that said kiss me and bleed.

Her eyeliner was bold, with the eyeshadow smudged to smoky perfection. Her hair was then curled, the ends a vibrant violet that shimmered under the light and she ran her fingers through the waves and let them fall however they pleased.

Violet then grabbed her leather jacket from the bed — cropped and snug with silver buckles that jingled when she moved — and threw it over her shoulders. It was just to ward off the chill that would settle in the garden outside, and not because she needed it. Her blood was already running hot.

Violet had an agenda for tonight and there was no backing down. With one last glance at the mirror, she smiled. Let the party begin.

She left.

Violet stepped out into the garden and paused.

Well, damn. Her men can't stop surprising her.

The entire garden had been transformed into a party space that screamed elite rebellion. Strings of soft golden lights crisscrossed overhead, tangling through the trees. The scent of night blooms lingered in the air blending with the low thrum of music vibrating through hidden outdoor speakers.

The grass had been trimmed perfectly, and was almost too soft to walk on, while scattered around the space were circular fire pits, each ringed with couches and velvet cushions that looked sinfully soft. This

was all shades of casual opulence, and if Violet wasn't careful, she might just melt into one of those and disappear for the rest of the night

And then there were the games.

Violet had no idea now it was possible but there was a large Twister mat that would definitely contain all four of the alphas if they decided to play together. Well, they would. They can't bring something this interesting and decide not to play.

A long drink table was set to the side with bottles of drinks on it. There were wine, cocktails, sodas, beer and whatever else they ordered. Yep, they were getting wasted tonight.

At the far end of the garden was a raised wooden platform wrapped in silver streamers and hanging vines serving as a makeshift dance floor. The lights there pulsed to the beat of the music thrumming low from the trees. Roman had already claimed a corner, moving in a lazy rhythm and taking the role of the DJ.

Violet smiled and then stepped off the stone path and into the grass, her heels sinking just a little as she moved towards him.

Laughter echoed from somewhere off to the side, followed by Alaric's familiar voice cursing loudly. Something about the drink being "too damn strong," and Griffin being "the worst bartender in history."

Violet smiled at the camaraderie in the air. She had a feeling this night was going to be a blast.

She hadn't even stepped fully into the party yet when Roman saw her and froze mid-dance.

It was comical though, one second, he was dancing carelessly under the garden lights and the next, he was stock-still, his gaze locked on her like she'd just walked out of his wet dream.

Roman's smoldering stare tracked her every step as she climbed the wooden stairs leading to the platform where he stood. She didn't look away, and neither did he.

By the time Violet reached him, Roman's breath was already heavy.

"You walk like sin dressed in silk," he said in a low voice, the corner of his mouth lifting like he couldn't help himself.

"And you stare like you want to be punished for it," Violet answered cheekily, her eyes glinting.

That was all it took.

Roman grabbed her waist and pulled her in, and she met him halfway, their mouths crashing together in a kiss that was all tongue, and heat. Roman kissed her like he meant to consume her, his hands exploring the curve of her back and her waist, unable to help himself. He wanted more. But unfortunately, this was all he could have for now.

They were still kissing when the others arrived.

"Typical Roman," Alaric drawled from below, his voice full of mocking judgment. "Can't hold his damn—"

But then Violet looked up and stopped talking at once.

"Holy hell," Griffin whistled. "Hot mama."

Even Asher's mouth fell open, his gaze dragging down the line of her legs to the plunging neckline and back up again. Who chose that cloth from the start?

Violet smiled, knowing exactly what she'd done. It had been her intention from the start and it was nice to know it was working.

She reached up, and used her thumb to graze Roman's lips, wiping off the red smear of her lipstick.

Then, without a word, she descended the stairs.

Asher was first in line. So she walked straight up to him and kissed him slowly, her hand cupping the back of his neck. He didn't move at first, but the tension in his jaw gave him away.

The next was Griffin and she kissed him playfully yet brief, but still enough to leave him grinning.

Finally, she reached Alaric.

His hands were on her before she even leaned in. He kissed her like he had something to prove, like the wait had been eating him alive. And Violet let him.

When they finally pulled apart, breathless, Alaric groaned. "You really want to kill us, don't you?"

Violet smirked, stepping back with a wink.

"It's a party, isn't it?"

She spun once, her dress catching in the breeze. "Let's get it started."

Chapter 460: No Pretending

"Drink! Drink! Drink!" Violet and Alaric shouted enthusiastically, cheering the two shirtless alphas who were going head-to-head in a drinking contest.

Roman Draven and Griffin Hale were upside down, balancing on their hands with their mouths latched to the hoses as cold beer streamed straight into them.

"One-ninety-seven! One-ninety-eight—"

Griffin had started to choke, his legs twitching in the air. Sweat beaded down his temples, and his grip on the keg hose was beginning to falter.

"One-ninety-eight!"

"Two hundred!"

A cheer went up, but Griffin was done. He sputtered, dropped down onto the grass with a grunt, rolled onto his back, and groaned loudly.

"That's it. I'm done. I saw the Goddess and she told me to stop."

Violet laughed at the statement yet went on counting.

"Two-oh-two!"

Roman was still going, upside down and wild-eyed, his jaw clenched around the tap like a man on a mission. At that moment, he indeed looked like a god of decadence.

"How is he still drinking?" Violet was impressed.

"Because Roman doesn't believe in moderation," Alaric said under his breath, eyes on the south Alpha. "South Pack breeds them like that, clubs on nearly every block, high-stakes tables in every basement. They party like it's tradition." He gave a dry smirk. "Lavida loca isn't a phase for them. It's their lifestyle."

"Two-twenty! Two-thirty!" Asher shouted since they stopped counting.

At last, Roman tore his mouth away, dropped to his feet with a fluid, acrobatic twist, landing perfectly. He was soaked with beer, his chest heaving, but his eyes gleamed like a man who'd just won the crown.

Then with a vicious shower, he grabbed the keg and tilted the rest of it upward, letting the remaining beer splash into the air and it rained down around him like a triumphant champagne shower, catching in the light as they roared.

"That's right, baby!" Roman yelled, pumping his fists into the air. "I'm the god of pleasure!"

Violet shook her head, biting back a laugh.

"You're disgusting."

"You love it," Roman called back, wiping his soaked hair from his face with zero shame.

Griffin, still sprawled out on the grass, raised a limp hand. "Tell my abs I tried, honey."

Violet couldn't help but burst into laughter. Then Alaric passed her a drink and she chugged it down, the garden coming alive again with the kind of energy that made her forget tomorrow existed.

"Let's dance," Roman said, and without waiting for her response, he was already moving to the beat.

Violet didn't hesitate, the warmth of the night was already buzzing through her veins. She was tipsy, and had to start watching how much more she drank. For once, Violet found herself wishing she had the fast metabolism of the wolves.

The lights strung above cast a golden halo over them, and Roman pulled Violet closer into him. They moved slowly, their bodies swaying to the music. Roman's hand was firm on her lower back, anchoring her, while the other caressed the curve of her hip in circles.

The world narrowed until all Violet could feel was Roman's breath at her ear, his fingertips drawing invisible shapes on her bare skin, and his chest rising and falling against hers.

Then Roman turned her until her back was to his chest and her eyes found Asher. He was lounging on the nearest couch with a drink in hand, watching them.

Except he wasn't just watching, he was practically devouring them. The way Asher's eyes dragged over her slowly, and with burning hunger made something twist low in her stomach.

So she decided to give him a show.

Violet raised her arms above her head, swaying her body to the beat, and losing herself in the moment. She rolled her hips, grinding back into Roman's hardness behind her, feeling the sharp intake of his breath against her neck.

Roman didn't speak. Not that he needed to. His mouth pressed hot kisses against her shoulder, her neck, his teeth grazing her skin. His hands roamed up her sides, brushed the outer curve of her breasts before sliding down and disappearing into the space between her thighs with a wicked slowness that had her goosebumps erupting on her skin.

Violet leaned into him, her eyes never leaving Asher. And that was all it took Asher to crack.

The west Alpha set his drink down and crossed the space in three long strides.

Without a word, his hand wrapped possessively around her throat from behind, and tilted her face toward his. His mouth met hers in a kiss that was all hunger and commanding, pulling a moan straight from her chest.

Violet melted between them. God, this was heaven.

Roman continued at her back, kissing the slope of her shoulder, his hand now cupping her breast with his thumb grazing over her nipple through the fabric of her dress.

She moaned again and this time it was directly into Asher's mouth.

The temperature in the air increased, heat blooming over Violet's skin, in her chest, and finally low in her belly. Her head was swimming and her body thrummed like it had been lit from within.

She was desired and surrounded by both men and in that moment, Violet didn't want to escape. She wanted more.

So when Roman's hand disappeared between her thighs again, he didn't tease like before. His fingers found her — wet, hot, and ready for him — and Violet broke the kiss just to gasp for breath. But all that escaped her lips was a needy mewl as Roman's finger thrust in and out of her, slow at first, then quicker.

"Oh God," Violet cried out when he added a second finger, stretching her, going deeper than before. His pace quickened, stabbing into her heat relentlessly.

Violet's hands flew to Asher's shoulders, her nails digging in. His arm remained wrapped around her waist, keeping her grounded as Roman played her like a fiddle, dragging wave after wave of pleasure through her with just his fingers.

"Oh fuck, I think I'm about to come—"

Her voice broke, stars exploding behind her eyes as Roman rubbed that one sweet spot inside of her.

Before she could cry out again, Asher grabbed her face and kissed her hard, swallowing the broken moans pouring from her mouth as she came apart between them.

Violet shuddered violently, her moan muffled against his lips, her body trembling from the intensity. Her fingers clawed at Asher's back, grasping him with a desperation that bordered on pain.

Behind her, Roman withdrew his fingers, slow and smug, and without hesitation, licked them clean, savoring her taste. At that moment, he looked downright feral with his eyes gleaming, lips wet, and smiling like a cat who'd just been given a treat.

Then Asher scooped Violet up without a word, carrying her over to the couch where he'd been sitting earlier. He sat down, pulling her into his lap, and let her relax into him, breathless, flushed, and completely satisfied.

They remained that way, just the two of them enjoying the moment until, of course, Roman ruined it.

"Twister time!" he announced, far too loudly.

Asher groaned while Alaric laughed at his antics. Griffin howled in excitement.

And just like that, the peace was shattered.

"Get up, sweetheart," Alaric said, already tugging her gently off Asher's lap. "The arena awaits."

"The what?" Violet mumbled, barely lifting her head.

"The mat." He pointed. "And your downfall."

Violet narrowed her eyes at all of them.

"You're insane if you think I'm playing in this dress."

"No backing out now," Roman grinned, already kicking off his shoes. "You're the one who walked in here looking like sin in heels. At least have the decency to play with your victims before you destroy them."

Violet rolled her eyes but walked barefoot toward the mat. The garden lights glinted off her black, body-hugging dress that was entirely inappropriate for a game that involved this much bending.

Her skin prickled with awareness as she stepped onto the mat, every movement followed by four male gazes that burned hotter than the fire pits surrounding them.

"I'm spinning," Asher announced from the sidelines, taking the role of a referee.

"Left foot, green." He announced.

Violet went first, stepping into place.

Roman followed her, intentionally staying close so she could feel his body heat, his thigh brushing against hers as he stretched beside her. Of course, he didn't say a word and just smirked.

"Right hand, blue."

Griffin dropped next to her, hitting the mat with smooth control. He planted his hand near her waist, and as he leaned down, her dress shifted, riding up just an inch or two.

Yet, Violet didn't miss the way Roman's eyes dropped and his gaze latched to her thighs, zeroed in, then went even lower. Her panties peeked beneath the hem, lacy and black and he saw it. And Violet knew he saw it.

Then without apology, Roman inhaled slowly and deeply, as if he was tasting her with nothing but his senses alone.

Violet felt her cheeks heat, and her muscles tightened. The game hadn't even started properly, and already, she was being devoured by their stares.

And they weren't even pretending anymore.