

Defy 471

Chapter 471: Alone With A Monster

The last thing Violet ever imagined was sprinting buck-naked through the woods, dodging branches and praying she didn't die with no clothes on.

They hadn't given her a second to breathe, let alone dress. One minute, she and Griffin were lying together, warm and safe, and the next, they were running for their lives.

She didn't know whether to be terrified or oddly grateful that no gunmen had caught up to her yet. Maybe they were far away, or maybe she was just their prey, meant to tire herself out before the real hunt began.

Violet had no idea where she was, nor how to find the others. And if those bastards found her first, unless her unpredictable power decided to show up, she was fucking screwed!

Still, more than fear for herself, it was Griffin she couldn't stop thinking about. The only thing keeping her from losing her mind was the bond pulsing in her chest. He was still alive.

But for how long?

Violet heard the distant roar of rushing water and she veered toward it on trembling legs and lungs that were on fire. She broke through the treeline and found a quiet pool tucked between the rocks with no one in sight. The moment she saw the water, her body gave up the fight.

She dropped to her knees and cupped handfuls into her mouth, drinking greedily. Her throat burned and her chest heaved but the cold water soothed her.

But even through the haze of thirst, something prickled at the edges of her senses.

Danger.

Every instinct she had screamed run.

She shot upright, ready to bolt, then cried out as something sharp struck her foot. Violet gasped, staggering backward, reaching down only to find a dart lodged in her skin.

A tranquilizer.

"Oh, no..."

Panic flared in her chest as a cold numbness spread up her leg. She dragged her foot, fighting it, but didn't make it far before another dart pierced her back.

She gasped, pain flashing bright before the world tilted sideways. She ripped the dart out, but the weakness was spreading fast. Her limbs had already turned to lead and her knees buckled.

The forest tilted as her body hit the earth, skin scraping rock and dirt. She couldn't move and was totally helpless. It was just her heart, thundering against a prison of flesh.

Then footsteps approached her. Violet tried to lift her head to see who it was, but failed until the person stepped into view.

Henry Nightshade.

Violet's blood ran cold.

God, no.

Henry Nightshade stepped into the clearing like a nightmare made flesh. His boots crunched the leaves with unhurried leisure as his eyes dragged over Violet's naked, helpless form.

"Well, well," he drawled, voice slick with amusement. "Finally, just the two of us alone."

Violet tried to move but nothing responded. Her fingers barely twitched and her jaw clenched. But even the rage that burned in her blood was no match for the toxin flooding her system.

"What did you do to me?" she bit out, each word gritted between her teeth.

"Oh, that?" Henry cocked his head, then glanced at the tranquilizer rifle slung in his hand, examining it like a trophy. "Gift from an old ally. Patrick. You remember him, don't you?" His smile stretched wider. "He sends his regards."

Violet's heart hammered. Patrick the mad doctor. What does he want with her? Was it because she got involved with the cardinal alphas?

Violet's heart pounded harder as Henry crouched beside her, close enough for her to smell the metallic tang of blood and smoke on his clothes.

His voice dropped, low and chilling. "You're not going to black out, by the way. No, no." He tapped the gun lightly. "This one's special. You'll stay wide awake and be painfully aware for every single thing that happens to you."

Her skin crawled.

Then Henry's gaze slid down her body with perverse slowness. At that point, Violet wanted to scream, to claw his eyes out, to disappear into the forest. But all she could do was lie there exposed and burning with fury.

"I think I see what my son sees in you," he murmured, his smile turning sleazy. Then he leaned in, inhaling deeply.

"You smell," he whispered, "delicious."

Goosebumps erupted across Violet's arms and it was not from the cold. That sick glint that told her exactly what kind of monster crouched before her.

From Asher's memories, Violet had seen what Henry Nightshade was capable of and would rather die than let him lay a single hand on her.

Henry saw the fear in her eyes and relished it. But then, almost mockingly gentle, he said, "Relax. I am not interested in a whore like you. Even I have my taste in women."

Violet exhaled in relief but that was only for a moment, she was still not safe.

"What do you want with me?" she asked, voice hoarse and shaking.

Henry's grin widened like a wolf baring its teeth. "For me alone?" he said darkly. "I'd end your pathetic life in a heartbeat. But Patrick wants you alive." His eyes glinted with cruel amusement. "Though, he never specified if you had to be in one piece."

Then, without warning, he stood and slammed his boot into Violet's stomach.

The breath wrenched from her lungs and pain coursed like fire, but all Violet could do was feel it. Her body remained frozen and paralyzed by the tranquilizers, her limbs numb, and her mouth too slow to even scream.

"Who the hell do you think you are?!" Henry roared.

He kicked her again—harder this time—and relished the raw sound of her strangled cry.

He remembered that damn water balloon, the fight and every other ways she had humiliated him so far.

How dare she? Who does she think she was to humiliate him, Henry Nightshade? He could sniffle the life out of her and no one would worry about an insignificant being like her.

Henry stood over Violet, watching her crumpled on the forest floor, gasping in pain and powerless. It was intoxicating, seeing her broken like this. It made him feel powerful. In control.

He bent down and grabbed a fistful of her hair, jerking her upright.

"Let's see if you'll laugh now—" he snarled, raising his hand to strike her across the face when a monstrous snarl ripped through the air as a wolf with wild green fur launched at him.

Chapter 472: The Suspicious Teacher

Adele trudged back to her quarters, exhausted beyond belief. It had been a hellishly long day at the clinic since her workload had doubled, if not tripled.

Just days ago, she'd been at her office minding her business when there was sounds of commotion. She'd stepped outside only to find men in suits arresting every single worker and doctor in the vicinity, seizing anything they could get their hands on.

They hadn't spared her either.

She'd been hauled off to the Lycanthrope Intelligence Agency (LIA), and interrogated relentlessly about her connection to Patrick Vales, or rather, Elias Turner.

They tried to be subtle, but Adele wasn't stupid. She knew exactly what this was. Alpha King Elijah was under fire—cornered by President Roy—and scrambling to clean up the ignis mess. A mess they were still desperately trying to keep under wraps.

Because, really, what would happen if the public discovered a drug existed that could give them powers like werewolves, but without knowing the consequences?

Even though humans and werewolves now lived side by side, racism hadn't magically vanished. Adele didn't even want to imagine what a hateful human would do if they got their hands on something like that.

She was eventually released, but that didn't mean she was over it. What pissed her off most was that Elijah had let her get taken. And for what? She knew practically nothing about ignis. Hell, she'd saved his precious heirs during the attack. And this was her thanks? That man didn't know the first damn thing about loyalty.

Thanks to that incident, the hospital remained shut until further notice. But her clinic? It was still very much open. Unfortunately.

In an academy filled with aggressive werewolves and spoiled human brats who'd rather fake an injury than endure one of Commander Malakai's classes, yep, life was thriving—note the sarcasm.

A vacation would have been nice at a time like this.

Sure, using her powers to heal was her life's calling. But babysitting these entitled kids? Not so much. Elijah had brought her here to care for his heirs, not to run the entire damn school infirmary.

At this rate, she'd need an assistant. Or better yet, she'd just take over the whole damn hospital. Elijah owed her that much if he was going to turn her into a full-time employee.

She'd bring it up with him later. For now, she needed sleep.

However, the moment Adele stepped into her quarters, she froze.

"What the hell?"

It looked like a tornado had ripped through the room, no, more like someone had ransacked the place with desperate, greedy hands. Furniture was overturned with the cushions tossed to the ground, but it was the paintings on the wall that gave her pause — hasty, chaotic drawings that didn't make sense.

It was happening.

Panic prickled at the back of Adele's neck as she rushed inside and there she was. Mary was curled up on the floor sketching like a girl possessed. Again.

Adele sighed and crouched beside her, trying to keep calm. She'd grown used to these outbursts since Mary's visions sometimes hijacked her senses and turned her into a frantic artist. She had even started keeping sketchbooks on standby to make it easier when the episodes hit.

Mary should've been in the East by now, at the Seers sanctuary, learning to control her powers. But Alice had insisted her "time here hasn't been served yet." Adele hadn't understood what that meant until now.

The floor was littered with pages upon pages of drawings scrawled in frantic charcoal and ink. Adele picked one up and though the lines were erratic, she could still make it out a girl surrounded by four wolves.

Violet.

Of course it was Violet. Nearly every one of Mary's visions revolved around the cardinal alphas and Violet Purple. Most were cryptic. But this one felt like a message that couldn't be ignored.

Adele began collecting the scattered pages. Several were odd fragments, unfinished sketches that didn't make sense until she pieced them together like a puzzle. As she shifted the papers into place, the fragments formed an image and it was of a building. Some lodge or something tucked away in the woods.

And then she saw it scrawled in jagged handwriting near the corner:

"Pine Ridge Lodge."

She whispered it aloud, almost like a question. But Mary didn't respond, still trapped in her trance, furiously shading a single spot on the next sketch until the paper nearly tore.

Worried, Adele reached out and touched her. Mary jolted upright with a sharp gasp.

Mary's eyes were wide as she looked around. Her hand loosened its death grip on the pencil and dropped it to the floor.

"You're okay," Adele said softly, steadying her. "You're safe now."

But then her gaze fell to the final drawing, and this one was more detailed, more haunting than the rest. A girl was hunched over what looked like a wounded wolf, her hands pressed to its side.... healing it?

Mary followed her gaze and said, "I don't think you're supposed to be here."

Adele didn't need further convincing at all. She was already on her feet, turning back the same way she came from.

These damn cardinal alphas were going to be the death of her.

Adele snatched up her phone and called Griffin. Violet had to be with him. But his line didn't connect.

Neither did Asher's. Or Alaric's. Or Roman's.

A string of curses flew from her lips. She was dangerously close to losing her mind.

Frantic, she searched up Pine Ridge Lodge and of course, it was real. A real, secluded cabin in the damn mountains. Just perfect for trouble. Great.

She spun around, ready to bolt to her car only to scream when someone appeared directly in front of her.

"Sorry to scare you," Micah said, eerily calm. "I was hoping to speak with the student in your custody with your permission but you seem to be in a hurry. Everything alright?"

"All is well," Adele snapped as she moved to walk past him.

But he stepped slightly into her path.

"Are you sure?"

That stopped her cold.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "What do you want, Micah?"

They were never particularly close. The man was too quiet, and too unreadable. Not to mention, he had a way of unnerving her even when he wasn't trying.

Micah tilted his head slightly, his gaze unblinking. "Your energy is all over the place, and the only times I've picked up something this chaotic from you is when the cardinal alphas are in danger."

His voice dropped an octave.

"What's happened this time?"

Chapter 473: Unexpected Team Of Two

What the hell was she doing?

Adele asked herself that question for the umpteenth time, gripping the wheel a little tighter. Of all the things she imagined doing tonight, driving to Pine Ridge Lodge with Micah of all people wasn't on the list.

How did they even end up here?

Well... apparently, Micah claimed Alice the seer had called him out of nowhere and told him to find her. Adele would have called that bullshit but judging from her own experience with Mary, this can't be games. The timing was just strange.

So here they were speeding on the road, heading straight into whatever fresh problem the cardinal alphas and Violet purple had landed themselves in.

Two rescuers were better than one, she supposed.

Still, the silence in the car was suffocating. It was tense and awkward. And unfortunately for Adele, she found herself glancing at Micah more often than she cared to admit.

This was the first time they'd ever been in such close quarters, and it was messing with her.

Demon-blooded or not, Micah was a glorified flirt with questionable morals and a disturbingly close relationship with nearly all the student body. Yet, sitting beside her now, Adele had to admit—grudgingly—that he was unfairly handsome.

Nope. Not going there.

Trying to distract herself, Adele broke the silence.

"I didn't know you were close to Alice."

Micah didn't look at her, just shrugged. "I didn't know about the woman until today. Trust me. If Violet and the alphas were in danger, why send me to find you? Why not just send me directly to them?"

Adele snorted, eyes on the road. "Beats me."

Silence fell again. Then, out of nowhere, he asked.

"Still spying on the cardinal alphas for my uncle?"

Adele's jaw ticked. "I was asked to watch over them. Not spy on them."

Micah arched a brow. The kind of look that said really, you want to argue semantics right now?

Adele exhaled deeply. "I don't do that anymore."

"Oh? What changed?"

She paused, then said quietly, "Your uncle's not the man I thought he was."

Micah let out a low whistle. "That's a shocker. Someone who doesn't worship the ground Elijah walks on. That's rare."

Adele rolled her eyes. But after a beat, she confessed. "The cardinal alphas, they're pitiful in a way. They were dragged into a life they didn't ask for, and given these powers that wasn't even their choice."

She glanced at him. "I'm their healer, Micah. That's more than physical wounds. I'm supposed to patch what I can't even see, heal every aspect of their fragile soul. You can call me their guardian if you want."

That actually silenced him for a while. Long enough that Adele started to fidget again.

"What?" she finally snapped, unable to take the stillness.

Micah shook his head with a faint smirk. "I think I might've misjudged you."

Adele blinked. "Wait, you profiled me?"

"I profile everybody," he said easily.

"What for?"

For a heartbeat, it looked like he might give her a real answer. But instead he just smiled.

"I'm a counselor, remember?"

Adele narrowed her eyes. She could tell that was a white lie. However, she let it be. They were not close enough to start confessing secrets even though she had said more words to him in a single night than she had ever done since coming to Lunaris academy.

"Approaching destination. Fifty meters to Pine Ridge Lodge." The robotic voice of the GPS broke the silence like a crack across glass.

Adele's body tensed. They were almost at the location. The road had narrowed into gravel, trees thickening on either sides.

"Kill the engine," Micah said suddenly.

Adele blinked, eyes darting to him. "What? Why?"

"If the boys are in trouble," Micah replied calmly, his tone darkening, "then whoever put them there might be waiting right at the entrance."

He made a fine point so Adele didn't argue.

The tires skidded slightly as she pulled the car off the path into a pocket of darkness under the trees. They stepped out, silence stretching thick between them, and began the descent on foot. The woods were eerily quiet, there was no chirping birds, no rustling leaves, just the crunch of gravel beneath their boots and the feeling of unease.

When the trees parted and the lodge came into view, Adele's instincts confirmed everything Micah had warned her about.

Several unfamiliar black cars were parked around the entrance, slick and expensive, gleaming like they didn't belong in this wild place. And guarding them were armed men in dark gear with guns slung at their sides, their postures too sharply to be locals.

Micah leaned toward her and whispered, "We scale the wall."

She gave a small nod. "Lead the way."

They circled the perimeter silently, cloaked by the trees and the lodge's tall stone walls. Micah moved silently, efficient, and far more agile than Adele had ever given him credit for. Then, without warning, he crouched and leapt.

Her breath caught.

He cleared the wall effortlessly like it was nothing and she stared, stunned. For someone who spent his days surrounded by books and hormonal teenagers, the man sure moved like a trained assassin. And that was sexy.

What the hell? Adele cleared the thought out of her head.

This was no time for distractions so Adele crouched, sprang and landed soundlessly beside him with the grace of a born werewolf.

Without thinking, Micah reached out and took her hand in his. And just like that, a spark shot through her palm like lightning.

They both gasped, freezing.

His hand dropped instantly, and he stared at his fingers as if he had been burned. Adele clutched her chest, trying to calm the wild hammering of her heart.

What the hell had that been?

Micah's brows furrowed, and for a second, something strange passed between them.

But the moment was shattered by the sharp crack of a gunshot in the distance.

They both jolted, their instincts kicking back into place.

Micah's eyes went in the direction of the sound, and his expression hardened. "Let's go."

Chapter 474: Spellbound

Henry tried to dodge the assault, but it was too late. The green wolf slammed into him with bone-crunching force, knocking him to the ground so hard the air rushed from his lungs.

He groaned, dazed, only to hear the low snort of fury and his eyes snapped up.

The wolf was gone now and in its place stood a massive, verdant bull, its nostrils flaring and his hooves pawing at the dirt with murder in its eyes. The line had been drawn.

It was either him, or him.

And then Roman charged.

Henry barely rolled away in time, the hooves slamming down where his chest had been moments before. Dirt exploded from the impact and by the time the bull turned, Henry had already scrambled to his feet and reached for his gun.

Roman came at him again and Henry fired.

The bull dodged the first shot and closed the distance. But Henry was faster this time as he dove aside, rolled, and aimed. His second shot landed on his target.

As soon as the dart hit the bull, it let out a guttural cry before collapsing, shifting mid-fall into Roman's naked form.

Henry laughed, boots crunching toward him. Roman yanked the dart from his side, but the paralysis was already taking hold. His limbs shook and he could barely sit up.

Henry's smirk deepened. "It's odd, my son being involved with that girl but you? No surprises there, Roman Draven. Like father, like son."

Roman snarled, lips peeling back to reveal sharp teeth. His eyes blazed greener than ever, almost glowing. He might not be as feral as before but he was still very much aggressive.

Then those eyes slit and he opened his mouth, revealing serpentine fangs, and sank them into his own arm. Venom pulsed through his bloodstream, rushing to counter the drug.

Henry's smile faltered the moment he realized what Roman had done.

Then Roman stood slowly and powerfully, a mocking smirk dancing on his lips.

A shadow fell over Henry's face. So that's how it would be. Fine.

The challenge was clear.

He tossed the gun aside, grabbed his shirt, and yanked it over his head. Then he dropped to a crouch, a guttural growl escaping him as his bones cracked and twisted, the skin tearing, and muscle reforming.

Moments later, a massive black wolf stood in his place. His thick fur bristled, razor-sharp teeth gleaming with thick saliva, and eyes burned with murder. The air around him reeked of dominance and thirst for blood.

He then released a long, thunderous growl that echoed through the forest.

"R-Ro-man..." Violet rasped behind them, her body still paralyzed. Her heart was racing. Roman might be gifted, but Henry was older, stronger and far more experienced. He was not his match.

But Roman didn't flinch. Instead, he shifted faster than Henry had. And like breathing itself, his wolf emerged.

He was nearly the same size as Henry's, sleek and majestic, his fur shining with youth, He took on a defiant stance and let out an equally thunderous growl.

He was not backing out of this fight. Yes, Roman stood before Henry undeterred and unafraid.

"Very well then..." Henry's wolf eyes seemed to say.

They lunged at each other, the wolves colliding midair.

For the first time, Griffin and his beast were in sync. They recognized each other's awareness and moved as one. But it was also heartbreak because they both knew they were going to die.

Griffin could feel his strength draining, the silver poisoning him from within. Still, he couldn't stop. He wouldn't stop. He had to protect Violet.

So far, he'd been holding off the soldiers, keeping them from reaching her and buying her enough time to escape to safety.

He wailed as another bullet tore through him.

As the toughest of the four cardinal alphas, they had singled him out. They knew once he was down, the rest would be easier to pick off.

But even Griffin had limits. Surrounded, and bleeding, he couldn't tell anymore if the blood coating him was his or his enemies'.

His vision blurred and darkened as he wrecked through another cluster of operatives until he caught one aiming straight at him. He couldn't avoid that. So

Griffin braced for the end.

Then out of nowhere, lightning struck the man dead.

Alaric.

Griffin nearly wept in relief.

Almost immediately, chaos took over with mercenaries screaming as some began turning their weapons on each other.

Asher.

He recognized the signature move instantly.

At that moment, every ounce of strength left him. Griffin collapsed, the earth quaking beneath his weight. His form shrank back to his normal size just as Asher rushed to his side.

"Hey, Griffin," Asher called, breathless.

All Griffin could do was groan in agony.

"Care to update me?" Alaric yelled, glancing between enemies as he kept fighting.

"He's been shot!" Asher shouted back.

"Shit!" Alaric cursed, half at Griffin's state, and half because a bullet grazed past him as he missed a strike.

"I'm pulling them out," Asher muttered, his jaw clenched tight. He reached behind Griffin's shoulder, his hand plunging into the wound.

The sound of squelching flesh filled the air. Griffin grunted in raw pain as Asher searched blindly, his fingers digging into the torn muscle. This was pure agony.

And the worst part? It was just one of three bullets lodged inside him.

Asher's hand came out slick with blood, the first silver bullet glinting between his fingers. He tossed it aside as it burned him. Normally, no bullet should be able to pierce Griffin's beast form. His body was thick-skinned, dense, and nearly impenetrable.

But silver was every werewolf's bane. Super strength or not, it ripped through them like paper.

Asher's gaze dropped to Griffin's lower abdomen, where a second bullet had punctured deep. He grit his teeth and pressed his fingers to the wound. "This is going to hurt," he murmured.

Griffin's answer was a deafening scream as Asher dug in.

"Almost there, almost there—stay with me—" Asher yanked the second bullet out, his own breath coming in hard gulps. Blood soaked the ground beneath them.

He found the last entry wound high on Griffin's shoulder. With a final push, he gripped the embedded silver, twisted, and ripped it out.

"Gotcha," he breathed.

But when he looked up, Griffin was still. His body was not moving.

God, no.

"Griffin?" Asher gulped. "Griffin!"

He grabbed his face, his chest, but there was no rise. Shit. This was not happening.

"Griffin, answer me! Hey! Griffin!"

Panic punched through Asher's chest. "We're losing Griffin!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "We need to get him help now!"

"I'm barely holding them back!" Alaric shouted from somewhere behind, his voice tight with fury, echoing between the gunshots now raining around them. More men were flooding in from the forest line.

Patrick must really want them dead if he had pulled in this much resources.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." Asher cursed, his hands pressing down hard on Griffin's bleeding shoulder. "Don't do this to me. Don't you dare. You hear me?" His eyes were burning with tears. "Don't make me tell Violet you died in my arms. I can't —"

A rustling sound snapped him alert and his head jerked up, already preparing to compel whatever target emerged from the trees.

But it wasn't the operatives but Adele.

And Micah?

There was no time to ask how or why the school counselor was here.

"He's dying!" Asher choked. "Please—he's not breathing!"

Adele dropped to her knees without a word, just like in Mary's vision, hands glowing as she pressed them to Griffin's chest.

But nothing happened.

Come on. Come on.

Asher's heart hammered wildly. "Please..."

Then slowly the blood stopped flowing. The wound began to mend and the bruises faded. With a loud, startled gasp, Griffin jerked upward.

Asher's eyes welled as he let out a relieved, almost hysterical breath. "Oh, thank the fucking moon."

Adele gave a shaky smile. "Next time, try not to die on us."

Griffin groaned. "I wasn't trying to be dramatic..."

Asher let out a laugh. He had been close to losing his mind.

"I cannot hold them back!" Alaric bellowed, drawing their attention as exhaustion began to creep in.

Asher started to rise, blood still on his hands from Griffin's wounds. "I've got it—"

"No," Micah's voice cut in, "I got this."

They turned, stunned, as the ever-composed Counselor stepped directly into the firing line.

Suddenly, the air shimmered.

It was subtle at first like static brushing against skin, but the sensation quickly intensified until it felt like a thousand invisible threads pulling tight around them. It wasn't just power. This was allure. Seduction. Magic so potent it curled beneath the skin and whispered in the mind.

Asher's throat dried, suddenly aching to move closer to Micah. Heat rushed through him and there was the overwhelming urge to touch Micah. To worship him. To obey.

But suddenly, he snarled and snapped out of it. "What the hell?"

Was that how that guy's seduction powers worked. It was the first time he felt that and it annoyed him that Griffin and Adele didn't feel the same.

But the armed men weren't so lucky.

One by one, they emerged from their hiding spots between the trees. Their guns were long forgotten and their coordination gone. They staggered toward Micah like moths to flame, the masks hiding their faces, but not the lust in their eyes.

They were spellbound.

There were at least ten of them now, staggering into view with slack jaws and trembling fingers as if they'd crawl to Micah if they had to.

Micah offered a charming, careless smile.

"Oops," he said. "Sorry."

Alaric's expression twisted in disgusted fury, and with a roar, released his lightning.

It didn't crash in a single burst. No, arcs of crackling blue leapt through the air like serpents with minds of their own. They split, twirled, and struck, each of it finding its mark with pinpoint precision.

Ten bodies hit the ground almost at once, twitching and scorched.

Alaric scowled at him, panting. "Don't pull that trick on me next time."

But Micah calmly blew invisible dust off his shoulder. "You're welcome."

Chapter 475: End Of An Alpha

The fight was an intense one.

Henry and Roman met head-on, the crash of their bodies sending shockwaves across the clearing, dirt spraying in all directions.

Henry snapped his jaws, catching Roman by the shoulder and flung him across the shore. Roman landed hard, a whimper escaping him as he rolled to his feet. But he didn't stay down. He was seeing this to the end.

Snarling, Roman charged at the Alpha once again. Their fangs clashed while they clawed at each other, the scent of blood and fur and rage saturating the air.

Henry was older, bulkier, and stronger in every way. His strikes hit like a boulder and each blow sent Roman staggering. Yet the younger Alpha kept getting back up.

He ducked under a slash and bit down hard on Henry's leg. Henry let out a furious howl, bucking wildly until Roman was forced to release. Roman then used the momentum to leap behind him, his claws raking across the thick hide.

Henry spun with brutal speed and caught him in the ribs. Roman gasped. Pain shot through his side as he was tossed again.

"You annoying fool," Henry growled, circling him. "You are willing to die for that wretch!"

Roman didn't answer the mad man. Rather, he crouched low, and charged at him as their bodies collided once more.

This time, Roman didn't pull back. He bit down near Henry's neck and held, even as the older wolf slammed him into a tree, the bark exploding around them.

Roman kept going.

He let go and slammed into Henry's chest and drove him back several paces. Then he struck with everything he had, ramming his head into Henry's jaw.

There was a cracking sound and Henry reeled from the impact. Blood burst from his mouth and splattered the ground. He snarled in fury, red dripping from his teeth. His eyes burned with such fresh hatred that even Violet shivered from the spot. That man was going to kill Roman and he wouldn't go easy on him.

Roman didn't even get a second to relish his short-lived upper hand before Henry pounced. The older wolf was done playing around.

He tackled Roman to the ground, his claws shredding fur and flesh. Roman screamed, writhing as Henry sank his teeth deep into his side and shook.

"Roman!" Violet screamed as his bones cracked and blood sprayed. Roman was fighting back but he was no match. He cried out as Henry slammed him into the mud, his fangs poised over his artery for the kill.

Then lightning flashed across the sky right as a black wolf burst forth from the trees like a blur and slammed into Henry with the force of a storm.

Henry howled in pain as sharp fangs tore into his side. He twisted off Roman, staggering back as blood poured from a gaping wound in his ribs. He had no choice but to shift into his human form to heal better.

Roman groaned behind Asher's wolf as he too shifted to his human form, blood streaming from his wounds.

Asher now stood between them, his black wolf form rigid and snarling. His eyes glowed with fury while his hackles were raised with his teeth bared.

Henry was stunned. "You'd protect him? Against me?"

But Asher shifted into his human form, his eyes colder than the grave.

"Anyone who hurts my loved ones is an enemy," he said.

"What...?"

Henry's eyes filled with rage. Had he known this fool would turn out like this, he might as well have ended him long ago. He had thought to give Asher a chance and spare him the fate that awaited his friends tonight, but in the end, he would indeed need another heir.

But what Henry never expected was for more people to emerge from the forest. And the worst part was that they were not his people. The cardinal alphas were complete, alongside that healer, Adele — who must have saved the heirs from meeting death.

Above all, Elijah's nephew was here.

For the first time that night, dread washed over Henry and he wasn't so sure of his plans anymore. If the rest of the cardinal alphas were The cardinal alphas were still alive, that meant they had survived Patrick's people somehow.

Henry had understood the risk of exposing himself, but he had thought it would be easy to grab Violet and leave, while Patrick's men finished the job. Who knew the boys were so determined to protect Violet to the point of death. Else he would have abandoned the plan.

Now, everyone would know what he had done and no matter, even if he survives tonight, he would be labeled a traitor and Elijah would personally kill him himself.

"You can't fight us all," Asher said, stepping forward with a thrill in his voice now. "You'll die here."

For a second Henry hesitated, his eyes flickering from face to face. He knew he was trapped. But that didn't mean he would go down alone.

Then he moved, but not toward Asher.

In a flash of speed, Henry dashed to the side, and grabbed Violet from where she lay on the ground, and yanked her up with one arm around her limp body.

"No!" Asher shouted.

The others started to charge but froze as Henry's teeth bared over Violet's neck. His snarl stopped them in their tracks.

Violet's body hung in his grasp, useless, her head lolling. She was still under the drug's effect and couldn't fight him.

Asher's voice dropped, trying to reason with him. "Doing this won't fix anything."

But Henry's eyes gleamed with madness. "No. It'll fix everything," he said. Then added with a sick smile, "When she's dead."

"No!"

Asher sprinted forward, but it was too late.

Violet screamed in horrible pain as Henry's jaws clamped down, a horrific sound echoing as he tore through her flesh. Immediately, blood gushed down his chest while Violet's body went limp.

"No!"

The cardinal alphas screamed in unison.

Lightning cracked as Alaric's fury struck first. His power slammed into Henry's shoulder, forcing him to drop Violet and her body hit the ground with a thud.

Asher was already there. His claws tore through Henry's chest with such force that blood splattered across his face.

But it was Griffin who lost control.

He had felt it. The pain and fear that Violet had felt through the bond. And now, it shattered something inside him.

With a primal roar, he shifted mid-leap, his wolf form slamming into Henry. He tackled him so hard the older man was nearly buried into the dirt.

Then came the beating.

Over and over, Griffin's claws and fangs tore into Henry. He didn't stop. Not even when Henry started to scream. Not even when blood sprayed and bones cracked.

Roman tried to call his name.

Alaric stepped forward, but even he held back.

There was no stopping Griffin now.

He ripped into Henry like a beast. The earth trembled beneath the onslaught and the trees shook with every impact.

And then, Griffin's massive paw slammed into Henry's chest and pinned him down.

The Alpha coughed, blood spilling from his lips.

Griffin's jaws closed around his chest. And with one final, guttural growl, he ripped Henry's heart clean out of his chest.

The muscle thudded in his mouth, still beating. Griffin didn't hesitate and crushed it in his jaw until it was pulp.

And silence fell.

Griffin stumbled back. His wolf panted hard, chest rising and falling with raw grief and rage. Henry's body was a mangled mess.

Griffin slowly turned around, shifting back to his human form. Blood was all over his skin like war paint, then he looked around for Violet.

A sharp breath caught in his throat when he recalled Henry hurt her.

His knees nearly buckled but Alaric and Asher stepped beside him. They didn't say anything nor judge him because they understood.

He had done what any of them would have done.

Their attention snapped back to Violet.

She was still lying there, limp and bloodied, her throat a torn mess of crimson.

"Adele!" Asher shouted, already rushing over.

Adele was already on her knees beside her, her hands glowing as she pressed them to Violet's wound.

"I've got her. Just give me a second."

Griffin, Alaric, and Roman circled around, hearts in their throats, watching every move. Micah gave them space, watching with a tight expression.

Slowly, agonizingly, the torn flesh began to knit back together as the blood stopped leaking and the skin reformed.

They breathed in relief now the wound was gone. Henry's plan had no worked.

However, Violet didn't wake up. Instead, her body jerked once, and then again, harder this time. She convulsed violently, her limbs thrashing, with her back arching off the forest floor.

"What's happening to her?" Asher demanded.

"I—I don't know!" Adele said, panic creeping into her voice. "I healed her! She should be okay!"

"Fuck!" Griffin snapped, staggering back as the ground beneath his feet suddenly darkened.

"What the—?"

Micah's eyes widened in horror.

"Get away from her," he said sharply. "Now. All of you."

Chapter 476: Kill Us All

Violet was on fire.

Whatever Henry had done to her, it felt like venom rushing through her bloodstream at the speed of light. Her heart was pounding so loudly she could hear the blood roaring in her ears.

She was screaming now—shouting at the top of her lungs, clawing at her skin as if a thousand fire ants were crawling all over her. She was being burned from the inside out, and she wanted it to stop.

Something was happening to her. Something awful.

It was tearing her apart, shredding her from within like it wanted to break free.

Maybe she needed to let it out.

Maybe she needed to be free.

"Violet?!" Griffin shouted, starting forward, but Micah blocked him with a firm arm.

"Don't!" he snapped. "Mate or not, she's unraveling right now."

"What do you mean by that?"

Micah pointed to the ground. "You look at that and tell me!"

Griffin's eyes dropped and froze. The earth where Violet had been lying had blackened like scorched coal. Worse, it was spreading, creeping outward in every direction. They had to take several steps back just to stay clear.

Pulses of light twisted beneath Violet's skin, flickering erratically like lightning trapped in a glass jar. With each scream she let out, the creeping darkness expanded, withering everything in its path. A small patch of vegetation near her blackened in seconds and disintegrated into ash.

Not only that, Violet herself was starting to glow. The pulses were intensifying, radiating brighter and faster.

"She's going to explode!"

"She's going to kill us!"

Asher and Micah said at the same time, exchanging wide-eyed looks.

"Whatever's happening to her, she's not in control," Micah said, his voice tight with concern. "We need to get out of here."

"And leave her here alone?" Griffin said in disbelief. The growl that came from Roman's throat showed he agreed.

Micah snarled back. "Right now, Violet is more dangerous to us than she is to herself. Whoever's standing near her when that energy explodes is the real sorry one." He added in a low, mocking voice, "You're her mate. Maybe you'll survive. Maybe not."

Griffin's face twisted with conflict. Micah's words stung because they were true. He knew what it meant to lose control, to hurt people. If Violet harmed someone she loved, even by accident, she'd never forgive herself.

"Then what about her?" Roman suddenly snapped. "What happens if she's hurt?"

He didn't look at Micah this time. His eyes were locked on Adele and Alaric, the brains, and the ones who were supposed to have the answers.

But neither of them answered. Adele's eyes were filled with helpless concern while Alaric swallowed hard, his eyes traveling back to Violet's glowing, writhing body.

That silence broke something in Roman.

"I'm getting her out of here!" he barked.

"No, Roman!"

"Don't!"

They lunged to stop him only for a bullet to slice through the air and hit Roman in the leg. He howled in pain, dropping hard to one knee as blood spilled down his calf.

"Do these cockroaches never die?!" Asher roared. His claws burst out as he charged forward, fury and frustration flashing in his eyes.

They had been found. Again.

More armed men were stepping out of the treeline. The fight was far from over.

"No, no, this is not the time for this," Micah groaned, running his hand down his face.

He should be in his place back at the academy, chilling and not giving a damn about others. But lo, here he was, trying to save these teenage boys from dying.

He eyed his sister, Violet, who only blazed brighter with each heartbeat, the glow beneath her skin turning dangerously unstable.

But it was too late. The boys had already run into battle, claws out and fury unleashed. Only Adele remained behind, focused on Roman, her hands glowing as she worked to heal him.

Even they had to move back when the spreading darkness slithered closer, devouring the earth inch by inch.

Griffin didn't hold back.

He launched into the air like a beast unleashed, vengeance blazing in his eyes. The first mercenary barely had time to shoot before Griffin crashed into him with brutal force.

Then he lifted the man up, his scream splitting the night as Griffin pulled him apart like tissue paper. Intestines spilled to the ground and Griffin didn't stop until the man was split clean in two, blood spilling on him like showers.

Meanwhile, Asher ducked, swerved, and twisted through the gunfire, dancing between them as if he were untouchable.

He got in close and punched the first man, sending him sprawling.

The second mercenary raised his gun, but Asher was already moving, ducking under the barrel and driving his claws straight into the man's kneecap. The bone crunched loudly causing the mercenary to fall with a strangled cry. Asher raked his claws across the man's chest mercilessly, blood spurting in thick arcs.

A sharp gunshot cracked behind him and Asher leapt to the side, narrowly avoiding the next round. In a blur, he reached the shooter and delivered a punishing strike that shattered the man's mask completely. Their eyes met.

Asher grabbed him by the collar. "Find the others. Kill them all. Don't stop until they're dead. Then kill yourself."

The man's pupils dilated. Numbly, he nodded and took off to carry out the command.

As for Alaric, he was drained and could no longer summon his lightning. But that didn't stop him. He snatched a fallen gun beside him, and got to work.

Alaric had always had a thing for precision, hence his aim was lethal. Just one squeeze of the trigger, and a sharp yelp echoed as his bullet found its target. And just like that, he took them out one after the other.

Blood coated the forest floor, but none of them cared. They had brought the fight to their doorstep, now they'd be the ones to finish it.

Chapter 477: Detonate

"Oh shit," Roman breathed, eyes wide as Adele pulled her hands back from his healed leg.

Violet was no longer on the ground.

She was suspended mid-air, completely weightless, as if the earth itself had let her go. Spirals of raw energy coiled around her, glowing brighter with each slow turn.

Her body was hovering at least six feet off the ground, her limbs slack, and her head tilted slightly back. Violet's hair floated around her like a halo of amethyst flames, moving as if underwater. It was quite a beautiful sight that left those who stared in awe.

Violet's eyes were shut peacefully. Almost too peaceful. She didn't seem to know what was happening, or worse, she didn't seem to know what she was doing.

The air changed.

The wind picked up fast, howling through the trees as branches bent and groaned under the pressure. Dust, pebbles, and sand from the nearby shore lashed against their faces while leaves whipped past like blades. This was no longer just wind. It was pure, unbridled power.

Roman shielded his eyes, hair flailing around his face. "We need to get out of here!"

"Oh, now you agree with me?!" Micah snapped back, already squinting against the gusts.

Then he felt the energy rippling through the air.

Micah's eyes went wide. "RUN! RUN NOW!"

He didn't wait and bolted.

That snapped the others out of it.

Asher spun, grabbing Alaric. Griffin snarled, glancing back at Violet one last time as her body began to pulse with terrifying frequency.

This time, they ran not just from the remaining mercenaries, but from the girl they were trying to protect because Violet was no longer stable. She was ticking like a time bomb and was about to go off.

Unfortunately, there was no outrunning what was bound to happen.

Violet exploded.

It was everything as heat, pressure, and magic, detonated outward in a single, catastrophic pulse. The air cracked with the sound of a thousand thunderclaps as a blinding flare of white-hot energy erupted from her body. The ground split open beneath her, the shockwave flattening everything in its path.

The heat hit first, unbearable and all-consuming. It scorched the earth, turning the soil into glass. Then came the force, a violent rippling wave that ripped through the landscape like a bomb dropped from the heavens. The energy moved fast, leaving nothing but destruction in its wake.

"Oh, fuck it!" Micah snapped, making up his mind in a heartbeat.

There was no explaining what happened next.

Immediately, his body turned to a black mist that twisted like a living thing. In that split second, the smoke shot toward Adele and Roman, wrapping around them like a cloak just before the shockwave reached them. Then it stretched, impossibly fast, whipping through the chaos and curling around Asher, Griffin, and Alaric as well.

The instant it enclosed them all, the world behind them lit up in pure destruction.

And then, there was nothing.

They vanished, pulled from the blast a breath before it could vaporize them.

Except the world reformed again in a violent lurch, and suddenly Asher, Alaric, Griffin, and Adele landed hard on a jagged black surface.

The air was thick with heat, suffocatingly dry, and choking. Lava flowed in wide, glowing rivers between cracked obsidian rock, bubbling and hissing as it spat fiery embers into the air. The sky above was pitch black, pulsing with angry red veins, and the air itself echoed with tortured, unending screams.

Asher's eyes narrowed, scanning the burning landscape. "Where the hell are we?"

"Literally?" Micah answered as he materialized in front of them, his body solidifying from the mist. He collapsed to one knee, panting heavily, like whatever magic he'd just used had nearly torn him apart.

"Wait a minute..." It dawned on Asher. "You brought us to hell?"

For a moment, everyone thought Asher would lose it only for him to ask. "Mind if I see my father?"

Micah rolled his eyes just as the groaning creak of armored footsteps echoed behind them.

Two massive demons patrolling a nearby ridge had turned. Their skin was gray and cracked like burnt stone, with horns that spiraled upward and eyes that glowed like dying suns. Spiked armor clung to their hulking forms as they raised their obsidian spears and froze, staring at the group with baffled expressions.

Clearly, they had not been expecting visitors.

Roman gave a small wave. "Hello?"

The demons blinked, only for their expressions to twist into rage suddenly.

They spoke in a language they did not understand, but clearly Micah did judging from the colorful words that left his lips.

The demons charged at them, but before their weapons could reach them, Micah's body exploded into mist again, wrapping around the group like a net of darkness.

The last thing they saw before vanishing was one demon's snarl as he swung his spear and the lava glowing brighter beneath their feet. And then, they were gone. Again.

They landed back where it had all started, except it wasn't a forest anymore.

Every tree had been flattened, torn apart by the blast. What remained were broken trunks, scorched stumps, and ash. Fires still smoldered across the ruin, casting a sickly orange glow beneath thick clouds of smoke. The air was hot and dry, filled with the acrid stench of burning wood, singed earth — and flesh.

Smoke was everywhere, clinging to their skin, stinging their eyes, and choking their lungs.

Micah collapsed instantly, hitting the ground with a grunt.

"Micah!" Adele shouted, rushing to him and falling to her knees beside his unconscious form, her hands glowing as she checked him.

But the boys weren't waiting.

Their feet were already moving, pounding over cracked dirt and splintered debris. Griffin, Asher, Alaric and Roman, all of them run to find her, their heart hammering in their chest.

When they reached the spot, they froze because a wide crater now replaced the spot where Violet had once been.

The center was still smoking, like the earth itself had been ripped apart and cauterized in the same breath, embers crackling in the pit's heart.

They couldn't see anything at first because the smoke was too thick. But when it cleared a bit, they saw her. Or rather, what was lying in the center of the crater.

It was a wolf.

And not just any wolf, but a purple-furred one.

No way...

Chapter 478: The Fae Realm

"Your Majesty."

Queen Seraphira opened her eyes to find Zuru, the court healer, hovering over her.

She tried to move but couldn't. Panic nearly rose in her throat until the memories came flooding back.

One moment she had been in court, holding session, and the next, a strange, draining sensation had washed over her. And then, there was darkness.

She raised her hand only to find gnarled roots buried in her veins. Realization struck her that she was beneath the Tree of Life.

Said to be the last surviving tree touched directly by the Goddess herself when she once walked among her people, the Tree of Life was sacred. It had the power to heal most illnesses or injuries. No wonder Zuru had brought her here.

To the untrained eye, the Tree of Life resembled any other, but it shimmered faintly with divine energy, and right now, that same energy pulsed visibly through the queen's body, tracing the glowing roots where they had entered her skin.

Zuru gave a subtle nod, and the roots began to withdraw, one by one, from her veins. Seraphira gasped softly as a hint of pain pinched through her arm. But then, at last, she was free.

Zuru gently helped her sit up.

"You lost a tremendous amount of power, Your Majesty," he said calmly. "We had no choice but to bring you here to recuperate."

Seraphira sat still for a moment, letting the pain ebb from her limbs and the last of the tree's energy settle inside her.

"How long have I been out?" she asked.

Zuru looked hesitant to respond. Then, she gently said, "It's been quite a while, Your Majesty. Two weeks at least."

Her breath hitched.

The sacred grove where the Tree of Life grew was silent around them, save for the gentle rustle of the wind. Towering trees encircled the glade, but none compared to the Tree of Life itself. Its root were buried deeply into the sacred soil, its canopy humming with divine power. Only the royal bloodline was permitted here, and beyond the reach of ordinary Fae folks unless permitted.

As the strongest of the Free Fae, Seraphira's well-being had always been prioritized above any other.

A sound of rustling leaves drew their attention.

From between the trees emerged a tall female Fae, broad-shouldered and battle-scarred. Her long green hair shined like moss under sunlight, and her pointed ears peeked out from beneath silver-clasped braids. She knelt at once.

"Your Majesty," she said solemnly.

"Rhara," the queen acknowledged, her eyes narrowing. "Update me. Now."

Rhara bowed her head. "After your collapse, your majesty, Baron has taken over matters of court."

Seraphira blinked. "What?"

She rose shakily to her feet, her voice laced with disbelief. "He should've felt it. We share a life force. If I was sick, he should have collapsed right alongside me."

Her heart was pounding now. "Are you saying Baron was never ill?"

Zuru stepped forward slowly, his expression grave. "If I may, Your Majesty, I took the liberty of reading your magic. What happened to you was no accident. Someone siphoned your power swiftly and violently. It wasn't a natural decline, it was theft."

The words sank in like a blade between her ribs and she didn't need her to say more.

There was only one person who could get such easy access to her magic.

Seraphira's eyes darkened. Her voice dropped, seething with fury.

"Baron."

Neither Zuru nor Rhara flinched.

They had long grown used to the war between Queen Seraphira and her consort, Baron. Their love - If there had ever been one - had rotted away years ago, buried beneath power plays, mistrust, and whispered threats. In one word, there was no love lost between those two. Only survival.

Seraphira turned to Rhara, her voice clipped. "Where is Zyrealla? She should have been with you."

The moment the words left her mouth, she noticed the change in Rhara's expression, and that alone was enough to make her stomach sink.

"What happened this time?"

"Your Majesty..." Rhara hesitated, then straightened. "Zyrealla has shifted her allegiance. She stands with Baron now."

The blood drained from Seraphira's face. "No. No, no..."

As if sensing what was coming, Zuru's mouth opened to stop her, but the queen vanished before the words could leave her tongue.

With a sudden burst of magic, Seraphira appeared in her bedchamber, her legs buckling beneath her. She cursed under her breath, catching herself against a wall. Moving with her magic had not been an issue for her until now. She hated this!

Yet Queen Seraphira pushed forward, stumbling toward the tall mirror framed in obsidian. Her hands shook, but her voice remained firm as she stared into the glass.

"Lilarín, séla'choráe en darúh vaelesán."

The summoning spell lingered in the air, the Fae words vibrating against the glass. But nothing happened. Lilarin did not respond even though she had been summoned.

She tried again, louder and harsher.

"Lilarín, séla'choráe en darúh vaelesán."

Still, the mirror remained cold.

A bitter stillness crept into her chest as the the truth struck her.

Lilarin was gone.

Baron must have gotten his hands on her. Only Zyrella knew how to summon her and she had betrayed. Why? For a couple of coins or promises?

Eyes still fixed on the mirror, Seraphira slowly closed them. And when she opened them again, her amethyst gaze burned like forged steel.

She turned and marched out of the room, throwing the doors open with a force that startled the guards posted outside. Their eyes widened, after all, the queen was supposed to be bedridden.

"Y-your majesty....!"

But Seraphira didn't stop, striding ahead with purpose. She had been silent long enough.

Now, it was time to remind them exactly who the Queen of the Free Fae truly was.

The throne room of the Free Fae Court was a marvel carved of living crystal and enchanted stone, and high arched ceilings. Ancient tapestries bearing the sigil of the free clans hung proudly along the curved walls.

At the far end, two thrones stood atop a dais. One was carved from moonstone and wrapped in flowing ivy, its back high and graceful, unmistakably the Queen's. While the other, though smaller, wrought of obsidian with gold filigree, stood beside it. It was Consort Baron's.

Yet today, Baron sat not in his own throne. He sat on the Queen's.

Draped in black robes trimmed with deep green, he looked every bit the noble consort : tall, broad-shouldered, with perfectly groomed dark hair and sharp cheekbones that could cut glass. He was the picture of calm arrogance as he reclined in Queen Seraphira's throne, one leg resting lazily over the other, fingers steeped in thought.

The court was tense today. Queen Seraphira had not been seen in two weeks and though it was said she was simply "recuperating," Baron had taken over her role and might as well have crowned himself, king.

Baron folded his hands, rings gleaming on each finger, and nodded toward the council.

"You may speak."

A scout stepped forward, armored lightly in leaf-woven bronze. "My Lord. We've spotted emissaries from the Summer and Autumn Courts crossing our borders. They wore no crest. They came cloaked, and discreet, but we know what they were."

The room murmured, unease crackling like a live wire.

Baron didn't even flinch. "And?"

The scout blinked. "And, your grace, that's a violation. They've trespassed sacred land."

"Perhaps," Baron replied coolly. "Or perhaps they were curious. The barrier is no more. We cannot hide behind ancient trees forever."

Someone scoffed.

An elder with bark-lined skin and golden antlers, stepped forward. "Curious?" he snapped. "Do you forget they once tried to purge us? That we only survived because the goddess herself shielded us? There was a reason we stayed separate."

"And perhaps," Baron said, voice velvet-smooth, "that separation has bred nothing but stagnation. Our kind hides while the outside world grows. I intend to lead us into a new era."

"By allowing trespass?" another voice chimed in.

"Their emissaries have no respect for our sanctums. Our rituals. They mock our ways!"

"They see our power and fear it," another councilor added, "and fear breeds ambition. Who's to say infiltration isn't the first step?"

Baron stood. Slowly. Like a man tired of hearing children bicker. "I am not your queen," he said, letting the words ring. "But in her absence, I speak for this court. And I say we must evolve. There is no progress without risk."

Then—Bang!

The doors flew open with a force that echoed down the chamber.

A gasp ran through the officials as a bloodied figure collapsed into view, dragging herself forward with trembling arms. Long dark braids matted with dirt and blood, her armor damaged and her hands shaking.

Zyrella.

Baron's face twisted, not with concern, but displeasure. There was only one person that could do this.

As expected, another voice followed.

"So this is the new order?"

Every eye turned and it was Queen Seraphira standing at the entrance.

Chapter 479: Royal Birth

"Your Majesty," all the councilors in the room bowed their heads in respect.

But Queen Seraphira's attention wasn't on them, rather on her husband who was seated on her throne as if he owned it.

Catching her gaze, he bowed his head slightly, but only for show. "My Queen..."

Seraphira looked away, her gaze landing on Zyrella, still crawling weakly on the ground. She scoffed, then strode forward, deliberately stepping on Zyrella's body as if she were nothing more than a bridge to walk across.

As expected of the Fae with their willowy looks, Queen Seraphira was slim and appeared as if she couldn't weigh an ounce. However, with the use of her ability, she manipulated her mass. And when she walked on Zyrella, it felt as though the weight of a boulder crashed down on her, forcing a cry of pain from her lips.

The pressure compressed her armor into her body, and she heard not just one but many bones snap. It would be hell removing that armor—if the queen spared her life.

But her hope was short-lived. Queen Seraphira stepped on her head, crushing it completely. There were gasps from the audience—some even looked away—but Seraphira remained unrattled, her expression composed.

Since she was barefoot, Zyrella's blood clung to Seraphira's soles, and with each step she took, crimson footprints stained the floor behind her. The trail of blood made a bold, chilling statement that sent fear down the spines of all who watched. Whatever mood the queen was in, none dared test it. No one wanted to be next.

Then Queen Seraphira was standing in front of the dais, staring at Baron with a murderous look.

"I gave you a seat beside me," she said. "Not mine." Her tone was clipped.

"Apologies, Your Majesty..." Baron said with no remorse, stepping down from the dais slowly. "I didn't realize ruling while you were indisposed was a crime."

He stopped beside her, adding, "It's nice to see you back on your feet, Your Majesty."

He made to move when Seraphira said coldly, "Stop right there."

Baron halted at once, lifting a brow as if to say, What now?

Before he could react, Seraphira struck. A rush of her power surged toward him. Instinct kicked in as Baron moved immediately to defend himself, their powers colliding in a violent clash that sent a gust of wind tearing through the chamber, nearly blowing some of the councilors off their feet.

But Queen Seraphira wasn't done.

She extended a hand and a guard's sheathed iron sword flew from its scabbard into her grasp. The blade danced through the air, no longer held but willed by the queen.

The blade streaked through the air, targeting Baron with lethal intent, and he barely dodged in time, using his ability to deflect the incoming strike.

Sparks burst mid-air as his power clashed with the blade, the force of it drawing startled gasps from the councilors. They watched in stunned silence, unable to look away.

Even Baron looked shaken.

He hadn't expected this from Seraphira. Had she forgotten they were bound together? If he died, she died too.

But Seraphira didn't stop.

With a cold flick of her fingers, she summoned every sword in the chamber. A sharp clang resonated as the weapons ripped free from their scabbards causing the guards to stumble back in alarm as their hilts flew out of their belts and took to the air answering the queen's command.

The second sword first slammed into Baron's stomach and folded him over with a grunt. Then the third hit his back, sending him stumbling. And the fourth hit behind his knee, then swept his legs clean from under him.

Baron crashed to the floor, the breath knocked out of his lungs. Before he could rise, five iron swords hovered above him in a perfect circle pointing down, and ready to end him.

One of the iron swords dipped low enough to kiss his throat, slicing it just enough to draw blood. A single crimson bead ran down his neck.

Baron swallowed. This was a warning from Seraphira not to test her.

So he relaxed on the floor anyway and let her do what she wanted.

The silence in the throne room was thick as every councilor was too stunned to speak after what they've just witnessed.

Then, against the pounding fear in her chest, Councilor Ada rose slowly from her seat.

"Your Majesty," she said carefully. "Forgive me, but what exactly is happening?"

With the cold elegance of a ruler, Queen Seraphira explained to her council.

"My consort," she began, her voice sharp and cold, "has been siphoning my powers behind my back."

Everyone gasped in shock.

The queen continued. "He has risked my life to gain strength for himself and such treachery is not merely a personal offense, but an attack on the crown."

A heavy silence fell on everyone. No one knew what to say without getting on the queen's bad side.

"Baron took advantage of the life-bond between us. He knew I would not strike him fatally. He knew his death would claim mine too. And in that knowledge he grew ambitious."

Another wave of murmurs arose. Some leaned in toward one another, others stared at Baron in disbelief.

"Consort Baron will be—" A sharp gasp escaped her lips.

Seraphira staggered, grabbing the edge of the dais for balance. Her eyes widened.

"No..." she whispered. Not now.

Councilor Ada was on her feet. "Your Majesty! Are you well?"

But the queen didn't answer.

Outside, the once clear skies began to twist. Clouds spiraled unnaturally, darkening with alarming speed and the windows rattled.

"What is happening?!" someone cried.

There was the sound of chairs scraping as councilors rushed to the windows. They watched as darkness fell on them.

Then came a shout from one of them. "I see two moons!"

The room exploded in commotion.

"Two moons?"

"That's not possible—"

"Such an eclipse happens only during a royal birth.... ?"

But Seraphira knew the truth. Violet's powers had just been unbound.

Chapter 480: Trial Of Ascension

The goddess had just announced Violet's awakening and now, everyone was going to know about the child she had birthed in the human realm.

Baron's cold and cruel laughter broke through the commotion.

He lifted his head from where he lay sprawled and with a summon of his air ability, slammed the hovering swords away and sent it across the floor.

Consort Baron rose to his feet slowly, dusting himself off, his eyes gleaming with cruel amusement.

Queen Seraphira didn't move. Her expression had paled to a shade just shy of ghostly, her posture rigid.

The noise had drawn the attention of the councilors, many of whom had still been huddled at the window, trying to make sense of the impossible. Even now, the sky outside remained dark, the twin moons casting an eerie glow across the land.

"But the queen isn't pregnant," someone said.

"So how can the free Fae have a heir already?" another followed.

The speculation circled the air until Baron's voice cut through it all.

"Perhaps that question," he said, loud and clear, "should be directed at Her Majesty."

There was silence.

Seraphira swallowed, her throat suddenly dry as every head turned. The weight of their gazes fell on her like stones. One by one, the councilors returned to their positions, eager to hear the truth from her.

Councilor Ada asked this time, her brows furrowed. "What do you mean by that, consort Baron?"

Baron didn't even look at her. His smirk widened. "Exactly. Ask your queen. "

Seraphira's venomous eyes burned into her husband. If they weren't connected, she swore she could have melted him right now. But he smiled harder, basking in the rising tension like a man who had already won.

Perhaps if the previous queen and her mother had known, she would have let her die because Baron was literally a weapon fashioned against her.

Then another voice joined in.

Councilor Enock, stepped forward. He was Baron's relative, and he asked. "Speak, my queen, what is this omen we see outside the window?"

Seraphira's hands clenched at her sides, her nails biting into her palms. But then she exhaled deeply and lifted her chin.

"You're right," she confessed with a steady voice. "I have an heir in another realm."

Gasps rippled through the chamber.

Instantly, the councilors erupted into a flurry of murmurs. Their reactions were not encouraging, faces twisted in confusion, outrage, and disbelief. Whispers turned to low arguments and some looked to each other as if seeking confirmation they had heard correctly.

Even among the Free Fae—who had long accepted Seraphira's rebellious streak, her escape from the realm as a wild youngling—none had known this. No one had known about Violet. The old queen had guarded that secret like a sacred shame.

The Free Fae married among their own. It was tradition. That she had been mated to a beast—as the council often referred to the wolf shifters—was shameful enough. That she had borne his child? That was unbelievable — even if the goddess bonded them.

Seraphira said. "I'm sure everyone in this room is aware of the union that almost took my life. Yes, the goddess mated me to a wolf shifter and from that union came a child."

More murmurs followed. They were harsher this time and she could see the judgement on their faces.

But before she could speak again, Baron's voice rang out, soaked in mockery.

"Her Majesty accuses me of betrayal while she hides a she-child sired with a wolf?" He turned to the council with a grand sweep of his hand. "She speaks of the sanctity of Fae blood, of the dangers of outsiders, yet her own daughter is one of them."

Seraphira hissed. "My daughter is not an outsider, and you will do well to speak carefully about her."

But Baron only laughed again, full and loud and shameless.

"Then where is she?" he challenged. "Why is she still in the human realm, Your Majesty?"

Seraphira knew what this was. Baron wanted her to lose control and say too much. But she couldn't give him that satisfaction. The royal house could not be seen fractured. Not in front of the council. Her people cannot begin to question her rule.

"My heir," Seraphira said carefully, "was left in the human realm where she would be fostered, grow in peace, and return to take her rightful place when the time is right."

Then Baron tilted his head, his eyes gleaming. "When exactly is the time, Your Majesty?"

Seraphira's jaw tightened.

Baron let the pause stretch long enough for tension to sink its claws deep.

"As Her Majesty's consort, bound by law and life," he began, "I claim my right. That child belongs to us. Bring her to the realm. If she is truly the heir..." He smiled darkly. "Then let her survive the Trials of Ascension."

"What?" Seraphira whispered, her voice almost stolen by disbelief. Her eyes narrowed. "You can't be serious."

They wanted Violet to take that deadly test?!

"Oh, but I am," Baron said. "You gave me no heir, Your Majesty. And now we discover one exists, hidden from the court, and raised among humans?" He turned to the council. "If she is a true Fae, then let her prove it."

The murmuring returned, louder this time. This time, there were nods. Councilors whispered and exchanged glances, and slowly the consensus began to take shape dangerously.

Seraphira's voice rose sharply. "She doesn't know our way. She's never walked these lands or spoken our tongue."

"Then teach her," Baron replied without hesitation. "Or let her fail."

There was more nods and Seraphira saw the support folding like cards into Baron's hand, one by one.

She straightened, her expression shifting into icy authority.

"I am Queen of this kingdom," she silenced them. "And I say we've had enough for today."

Baron's smirked. He knew he was winning.

Seraphira's eyes swept over them all. "We will revisit this matter at another time. Until then, I must consult with the rest of the Free Fae. This session is dismissed."

Then she turned on her heel and walked out because if she stayed a moment longer, they'd see the fear on her face.

What had she done?

All this while, she had believed hiding Violet's powers was the right thing to do, but it seemed she had done more harm than good.

Goddess help her.