

Defy 511

Chapter 511: Secret Mission

Ziva was on her knees with her head bowed, and her hands resting on her thighs, every muscle in her body coiled tight. Her sisters stood in the far corner of the room, watching the scene with tense expressions, each of them careful not to draw their father's anger towards themselves.

"Why," Angus thundered, "did you send Lilian after Violet? Did I order you to?"

Ziva looked up, her expression composed even as her heartbeat drummed against her ribs. "I only wanted to make an introduction," she said. "Violet has to know we have an eye on her."

"Oh?" Angus's tone turned to ice. "You have an eye on her?"

At that question, Ziva lowered her eyes again, her lips tightening. "No."

That earned her a mirthless laugh from Angus. It wasn't humor, but mockery, the kind that scraped like broken glass across pride. A flush burned right beneath Ziva's pale skin.

Perhaps it's the magic in Violet's blood, or she was blocking her out with something, but Ziva couldn't spy or scry her whereabouts. Not even with her mother's bloodcraft ability. So she had sent Lilian to get her DNA. And she failed woefully.

The silence that followed was suffocating.

Then, without warning, Angus seized her by the front of her dress, dragging her up enough that her knees scraped against the stone floor.

His voice dropped, low and lethal. "If you make a move on Violet without my command again..." His head turned toward the others, his eyes sweeping over them. "Any of you.... you'll have me to face that day."

He shoved Ziva back, releasing her as though she were something foul, and stormed from the room. His footsteps faded, leaving the air brittle and unmoving.

No one spoke. Not until Layla, the one who never knew when to keep her mouth shut, broke the silence.

"Why does he even act careful around Violet? As powerful as she is, she can't take all of us alone."

"Because she's the daughter of his mate," Ziva spat, venom dripping from every word.

Just like that, everyone was reminded of his father's Fae mate. As cold-hearted as Angus was, the loss of a mate was a death of its own that gnawed at him endlessly.

That was why he'd immediately turned to Sarah, Ziva's mother. She had drowned his heartbreak in magical dopamine until he could breathe without choking on it. But everyone knew the truth: mates who rejected each other rotted in longing until eternity ended.

Perhaps it had to contribute to why he was partial towards Violet. But then, no one ever knew what Angus was thinking. Not even them.

Lilian, freshly healed by the twins and leaning against the wall, had the bad sense to shift uncomfortably under Ziva's stare. She didn't have time to brace herself before Ziva's hand cracked across her face.

Lilian hit the ground hard.

"I gave you one simple task," Ziva snarled, kicking her in the ribs. "And you fuck it up?"

She kicked her again. "Pathetic!"

Enya, perched on a chair with childlike curiosity, clapped her small hands and giggled. Her twisted delight was the kind only a demon's corrupted soul could produce.

Hannah looked away, exhaling through her nose. She had no patience for this petty, ugly display of power.

Ziva kept going until Lilian's breath came in shallow bursts. Only then did she straighten, smoothing her hair as though she hadn't just beaten her sister bloody.

"Get out of my sight," she ordered.

Lilian didn't need to be told twice. She stumbled to her feet and left, clutching her side. The others said nothing. In this family, silence wasn't cowardice, it was survival most times.

"Are you going to leave this alone?" Layla asked from where she lounged, her tone a lazy challenge. "I haven't seen you back down from a fight before."

Ziva didn't answer, but the glint in her eyes was enough. Angus's warning might as well have evaporated into the cold air between them.

Lauren pointed out. "Earlier when she woke, Lilian said something interesting about Roman Draven, the other Cardinal Alpha, acting all possessive, and the room reeked of sex. Isn't our dear sister mated to Griffin Hale? She couldn't be getting it on with Roman too, right? They say mates are territorial."

Layla laughed in a way that made you feel stupid for even opening your mouth. "You ask such silly questions, Sister. Violet still has our blood. If Father is any example, then you know she wouldn't be any different from him. Power doesn't settle for one. It takes, and takes, until nothing's left."

Then her lips curved into a slow, feline smile. "Although I get why our dear sister would want Roman Draven. That man's like a sex god..." Her voice dropped to a purr, thick with lust. "If we could get him in bed with us, it would be heaven."

She leaned toward Lauren as the space between them vanished in a kiss that was far from innocent. It was slow at first, a slide of lips, then deepening until they reached for each other's hair and their mouths moved with greedy familiarity. Lauren's hand slipped beneath Layla's jaw, tilting her head for better access, the wet sound of their kissing echoing in the room.

So they weren't hiding it anymore. Hannah turned her head away, disgust tightening her features. Her gaze, unfortunately, collided with Ziva's.

Unlike her, Ziva didn't seem the least bit bothered. Why would she? In this family, the word "abominable" meant nothing. And if anyone's relationships deserved that word, Ziva's certainly did.

With the heavy petting going on between the twins right now, Hannah would bet they could strip naked in front of her and Ziva wouldn't so much as blink. Hell, she might even join them.

"You."

Hannah's focus snapped back to Ziva at the sound of her voice. There was a strange realization in her sister's eyes, the kind that made Hannah feel like she'd just been labeled as a weapon.

"Me?" Hannah pointed at herself, wary. She didn't like that look. Not one bit.

"Yes, you," Ziva said, straightening to her full height. "I want you to leave the village and go on a secret mission for me."

That doesn't sound good. However, she didn't show her discomfort.

"What is it?"

Ziva's lips stretched into a smile that showed too many teeth. "I want you to keep an eye on Violet Purple for me."

Oh, shit.

Hannah swallowed hard. This could either be the dream she'd been waiting for, or the nightmare that killed her.

Chapter 512: Where Is My Son?

Henry Nightshade had not been the most likeable person, but seeing the empty position where he should be seated still put a heavy mood over the meeting room. The chair sat there untouched, reminding everyone what had happened.

The Alpha King's residence was never the kind of place where people showed grief, but the air felt colder today. Even the sunlight through the tall windows looked weaker, like it didn't want to come in, mourning for the Alpha's loss.

Alpha Irene sat straight with her arms folded, staring past the table. Aeron had broken away from her as soon as they arrived in the city, heading to find their son and protect him if push came to shove.

Across from her, Alpha Caspian leaned close to his wife, Zara, whispering in a hushed voice, as if anyone in the room couldn't hear them with their werewolf hearing. Their eyes kept flicking toward Henry's empty chair and then away again.

Leon Draven sat like a statue, Henry's death hitting him the hardest considering the two of them had been closest. His wife, Alexa, sat beside him with her hands loosely locked together, her gaze giving nothing away.

All of them had arrived early that morning from their various packs after the unfortunate incident had reached them.

The door opened right at that moment and Alpha King Elijah walked in.

The room didn't relax at his presence, it tightened. Conversations stopped at once and no one dared look at him for too long, bowing their head in respect instead.

Elijah walked to the head of the table, but he didn't sit. His eyes moved slowly over each person before stopping at Henry's chair.

"Henry Nightshade is dead," he announced, his voice calm but cutting. "This is not just an ordinary loss, but one that changes the balance in this council and beyond."

No one spoke.

"I won't waste time with sympathy," Elijah went on. "His absence leaves cracks in the West Pack, which is why Asher Nightshade, his heir, has traveled down before those cracks can be exploited by our enemies. That means he won't be available to tell us what really went down in that unfortunate accident.

"However, it's a good thing Alaric Storm had the sense not to go AWOL like the others."

At that announcement, the door creaked open and Alaric quietly stepped into the room. All eyes were pinned on him but he didn't falter one bit.

When he reached the center of their attention, he inclined his head first toward Elijah, then toward the other Alphas.

"Your Majesty. Alphas," he greeted, his voice carrying just enough deference to match the room's gravity.

Zara was the first to rise from her seat. She didn't hesitate, crossing to her son and pulling him into a fierce embrace. It was the kind of embrace that said she'd imagined every possible worst case until she had him in front of her. She pressed a kiss to his forehead before pulling back just enough to scan him, her hands moving over his shoulders and arms as if checking for hidden injuries.

"Thank the goddess you're safe, son," she breathed, the relief clear in her voice.

Caspian followed her, standing at her side until she stepped back, then pulled Alaric into a firm hug. There was no words, just a father grounding himself in the fact that his boy was real and alive.

Zara's questions came the moment Caspian let go. "What in the world happened? What were you doing outside of school?"

"I think all of us are curious to hear about that," Irene's voice cut in from her seat, her voice calm but edged. "So if you don't mind taking your seat and not hovering over the boy, he has been through a lot. All of our children have been through a lot in one night."

Zara turned to her with a pointed look that said she had something ready to fire back, but Irene met her stare without flinching, daring her to try.

"You're right. Our sons are all in this together, and since Alaric is here, we can hear from the horse's mouth," Caspian said quickly, stepping in before either woman could push further.

Tight-lipped, Zara went back to her seat, the scowl still on her face. Caspian sat after her. Zara and Irene had never been best friends, but Alaric and Griffin's closeness had made them relate with each other. However, that tolerance had thinned lately, especially over Violet and the unusual way she fit into both their sons' lives.

The Alpha King watched the exchange, then sat down with an amused scoff. He could already tell he was going to enjoy himself. His council and pack wardens were never short on drama.

"So, how did it happen? Tell us all," he said, nodding toward Alaric.

Alaric licked his lips, mentally bracing himself. "I was the one who booked Pine Ridge Lodge. I just wanted to get away from everything."

"Get away from what exactly? I don't recall anything unsettling happening that would make you skip school, Alaric," Zara cut in.

His jaw tightened. "Since you're not interested in your son's love life, I'll remind you that your workaholic of a son was in a polyamorous relationship with Violet until the goddess decided to mate her with Griffin." He said it flat, not flinching from the anger in his mother's eyes.

"I think we should let the boy speak without interrupting him," Alexa said, her words laced with meaning. "I get that mama bear wants to protect her cub, but the heart wants what it wants."

Unlike Irene, whom she tread carefully around, Zara met Alexa's eyes with open disgust. How dare she compare her adulterous lifestyle to her son's... her son's ...

Zara drew in a slow breath. Goddess help her.

Alaric went on. "The others found me at the lodge with Violet, and we decided to spend time together."

"Spend time together how?" Elijah asked this time, his gaze narrowing on him. "You're telling me you all decided to pursue a relationship with Violet despite knowing she's mated, and Griffin agreed to that?"

"Exactly," Alaric answered, bold and without hesitation.

The sharp intake of breath from Zara and Caspian was loud enough to carry across the table. Zara especially looked like she might collapse any second, her eyes wide with horror and disbelief. Was her son out of his mind? How could he go after a mated female? What had that girl, Violet Purple, done to him?

Irene didn't look even mildly surprised. Leon Draven raised his brows, but there was no judgment in his eyes, nothing like the way Zara stared at her son, as if his words had just split her heart in two.

Alaric continued, his tone heavier now. "That particular day, Violet went into heat. It hit all of us, Roman especially lost it. We didn't know it was the signs of the second mate bond snapping into place. He'd gone feral, so we chained him up. That meant Griffin and Violet were alone when Patrick's men showed up. Griffin got injured trying to protect his mate, but Adele's arrival with Micah saved them.

"Unknown to us, Alpha Henry had tracked us down too. He must have been worried about Asher after the way he vanished from the hospital. Henry was the one who found Violet first before we got there..."

Alaric's heartbeat stayed steady, a conscious effort in a room full of werewolves who could hear a lie before it was spoken. For Violet's sake, he didn't slip once.

"It was an intense fight. Patrick wasn't playing because he came to kill us. We had no idea what kind of weapon they had until it was too late for Micah to stop it. Henry was busy fighting them off, and he

couldn't reach the device before the explosion. Micah barely managed to teleport us to Hell, but we weren't welcome there either. We had to come back and when we did, there was nothing left but destruction. That's when it dawned on us, we lost Henry."

Alaric let a single tear slip down his cheek, and he didn't bother to wipe it away. "Henry fought like a true Alpha that day," he said with a shaky voice. "He didn't back down, not once. It... it kills me that we couldn't save him."

The silence that followed was heavy. Even Irene couldn't help but feel sympathy for Henry.

Alaric hadn't thought he was capable of pulling it off, but his performance was flawless and no one doubted him.

Elijah announced. "Henry Nightshade will be buried as a hero. The mourning bells will be sounded in every territory under my command, and his name will be etched in the Hall of Alphas. No one will forget the way he fell defending his own."

No one objected to that. As horrible as Henry had been, that was a honorary way to die as an Alpha.

Leon asked next. "What about my son?"

Irene followed. "And my son? Where is he?" She leaned forward, looking him in the eye. "Where are they?"

Alaric answered them. "Roman is now mated to Violet as well, and he's in the middle of the mating fever. I have no idea where they are but they'll return when they're ready."

Chapter 513: Celebrate The Double Bond

"I think that will be all for now," Elijah said to Alaric. "You may return to your chambers while the Alphas and I discuss important matters."

Alaric gave no objection. He bowed his head respectfully and left, the guards shutting the door behind him.

With him gone, the air grew heavier. Whatever the Alphas had held back in his presence now had room to surface.

Zara was the first to speak. "If Asher Nightshade takes the position of Alpha, doesn't that give him an advantage over our children when it comes to fighting for the Alpha King position after graduation?"

Irene didn't miss a beat. She said, "Why don't you die as well, so your son can take his rightful place as Alpha?"

"What?" Zara reeled, the words striking her like a slap across the face.

Irene said with a cutting tone. "Oh right, you're not the Alpha. Your husband is. But you certainly like to act like one."

"Irene!" Zara snapped, her temper finally breaking.

"Alpha Irene," she corrected her coldly, a reminder of her rank and the authority that came with it.

"Can we not fight right now," Leon said, surprisingly the one to sound like reason. "This is not the court of children, it's the council of leaders. We are already down by one, and our enemy is still out there. So why don't we start thinking about how to get to Patrick before one of us at this table ends up as his next victim?"

His words cut through the room and left an uneasy silence behind. Zara looked away, clearly annoyed, while Irene kept her face blank.

Caspian cleared his throat and turned to Elijah, "Do we have any leads on Patrick Vale?"

"Elías Turner. That is his real name," Elijah said, his tone edged with disdain. "His family has always been anti-werewolf to the bone. For generations they have lived off the blood of our kind, some as bounty hunters, others as werewolf hunters. Every branch of that line is steeped in hate."

He let the words sink in before continuing. "From the tracing of their bloodlines, it turns out they are descended from the Gerald bloodline. And it seems they intend to finish what their ancestors could not do and which is wiping us off the face of the earth."

Irene snorted under her breath. "And to think you let our kids under the hands of this maniac."

Elijah looked at her. "Are you blaming me for this?"

"With all due respect, your majesty. Ten years ago, we had no choice but to hand our kids over to that madman for your research, an experience my son has never recovered from. The least you could have done, if you cared for those boys, was make sure Patrick was legit. You practically handed my son to the enemy." Irene's chest heaved as she spoke, anger and years of frustration breaking through. There was no fear in her eyes.

Every Alpha turned to Elijah, waiting for the explosion. After all, no one spoke to him like that.

But instead of fury, Elijah said. "You're right. This is my fault."

Irene blinked. She had not expected that. Neither had the others, the shock rippling across the room. Elijah never admitted mistakes.

"I am earnestly sorry for that," Elijah went on, his gaze steady on Irene.

For a moment she could only stare at him, speechless. Then she looked away, pushing down the sudden wave of emotion rushing to the surface. After all these years... after all that pain... she was finally hearing the apology her son Griffin deserved.

Years back, Elijah had demanded the heirs be handed over to Patrick for observation. But Irene had always known the truth: the man had been threatened by their powers and sought to suppress them.

She had no choice back then. With Elijah pressing down on them for conducting the ritual that empowered their children, it had been either lose her son completely or hand him over to whatever plan Elijah had laid out. She had chosen the lesser evil.

And now, after all those years, the apology came like this? Irene didn't know what to do with it.

"...All of you," Elijah said, sweeping his gaze across the council. "That is why I am working tirelessly with President Roi to root out that traitor, wherever he hides. We lost Alpha Henry. We will not lose another Alpha, especially not my heirs."

"Words are not enough," Leon said flatly. "If you truly mean to protect my child, then help me find Roman before the enemy reaches him first."

Elijah replied. "On that matter, my people are already searching for Roman, Griffin, and their mate, Violet Purple. After all, it is not every day we witness a couple bound twice. The goddess herself must see something remarkable in Violet, to grant her a second bond. I, for one, look forward to meeting her."

Though his tone seemed almost casual, Irene shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Elijah was a serpent and nothing good could ever come out from his sudden interest in violet.

"I suppose congratulations are in order," Alexa suddenly said to Irene.

"What?" Irene was taken aback.

Alexa smirked. "Your son's mate is now bonded to mine. I guess that makes us in-laws, or however that works. Either way, this is going to be fun."

Leon shot his wife a look. "This is not the time for your jokes."

But Alexa only shrugged. "I'm just saying."

Zara cut in. "If that will be all, I'll be returning to the North with my son."

Elijah raised a brow. "The North? Why?"

"I could have lost my son in that attack. I intend to spend more time with him. So excuse me if I won't be part of your double bond celebration," she said, her eyes flicking from Alexa to Irene.

Irene said nothing, only letting a small, knowing smile tug at her lips. How sweet it would be to see the look on Zara's face when the prophecy was finally fulfilled.

"Fine," Elijah said. "You may leave with Alaric once we are done. Now, let us move to Alpha Henry's burial arrangements...."

Chapter 514: Take Alaric Home

Alaric was pacing the room when the door suddenly snapped open and his parents walked in.

"We are leaving right now," Zara announced before the door had even shut.

"What?" Alaric blinked, not sure he heard right. His gaze swung to his father in question.

Caspian sighed, his voice tired. "You heard your mother. We are going home."

"No. No, no." Alaric shook his head. "I can't leave right now."

Zara jutted her chin. "And why is that?" Her eyes locked on his. "Because of Violet Purple?"

Alaric didn't answer, his Adam's apple bobbing instead.

Zara stepped closer, desperation flashing in her eyes as she stared him down. "What has that girl done to you? I can't even recognize my son anymore."

"She did nothing to me, Mom. I just can't leave. I have to be here when she comes back with the others."

Those words scraped against Zara's nerves, and she lost it. "That girl has a mate!" she screamed. "Two, in fact! So what exactly are you waiting for?"

Alaric groaned, dragging a hand through his hair. He had no choice but to tell her the truth.

"There is a prophecy," he said. "Violet Purple is destined for the four of us. Griffin was the first. Now Roman is mated to her. Asher and I could be next. That's why I have to stay close to her, Mother. We need to be together more than ever!"

But his words seemed to vanish in the air. Zara's face drained of color, her expression going pale. It was as if the blood had dried out of her veins.

Her son had finally lost it.

"Where did you hear that?"

"What?"

"The so-called prophecy."

Alaric hesitated before finally confessing. "Alpha Irene."

"Is that so?" Zara's tone turned bitter. "So she's the one corrupting my son?"

"What?" Alaric was taken aback. That wasn't the response he expected. He thought now that he had told his mother the truth, she would understand his decision to stay.

"But don't worry. Everything will be alright soon." Zara smiled, bittersweet.

"What?" A sudden unease gripped him. He knew his mother was stubborn, but this was different.

"I'm sorry, son," Caspian said quietly from behind him. Before Alaric realized it, a jab hit his neck.

He groaned as the liquid rushed into his bloodstream. Whirling around, he ripped the needle out, but it was nearly empty.

"No," he said wide-eyed, realizing what it was. His father had tranquilized him.

"How could you?" he muttered, betrayed.

"I'm sorry, but you have to listen to us this time." Caspian tried to step closer, but Alaric's growl stopped him cold. Rage surged through him, strong enough that he could snap both their necks.

Zara said to him. "One day, when you become a parent, you'll understand the hard decisions we make for our children."

However, Alaric was not staying to listen to this nonsense. He had to get help. He shoved past them and rushed out of the room, his breathing uneven, the drug already clawing at his system. He needed something to counter it. Roman. If only he was here, his venom could burn it out.

But Roman wasn't here.

Alaric forced his legs to move faster, willing his metabolism to fight harder, his body heating as his wolf pushed back against the tranquilizer. He could not afford to lose consciousness, not here, not under their watch. He needed to find somewhere his parents couldn't reach him.

He was almost at the end of the hall when two guards stepped out to block him. His vision blurred, but he caught their silhouettes well enough. He spun on his heel only to see two more closing in from the other side.

So they had planned this, his parents had come well prepared.

Fine. Since they wanted it that way.

Alaric cracked his neck, his lips pulling back into a snarl. Lightning flickered across his knuckles, sparking louder with each pulse of his heart.

The first guard rushed him, but Alaric slid out of reach, his body moving with instinct despite the drug weighing him down. Lightning sparked across his fist, crackling as he struck the guard in the chest, enough to send him flying back but not enough to kill. Taking a life in Elijah's palace would not help his situation.

The second guard approached more carefully, circling him. He'd seen the lightning and wasn't about to be careless. His fists came quick, colliding with Alaric's in a flurry of blows. Alaric matched him strike for strike, but his strength faltered. He stumbled forward when the third person slammed into him from behind. The other two had arrived and it was now three against one.

Fine.

He fought them all, sparks of lightning cracking the air. Every hit he landed bought him seconds, but seconds weren't enough. One of them caught his wrist and snapped a cold band around it.

Alaric froze, his eyes widening in horror when he realized what it was. A suppressor.

"Damn it!" he snarled, yanking back, but the weight on him was growing. Another guard grabbed for his other arm, trying to force the second cuff. Alaric roared and threw him off, lightning sparking wildly. But he was already losing ground.

They drove him to the floor, forcing him down like a criminal. He thrashed with teeth bared and fury in every muscle, but that was enough as the second cuff locked into place.

"No!" His cry tore through the hall as he felt his wolf receding, his power cut from the root. His body weakened all at once, the tranquilizer finally claiming its grip.

Alaric struggled against the floor, his vision blurring, but the fight drained out of him. He heard his mother's approaching footsteps and reached out with a trembling hand, his voice cracking.

"Mom, please... don't do this." His eyes burned, tears slipping down.

Zara bent down, saying with a low voice. "I'm sorry. In time, you'll understand this was for your good."

She stood and turned to the guards. "Take him to the car. We leave now."

Alaric barely felt it when one of them hauled him over a shoulder like dead weight. His body hung limp, his strength gone.

And in that fading moment, all that came to him was Violet's face. How he wished he could see her one last time.

Then darkness swallowed him whole.

Chapter 515: Welcome Home, Asher.

The blades slowed, dust settling as Asher stepped out of the helicopter. Jeremiah moved forward immediately, bowing his head. "Alpha Asher, welcome back."

Asher's cold gaze swept across the compound, his steps halting when two men wheeled out a polished urn draped in the West Pack's colors. Jeremiah's words caught in his throat, his eyes fixed on it. He knew what it meant.

Asher didn't flinch. He didn't even spare it a second glance. "Status report. Now."

Jeremiah blinked, his voice tight with loss. That grief sat heavy on his shoulders, and Asher hated it. Henry did not deserve honor, not even in death. But what choice did he have? This was the show they had to play.

Besides, those ashes weren't Henry's. Not a single bone had been left to recover. For once, Asher was proud of his girl because Violet had burned it all to the ground, leaving nothing behind.

Jeremiah seemed to shake himself out of it. "All minor Alphas under the West Pack have gathered at the pack house, awaiting you."

"And Ezra King?" Asher demanded, his tone sharp and unyielding.

His father was dead now, and the sharks were circling. Henry might have been strong but he had been a failure of a leader, and Asher wasn't deluded enough to think enemies weren't already lining up, eager to sink their claws into him.

"Ezra has arrived with his mate, Nancy. They're waiting at the house," Jeremiah confirmed.

"Good." Asher's voice gave nothing away as he strode toward the waiting jeep. He climbed inside, while the second vehicle carried the urn, a siren blaring to announce to the pack that their Alpha's body had returned home.

"Tell them to shut it," Asher growled through clenched teeth. "He doesn't deserve it."

Jeremiah froze. "What?"

But he caught himself quickly, studying Asher's face. Years at his Alpha's side told him this wasn't a whim. Something was off.

So without a word, Jeremiah stepped out and signaled the other driver. Moments later, the siren cut off, the silence almost deafening.

Asher let out a slow breath, his chest easing for the first time since stepping foot in the West Pack, the place of his demons. Jeremiah returned to his side, saying nothing and his fists unclenched as the jeep drove off.

However, this wasn't the time for emotions. He was stepping onto a battlefield and his only goal was survival. He had his girl to live for now, and Henry's mistakes would not drag him down.

"I take it you have the list of Alphas documented," Asher said. "I want to see it."

"Of course, I do," Jeremiah replied, reaching for his tablet and handing it over.

Asher scanned it without hesitation. He was thorough in everything, and Jeremiah was prepared to serve him with the same precision.

Asher glanced at the list briefly before handing it back. "Draw out the names of Alphas loyal to Beta Dominic," he instructed. His voice was steady, but his eyes held that cold edge Jeremiah knew well. In Asher's opinion, it was always closest and trusted ones, that drove the knife in deepest.

"Yes, Alpha," Jeremiah replied immediately.

"Who is in charge of the staff at home?" Asher asked next.

"That would be Luna Patricia," Jeremiah said.

"Change them all," Asher ordered. "From today, you'll be the one in charge of my food and drink. Everything gets tested. Every bite, and every cup I would take until Henry's burial is over and I take full control of the West Pack."

Jeremiah gave a firm nod, already putting the note down.

"Also," Asher continued, "look into the fathers of the West Pack members who were loyal to me at Lunaris Academy. Check them out carefully and list anyone you feel can be trusted."

"As you wish, Alpha Asher."

Only then did Asher lean back into his seat, his gaze drifting to the window as the car rolled on. The streets were heavy with mourning. Shops were shuttered, schools closed, and every institution dark in respect for the dead Alpha.

Everywhere he looked, Henry's face stared back at him on banners, on drawings pinned to walls, on flags waving from the homes of pack members. Even in death, his father's shadow smothered the West Pack.

The car had not gone far before people began stepping out of their houses. It was customary to mourn an Alpha, and so the procession was forced to slow as the crowd grew. Women in black wept openly, wiping their tears with black handkerchiefs, the West house's chosen color. Men lifted Henry's portraits high and chanted his name, their voices heavy with reverence, while black flags rippled from windows.

Asher's jaw clenched, but he said nothing. He let the car crawl forward through the streets of mourning, the silence between him and Jeremiah heavier than the chants outside.

To the people lining the streets, Alpha Henry had been a hero. For all his cruelty, he had given them stability. He had ensured the pack wanted for nothing. In discipline and order, none rivaled the West Pack, because Henry had built it that way. On the outside, he had been the perfect Alpha, adored and respected.

But those who had been closest knew better. They had seen the devil that lived inside him, suffered his wrath, and bent beneath the weight of his control. He was a master manipulator, pulling strings and keeping everyone in their place. Now he was gone, and all he had left were enemies with smiles on their faces.

And they would come for his son. If not for power, then for satisfaction—vengeance against Henry, even if it meant carving it out of Asher. They would want him to bleed, to suffer, so Henry could watch from hell.

But Asher was ready. His father had scarred him, but he had also trained him. And now those demons Henry left behind were wide awake, and they were ready to play.

When the theatrics were over—as Asher called them—the car moved again. Soon, they entered the courtyard of the pack house. The vehicle slowed to a stop at the steps, and Asher stepped out with an unreadable expression.

"Welcome back, Asher."

Luna Patricia stood waiting, Beta Dominic at her side, flanked by pack members gathered to receive him. Their faces were solemn and their voices formal as they welcomed him properly.

Chapter 516: Challenge The Alpha

Asher barely inclined his head at their greeting, his eyes already past them. He walked forward, and naturally they followed, their footsteps quick to fall into line behind him.

They were being respectful around him but Asher wasn't deceived by the act. He knew the difference between loyalty and courtesy.

"It's nice to finally have you home, Asher," Luna Patricia said, her tone sweet as honey. "I've had your room prepared in advance."

Asher paused mid-step, his gaze cutting briefly to her before turning forward again. "I'll be staying in my father's quarters."

There was an immediate shift in the air, and Asher even heard someone exhale sharply. Luna Patricia's smile faltered for a fraction, and Beta Dominic seemed taken aback, but they were quick to mask it.

Staying in Henry's room wasn't a request but a declaration that he was here to take his father's place. Yes, Asher was not beating around the bush. He had just sent out a warning. His enemies better start preparing because his knife was sharpened already.

"Of course," Patricia said quickly, covering her slip. "If that's where you'd rather stay. I'll have the staff clean—"

"You don't need to worry about that. I'll do it myself," Asher cut in.

"But—" Patricia tried again.

Asher suddenly stopped. His movement was so abrupt that everyone trailing him came to a halt. He turned, his eyes sweeping over the faces of the sycophants who had followed.

"I appreciate your support," he said, his voice carrying across the passageway. "But I wish to mourn my father in silence."

Mourning Henry? Not in this lifetime. Mourn his ass. But Asher needed something tangible to strip them off his back without question and this worked well enough.

He turned back to Patricia, his gaze firm. "Make sure the Alphas are comfortable. I will address them before the end of this evening."

And with that, he walked off, Jeremiah falling into step beside him, while the rest of the entourage stood watching him go. None dared to follow.

Asher pushed into his father's office, the heavy door groaning on its hinges. The room had been shut for days, hence the air that met him was thick, and stale. Jeremiah followed close behind, silent as always and sensitive to Asher's need.

The office was broad, every inch of it a reflection of Henry's rule. Dark oak shelves lined the walls, stacked with carefully arranged ledgers, and records. At the center stood the massive desk with papers neatly aligned as if their owner would walk back in any moment. An adjoining door stood slightly ajar, leading into the room Henry had used as his private quarters.

But the room stank of Henry. His scent was everywhere, soaked into the wood, the curtains, the floorboards and it suffocated him. Asher went to the windows and pushed them open, letting the cold air rush in.

He walked the room slowly before stopping in front of a massive portrait dominating the wall. Henry's eyes stared back at him from the canvas, hard and commanding. The painter had captured every detail:

the squared jaw, the proud tilt of his chin, the aura of an Alpha so vividly etched in bold lines that it seemed to breathe power.

Asher's lips pressed into a line. "It's still hard to believe he's gone," he muttered.

Jeremiah said nothing. He stood behind his Alpha, letting the silence speak.

For a moment, Asher allowed himself to feel the loss. They had been enemies more than father and son, but blood was blood, and the ache still found its way into him. For that single breath, he was just a son who had lost his father.

Then it was gone.

Asher's gaze hardened. "Get rid of the picture," he ordered.

Jeremiah moved without hesitation, tugging the frame down from the wall while Asher watched with contempt. He couldn't bear those eyes staring back, the face carved with lines of cruelty and disappointment, the same expression that had haunted his childhood.

His father's chain over him was obvious. He would be the one carving his path from now on.

"Do a sweep of the room," Asher ordered next. "Check for listening devices."

It was a stretch, perhaps paranoia to think of that, but Asher had learned never to be careless. Carelessness was weakness, and weakness got you killed.

He was still speaking when the door snapped open.

Nancy and Ezra King walked in.

"Christ, Lord," Nancy breathed the moment her gaze fell on Asher. She crossed the room without hesitation and wrapped her arms around him.

For a moment, Asher stood still. He wasn't used to being touched like that, certainly not with that kind of warmth. But this was Violet's mother. Something inside him shifted, and he let go of the walls he always carried. His arms closed around her tight, almost crushing, as if she was a lifeline and he was afraid to let go.

Nancy drew back just enough to cup his face, her hands trembling against his cheek. "Thank the goddess you're alright," she whispered.

Asher gave a small nod, saying nothing.

Her eyes searched his, cautiously. "Violet?"

"Presumably safe with the others," Asher answered. There was no pretense, nor sweetened lie. He served her the truth just the way it was.

Nancy swallowed, her chest rising with a shaky breath.

"You can rest easy," Asher added. "Griffin and Roman won't let harm come to her."

Nancy nodded slowly, accepting his words in good faith because Asher never wasted breath on comfort unless it was true.

Only then did Ezra shift, drawing Asher's attention. Their gazes locked, the tension between them immediate.

"My condolences," he said.

"There's no room for emotions here," Asher cut him off, his voice gruff. "The burial will go on without flaw, but my concern is the stability of this pack when it's done." His eyes narrowed. "How many Alphas do you think will challenge my claim to my father's seat?"

Ezra's expression darkened. "I'd say all of them."

Chapter 517: Alphas Of Power

"I'd say all of them."

Ezra's words echoed, haunting the room. Nancy and Jeremiah stiffened, trepidation filling them for the young Alpha.

But Asher, the one they feared for, didn't seem affected. He didn't even flinch or blink. If anything, he rubbed his jaw, absorbing the information. He had expected no less.

"Then," Asher said coolly, "let's know exactly who I'll be cutting down."

Ezra exhaled what was almost a scoff, but there was nothing amused about it. He admired Asher's confidence, but the situation was dire.

The West Pack was unlike the others. They did not thrive on open-handed faith like the East Pack, nor did they drown in indulgence like the South Pack. Neither did they cling to blood pride like the North. No, the West Pack was built on discipline and ambition.

Education, order, and strategy.

Every child was drilled to see beyond survival, to scheme, to climb, to fight not only with claws but with wit. Women were silenced, tucked away into the shadows of their men, but that only made the men hungrier.

Henry had raised an empire on their hunger, whipping them into unity with his dominance. But Henry was gone, and now the scent of blood was everywhere.

And where blood spilled, ambition rose.

There were fifteen minor Alphas under the West pack banner. Fifteen packs bound beneath Henry's domination, each one restless now that the old wolf lay cold in the ground.

Ezra explained to Asher, "Three of the alphas, myself included, have packs outside the West borders, in scattered districts. We are weaker, less likely to press for your throne. But the other twelve..." He shook his head. "They are sharks circling, Asher. Henry kept them on a leash, but you—" his eyes locked with Asher's, a heavy, uncompromising look, "you are young, untested, and vulnerable. They will resent the idea of bowing to you. Each one secretly believes he deserves Henry's chair more than his son."

Asher smiled faintly. "Good. Let them think that way. Pride goes before a fall."

"There's Alpha Rowland," Ezra began, his tone edged with distaste. "He's fierce in combat, but rash and too quick to anger. If you strike his temper, he'll tear his own alliances apart."

Nancy's mouth pressed into a thin line. "A man who rules through rage will never last," she muttered, though her eyes flicked toward Asher, wondering how much of Henry's fire lived in his son.

"Then there's Alpha Cane." Ezra's continued. "He's politically minded, surrounded by too many friends. He's the one you have to watch out for, a spider in the web. He's quiet but dangerous, weaving alliances when no one's looking.

"Alpha Marlow's pack is rich, but he's indulgent, given to women and wine. A man ruled by his appetites is easy to manipulate with the right temptation."

Asher didn't need Ezra to explain. Marlow was weak, a pawn waiting to be bought.

"And then there's Alpha Drake," Ezra said, his tone heavy with irony. "The oldest, and he parades it as wisdom. But he's nothing more than a cunning old fool. If you strip him of his dignity, humiliate him before the others, he'll crumble..."

Just like that, Ezra laid out every alpha's strengths and weaknesses, including his own.

Asher wasn't sure he had ever seen a man so blunt about his own flaws. Most alphas he knew wrapped themselves in armor of pride, never letting anyone close enough to see the seams. But Ezra laid it bare without flinching, as if daring him to use it.

Perhaps that was why it worked between them.

Then Ezra's voice dropped. "But there is one, above the rest, you must be wary of."

Asher's eyes narrowed, and he said. "Dominic."

"Exactly," Ezra concurred. "Your father's Beta is strong and respected. He knows these men better than you do, better than anyone. While Henry lived, Dominic forged ties with all of them. These Alphas will listen to him, more than they will listen to you."

Asher worked his jaw. "So Dominic is the true threat."

Ezra nodded grimly. "If you fail to cut his influence, the others will not fear you. They will rally behind him, and you will be torn apart before you've even begun. I won't be surprised if they've already supported him as the next Alpha."

Nancy sighed heavily. "The timing of your father's death is cruel, Asher. You've not even graduated from Lunaris yet. Once this burial ends, won't you be expected back in school?"

Jeremiah's eyes darted to Asher, the implication clear as day. Asher couldn't lead the West pack while shackled to Academy walls. Someone had to take the lead of the pack while he was away. The only problem was, who could be trusted?

While the question still hung between them, Asher gave Ezra a pointed look, and he understood perfectly.

"Hell no." Ezra shook his head in refusal.

"It has to be you, Ezra," Asher told him with a tone of inevitability.

"No."

"Yes."

Ezra muttered, "I placed my pack away from the West borders on purpose. Henry's rule was too cutthroat, always stirring conflict. I didn't want my people caught in it."

"It has to be you," Asher said simply. "You're the only one I can trust right now. The rest want my throat."

Ezra scowled. "You're dragging me into fire."

"You'll survive it," Asher countered. "More than that, you'll have the chance to change things once in power. You've wanted better for your people, and this is the way."

"Damn you." Ezra cursed.

Asher smirked. "So we agree."

"Fine." Ezra grumbled under his breath.

Asher said to them. "The tides are against me, and I'd wager Dominic has already rallied the others and crowned himself Alpha. Good. It saves me the trouble of cutting down twelve alphas. If I kill Dominic, the rest will fall in line."

Ezra's expression hardened. "Dominic is strong, Asher."

Asher arched a brow. "And I'm not? You forget, I'm a cardinal alpha."

"Dominic hasn't forgotten," Ezra replied. "He'll come armed with that knowledge. He'll prepare for you in ways you don't expect."

"Then let him." A faint smile tugged at Asher's mouth. "Let the best fighter win."

He pushed to his feet, the conversation dismissed. "This was pleasant enough, Ezra, but I have a people to remind who their Alpha is."

Chapter 518: Meet Elijah

"Thank you for having us," Violet said to Mother Thessara. It was time for them to leave. Griffin and the Nova had returned safely during the night, and they made the decision to leave the next day.

They were no longer safe here, not to mention, the mating fever had subsided.

It was only a matter of time before Elijah found them, so they decided to make the job easier for him. It was not like they were hiding because they did something wrong anyway — except maybe, kill Alpha Henry.

Yep, that part was going to be hidden forever.

Mother Thessara's hands closed over Violet's and said, "Child, it is a blessing to carry more than one bond. Do not see it as a burden. The goddess grants such gifts rarely and may she walk with you always."

"Thank you." Violet nodded in understanding, a warm smile on her face.

Then they parted with the temple's greeting, one hand to the forehead, the other pressed to the chest. Violet mirrored the motion, a proud feeling blooming in her chest when she got it right this time.

Now that she knew who she was. Or rather what she was — half werewolf, half Fae. Learning even the smallest thing about werewolf culture excited her.

Roman stepped forward and slid an arm around her waist possessively. "It's time to go, my mate." He emphasized on the word, "Mate."

Honestly, it was still hard to believe that he was bond to Violet. Perhaps, why he kept calling her that to remind himself it was no dream.

Griffin, standing taller than both of them, inclined his head to the Moonmother. "We'll be in touch," he said simply.

They'd have to pay for the damages to the temple. Not that money was any issue. For now, they had bigger problems ahead.

"Safe journey, blessed ones." Thessara bowed her head. She had even provided them a car for their journey and a phone Griffin had used to contact Micah.

The moment they were out of here, Elijah's people would probably catch onto them. They needed to get their story straight and made sure they don't blow their cover.

Roman opened the car door for Violet, and she slid inside without a word. He followed after, the warmth of his body settling beside her. Griffin took the wheel, the engine humming to life.

And just like that, they drove off.

The ride was a silent one. It felt like *déjà vu* to Violet. She had the same uneasy feeling she'd carried after being first mated to Griffin, when she didn't know how to approach the boys. Not to mention, tell them she still had feelings for them.

It was the same thing repeating again, except this time she bore a second bond, and a very enthusiastic Roman, who hadn't let go of her hand once.

But Asher and Alaric were separated from them again. From what Micah had told them, Asher had gone back to the West pack for Alpha Henry's burial, while Alaric, last he'd heard, was at the Alpha King's residence. And that was where they were headed.

Having two bonds was huge, and this time there was no hiding from the Alpha King. It was time for Violet to meet the king of the wolves face to face.

Or, to be precise, her uncle.

The silence in the car was broken when Griffin announced. "We're being followed."

Roman sat up at once, every nerve inside of him alive. Violet's heart lurched, her spine stiffening as she whipped around.

Roman leaned forward, his gaze moving to the side mirror and said with a tight voice. "There's not just one, but two cars."

"They've found us," Griffin muttered, grabbing the wheel tight, his face carved from stone. He didn't press harder on the accelerator, nor swerve, driving with absolute control, and waiting for them to make the first move.

"What do we do?" Violet asked him.

Roman didn't look at her, still watching the mirror. "That depends."

"On what?"

"On what they want to do."

The answer rattled her, it was too vague to be comforting. But since neither of them looked spooked, Violet forced herself to breathe. If they weren't panicking, she wouldn't either. At least, she tried not to.

Then one of the cars suddenly moved ahead, and cut through the lane. Griffin's jaw tightened as the black SUV swerved, tires screeching, before pulling in front of them.

The trap snapped shut.

Griffin had no choice, he slammed the brakes. The car jolted, stopping dead. Violet's fingers dug into her seatbelt as the second car slowed behind them, sealing them in.

The doors of the lead car opened and armed men spilled out with hard faces and rigid posture.

Then they saw Christian, Elijah's beta.

"Stay calm," Griffin said over his shoulder, his tone brooking no argument. "We have to step out."

Violet's stomach twisted. But she looked at Griffin, then Roman, and found enough trust in their eyes to nod.

Griffin was the first to open his door, stepping out with quiet authority. Roman followed, sliding out but keeping Violet shielded behind him.

Christian was already speaking on the phone, as if he was reporting their capture. His sharp eyes flicked to them before he gestured to one of the guards.

"You'll have to come with us," the man said, stepping forward.

He reached a hand toward Violet, except it was a wrong move.

A guttural hiss tore from Roman's throat stopping the man cold. His expression was lethal, every inch of him radiating threat. "We'll come with you," he growled, "but if you lay a single hand on her, you're as good as dead."

The guard paled and pulled back instantly. Everyone knew Roman meant it.

Violet's pulse hammered as they began to move forward, Griffin taking the lead, Roman's grip burning warm against her back.

But just as they took the first steps, a roar of an engine split the air. Another car shot forward from the road, screeching as it spun to a halt, barely missing the Alpha King's men's vehicle.

The door flew open and Aeron stepped out with authority.

"They're coming with me."

Chapter 519: New Family Bond

The ride with Aeron was... well, awkward didn't even begin to cover it.

How do you even begin to describe the feeling of sitting in the backseat with your mate's father-in-law in the front, driving like an executioner behind the wheel, while his son sat beside you, and your other mate stretched out, acting like the situation was completely normal?

Violet sat stiffly, staring at the road ahead, until Roman leaned in with that infuriating smirk, his breath tickling her ear.

"So, love," he drawled, his voice deliberately pitched so Aeron could probably hear every word if he cared to. "Do I call him sir, or just go straight to Dad?"

Violet nearly choked on her breath, her eyes widening in horror. She elbowed him hard, whispering back, "Shut. Up."

If Aeron heard him, he didn't flinch, his eyes fixed on the road. Although Violet had a feeling his pointed silence was on purpose.

Roman winced, then grinned wider. "Fine, Papa Aeron it is. Do you think he'll give me his blessing if I manage to put a smile on his stony face?"

Griffin, sitting on her other side, pinched the bridge of his nose as though regretting every decision that had led him to this car ride. "Roman," he muttered through clenched teeth, "don't push it."

But Roman only chuckled, unbothered, his arm sliding casually around her shoulders as if they weren't driving straight toward the Alpha King's residence — and quite possibly their doom.

"What?" He gestured to Aeron in front, "He hasn't thrown me out yet. That's practically approval in father-in-law language."

Violet groaned, sinking lower into her seat, torn between strangling Roman and burying her face in her hands. If the goddess was watching, Violet was convinced she was laughing herself sick.

"Is there any implicating secret I need to know before we arrive?" Aeron asked, his tone heavy with meaning, eyes catching theirs in the rearview mirror.

The three of them froze for a moment, trading a silent glance that said more than words ever could.

Roman, of course, was the first to break. He

announced, "Your son killed Alpha Henry."

The revelation was so sudden that Aeron's hands jerked on the wheel and the car swerved violently off the road. The abrupt lurch jolted everyone in their seats, the tires screeching as gravel spat beneath them. For a moment, Violet's breath caught in her throat while Roman's arm instinctively caged her in, and Griffin braced against the door.

But Aeron wasn't a man who lost control for long. With a deep growl of frustration, he righted the vehicle, with steady hands, forcing it back onto the road. Silence fell as they calmed their breaths in the back, hearts pounding against ribs.

Through the mirror, Aeron caught sight of Elijah's men still trailing behind them, the black car hugging their line. No doubt they were wondering what the hell had just happened. Aeron forced himself still, every muscle in his muscle tight as he now drove with extra measure.

Then he demanded in just one, grave word. "Details."

Roman turned to Violet and whispered, "He's so cool. I love him."

Violet rolled her eyes. Leave it to Roman to make the most serious moment sound like a joke.

Griffin told his father. "He hurt Violet."

Roman, of course, couldn't resist painting the scene like he was narrating dinner theater.

"Then Griffin went King Kong on him. No, seriously. He pounded Alpha Henry so hard the man looked like mashed potatoes. Not even the creamy, buttery kind, oh no, but the horrible, lumpy disaster I once ate on an 'exotic' trip. Yolk." He shuddered dramatically, as if scarred for life. "I still have nightmares."

Griffin and Violet stared at Roman. No one asked for that detail.

But Roman ignored them, lowering his voice as though he was sharing a juicy secret.

"Good thing Violet blew the place up, otherwise we'd have to explain why Henry looked more like an entrée-of-the-day than a dead Alpha...."

Aeron didn't listen until the end. At the mention of "Violet blowing the place up," the car swerved sharply off the road again. This time it stayed there, engine humming in idle while Aeron's knuckles turned white around the wheel.

Silence swallowed the car. The air was heavy, and thick, no one daring to speak. Violet sat stiffly, her pulse racing, while Griffin braced himself for what might come next. It was Roman who looked the guiltiest of all, his lips pressed thin as if he'd just realized maybe—just maybe—he'd said too much.

A beat passed. Then another. Still Aeron didn't move. The only sound was the low purr of the engine and the faint whistle of wind through the window.

Finally, a rap on the glass shattered the stillness. Aeron blinked and lifted his head, finding Christian peering in with suspicion written across his face. He had no choice but to roll the glass down.

"Is everything alright?" Christian asked, suspicion dripping from every syllable.

Aeron's reply was gravel, clipped and gruff. "Everything is fine." He was already turning the ignition back into gear, the underlying growl in his voice obviously telling the beta to move on.

Christian didn't buy it, his eyes narrowing, but before the moment stretched too long, Roman waved at him brightly with his eternal sunshine grin.

"Don't worry, Christian. We're just working out family dynamics, you know, new mate bond paperwork, and harem seating chart, you know. It's more chaotic than I thought."

Christian blinked at him, unimpressed. "Let's not have any accidents, hmm? Arrive at the estate in one piece, shall we?"

Aeron didn't answer. Instead, he gave Christian a look so cold it could have frozen blood, then stomped the pedal. Dust blasted up into Christian's face as the car tore back onto the road.

Roman slumped back smugly, whispering against Violet's ear. "I'm so in love with my new father-in-law. Or should I say father-in-pack?" He grinned wolfishly. "Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

Chapter 520: The Alpha King's Welcome

"Can someone shut him up, please?" Aeron finally spoke, his voice a growl as he pressed harder on the accelerator, putting more distance between them and Christian's trailing car.

And that was the crack Griffin had been waiting for. His unflappable father, the man who could face down enemies without blinking, finally snapped under the one force of chaos no wolf alive could handle: Roman Draven. Even Asher couldn't stomach him for long, and that said everything.

Roman, of course, looked positively delighted at the outburst. "As you wish, Dad Deluxe."

Through the rear-view mirror, Aeron gave him a stare like he was trying to decide if Roman was a wolf or some new species of pestilence. Griffin hid the grin tugging at his lips, while Violet prayed they survived the car ride before Roman got them killed with his mouth.

Thankfully, Roman went quiet after that, and Aeron seized the chance to speak seriously.

"Now listen up," he said, voice sharp. "As far as anyone's concerned, Alpha Henry died in the explosion set off by Patrick Vale. Are we clear?"

"Clear as day," Griffin answered without hesitation.

"Yes, Aeron," Violet answered.

"Yes, Dad," Roman added smugly.

Aeron cut him another look but let it slide.

After a beat, he asked again, slower this time. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

The way Griffin and Violet's eyes snapped to Roman in unison was almost comical. It was almost like a silent firing squad warning him to keep his mouth shut. If Aeron had nearly wrecked the car over mashed-potato Henry, God only knew what would happen if Roman blurted out that Violet was half Fae, half werewolf. Definitely not a roadside conversation.

"Nothing, sire," Roman said at last, for once behaving.

Aeron lifted a brow at Roman's answer. For a man desperate to silence Roman, he sure looked like he had an appetite for more gossip.

"What's the situation at hand?" Griffin asked his father.

Aeron told him. "Your mother is waiting for us at Elijah's residence. Apparently, everyone is waiting to hear you guys part of the story."

Roman perked up instantly at the news. "Is my father there too?" he asked with curiosity.

"Yes," Aeron confirmed, eyes fixed on the road. For a moment he said nothing else, then he added, "You have nothing to worry about. Your mother and I have everything in control. On the bright side, we won't have to spend much time with him, anyway. Everyone's headed down to the West pack for Alpha Henry's burial."

The trio stared at each other, a thought passing between them. This was a good thing. With everyone headed down to the West pack, they'd finally be reunited with Asher.

Aeron suddenly said to Violet, "When we arrive, make sure either Griffin or Roman is always with you. Don't ever stay alone with Alpha Elijah no matter the circumstance."

The warning hit Violet harder than she expected. Aeron didn't even know who she truly was, yet he was already cautious. That alone made her feel even more aware of the danger.

Griffin noticed her unease first, his hand closing over hers. Roman followed suit, catching her other hand, the both of them giving her a firm squeeze.

"Elijah will have to get through me first to get to you," Griffin assured her.

Roman added with a smirk, "We'd die for you, little mate." He even wiggled his brows in that stupid way of his.

Violet tried not to laugh but failed miserably. The sound of her laughter eased the tension and made the rest of the ride feel lighter. They spent the time joking, throwing insults, and for a while, it was almost easy to forget where they were headed.

But the mood vanished the moment the Alpha King's estate came into view. The gates were already open, as if they had been expected.

Violet studied the vast grounds, her eyes mapping exits without thinking. She flexed her shoulders, feeling that restless pull again—the phantom weight of her wings itching to break free. The urge to fly pressed against her bones and she pushed it down with an exhale. Now wasn't the time.

Griffin and Roman told her it was normal for young shifters to shift often in order to strengthen the bond between wolf and man. Unfortunately, it was too risky. She could feel her wolf, slumbering beneath her skin, restless and waiting for her to take the first move. Violet already knew her wolf wasn't going to make it easy for her.

The car rolled to a stop at the entrance, the engine still humming before Aeron cut it off. Doors opened one after the other with Aeron stepping out first, Griffin right behind, and then Roman, who didn't wait a second before turning to the backseat. With his usual flourish, he offered his hand to Violet as if he were escorting royalty.

Violet almost refused out of principle, but the smug little smirk on Roman's face made her slip her hand into his. Irene was waiting for them, flanked by a few people Violet didn't recognize.

"Welcome," Irene said warmly.

"Mom!" Griffin said with boyish excitement, his expression brightening instantly. He stepped forward, his arms already outstretched for a hug.

But to everyone's shock, Irene brushed right past him. Her arms circled Violet instead, pulling her in with such firmness that Violet nearly lost her breath.

Roman absolutely lost it. He threw his head back and burst into a mocking laughter.

Griffin stood there, arms still spread, looking as though someone had stabbed him in the chest.

Meanwhile, Irene fussed over Violet as if she was a baby, her hands brushing her hair back and tilting her chin as though inspecting her for injuries. Violet felt heat rush to her cheeks under that motherly scrutiny.

"How are you feeling?" Irene asked.

"Fine," Violet mumbled.

"Good." Irene's tone sharpened, the warmth vanishing in an instant. She released Violet and straightened. "Because the Alpha King wishes to see you now."

Her gaze cut to Griffin and Roman. "All of you."