

## Defy 531

### Chapter 531: Take Henry's Place

Although the call hadn't lasted long, Violet's voice stirred Asher like fire in his veins, and he needed that now, walking into a room full of lions waiting to tear him alive.

Behind him, his Beta, Jeremiah, followed close. When they reached the door, the guard on duty made to announce his arrival, but Asher lifted a hand to silence him. It was best they didn't see him coming.

Asher pushed the door open and stepped inside. The room was alive with raucous laughter. Meat and wine flowed freely, the air thick with the smell of grease and smoke. The alphas sprawled in their seats like they owned the place, boasting and barking, trading stories loud enough to shake the rafters.

The atmosphere was rowdy and careless. A celebration that tasted too much like mockery, because the wolf who had held them all in chains for decades was dead.

Not that any could blame them.

But then Asher entered and one by one, heads turned. Just like that, the laughter faltered and the noise strangled into silence.

In that split second, their goblets froze mid-air, teeth no longer flashing. Sixteen pairs of eyes turned on him, measuring him.

Goblets froze mid-air, the smile gone from their faces. A few alphas scratched at their throats, their eyes cutting sidelong and avoiding direct gaze. Some gave him polite looks, while the bold ones stared at him with thinly veiled contempt.

Polite or not, Asher could smell it all. Pride, hunger and the sweet stink of ambition.

And they saw him too as the boy. The son. Henry's blood — but not Henry.

A few of the alphas cleared their throats, feigning ease while the rest smirked like men humoring a child. A baby tiger playing at lion.

"Alpha Asher," Dominic said smugly as he rose from the far end of the table. "We were just sharing stories of your father. Come, sit. Take wine. We are all family here."

But Asher didn't respond. He just stared at the man, long enough for the silence to curdle into discomfort. Then without a word, he took the empty seat at the head of the table without asking.

That position was significant and represented Henry's position when he was alive and now, Asher had taken it without permission. Without acknowledging the alphas who were already bristling at his audacity.

The statement was clear: the son had come to claim the father's throne, and he would not ask.

"Enjoying yourselves?" Asher finally asked, his lips curving into that signature unsettling smile.

He wore no glasses tonight. His infamous slitted eyes were bared for all to see, slowly dragging across the table, pinning each alpha one by one.

Asher had been told time after time how unsettling his eyes could be. Some whispered they looked less like a man's and more like a predator's, as if something feral lurked beneath his skin. Worse still was the power hidden in them—the compulsion that could drag a man to his knees if he wished it.

The fact that Asher walked into this meeting without hiding them meant one thing.

He wasn't here for pleasantries. He was out for a fight.

Rowland, broad-shouldered and quick-tempered, barked a laugh to cut the tension. "The cub glares like he thinks he's grown claws. Careful, boy, baring your teeth doesn't make you dangerous."

Snickers broke across a few of the alphas. Even Cane, sipped his wine as if amused.

But Asher was unruffled as still water. If anything, he only tilted his head in the Alpha's direction.  
"Down."

He had given the command so softly it was almost conversational, but the effect was inescapable.

Rowland's body seized like a puppet on strings, his eyes wide with horror just before his face slammed against the table with a sickening crack.

The sound jolted the alphas beside him, their chairs scraping back as though the compulsion might leap from Rowland and drag them down too.

Rowland groaned, his face twisting with pain, but Asher didn't relent. There came a second crash. Then a third. By the fourth, blood streamed down his nose, spattering the wood. Bone gave way with a dull snap that made several alphas flinch, but still Asher held him.

"Gods..." one of them muttered under his breath as Rowland's bloodied face met the table for the fifth time before he finally collapsed in a heap of groans on the floor. His hands came up instinctively, clutching at his ruined nose, crimson dripping between his fingers.

On the bright side, he was going to heal. But the room had gone cold.

Asher leaned back in Henry's chair, his gaze sweeping over the others, his voice calm, and almost mocking.

"Now, who still thinks I'm a cub?"

No one spoke, at least not immediately.

Alpha Cane, ever the political tongue, finally broke the silence. "Forgive Rowland, Son. He often does not think before he speaks."

But Alpha told him pointedly. "I'm not your son, but your Alpha."

There was an uproar, the alphas murmuring amongst themselves in agitation. Although this was inevitable, Asher declaring himself Alpha, and in Henry's seat no less, forced them to face it head-on. No one was comfortable with it — even if they planned to challenge his claim.

"However, I did not come to argue succession with any of you." Asher rose to his feet.

"Tomorrow," he said, "we receive the Alpha King and the visiting Alphas for my father's wake."

At that, chairs shifted and eyes cut toward Dominic.

"Tradition," Dominic offered carefully, "is that the Beta of the deceased fills the space until succession is determined. I will—"

"Is my father without an heir?" Asher's voice sliced across his words.

Dominic's jaw ticked, but he answered. "No."

"Then why does the Beta of the deceased want to take the heir's place?" Asher's tone turned sharp, no longer a question but a challenge.

Alpha Drake, the oldest among them, cleared his throat. "No one questions your blood, Asher, but propriety matters. You haven't graduated yet and lack the experience. Experience is what guides a pack, not raw strength and dominic has both. He is the appropriate choice to welcome the Alpha King and the other guests when they arrive tomorrow."

#### Chapter 532: The Long Night

From the way nearly all the alphas nodded and wordlessly agreed to Alpha Drake's words, it was all the evidence Asher needed to see that he was right. Dominic had rallied them all and was gunning for his father's position.

Asher couldn't help but wonder. If Henry had been a cruel ruler, what made them think his son was any better? How could they look down on him like this?

Asher's mouth barely moved. "You've all finished?" he asked.

Everyone turned to him.

Asher's gaze rested on Drake. "You talk about experience, huh? What has your experience given you, old wolf? A back too bent to rise without help, and a tongue too slow to bite before you're bled dry."

Drake's face purpled, except laughter did not follow this time. No one wanted Asher's eyes turning on them.

Dominic said, "Your father's shadow is long, Asher. These alphas trusted him, and I've been with your father the most. It's inevitable they trust me. Sure, you have powers, but you think fear will hold them? Fear fades, but loyalty lasts."

"Asher is not inexperienced," Ezra spoke up, drawing everyone's attention. "Have you forgotten that Asher Nightshade rules and leads the West pack in Lunaris Academy?"

"They're all a bunch of children," Alpha Marlow argued. "We're talking about the future of an entire pack."

"Are they?" Ezra said with a raised brow. "Those children he leads are your heirs, and represent you all. Or am I wrong?"

This time around, none of them could talk.

Asher slammed his hand down on the table to draw their attention. He hissed, "I don't care about your loyalty. You'll give it whether you mean it or not. I'm only here to tell you how things will run."

No one dared to challenge him, murmuring under their breaths instead.

"Here's how this goes," Asher commanded. "Tomorrow, when the Alpha King and the others arrive in the West pack, they will see unity, not fractures. We keep the peace until Henry is put in the ground. You will not brawl in my halls. And most of all, you will not send assassins after me. Trust me, you'd die in your sleep before you even think of it. Don't test me..." He paused, then smirked evilly. "Or rather, test me and find out."

The murmurs in the hall increased now as Asher showed them his true colors. They had thought him a cub, but he was much more than that.

He let his eyes sweep them again. No one met them this time.

"You'll mourn Henry like loyal sons," he continued. "But do not mistake me for my father. I'm not the Alpha you were used to. I'm worse."

The pressure in the room thickened. For the first time since Asher arrived that night, all of their confidence and arrogance had vanished.

"Ezra will update you about the arrangements I've made regarding the burial. If there's any other information, I'll ensure my Beta gets it across to you all on time. Enjoy your meal."

And with that, Asher Nightshade whirled around and left a room full of dumbfounded alphas.

As soon as the doors closed, fifteen pairs of eyes turned toward Ezra.

Ezra pinched the bridge of his nose. "And here we go."

Meanwhile...

Jeremiah followed close behind his Alpha, until he abruptly stopped in the hallway. Without a word, Asher dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out his phone. Notifications had been pinging at him throughout the meeting, but he'd ignored them until now.

Curiosity got the better of him, so he tapped open the video Griffin sent, the one with that weird "xoxo" emoji thumbnail.

The next second, his eyes went wide as the moon. Across his screen played a very explicit video of Violet, on her knees, lips wrapped tight around a cock.

Asher's breath hitched and he nearly fumbled the phone. He killed the screen so fast it almost looked like he'd burned his fingers.

Jeremiah blinked at him, concerned by the sudden reaction. "Is something wrong?"

Asher straightened immediately, his composure snapping back into place. He said quickly. "No. Nothing's wrong."

The look Jeremiah gave him said he didn't believe it, but wisely didn't push. They walked the rest of the way in silence, until they reached the door of Henry's quarters.

Then Asher suddenly turned. "That's it. Goodnight."

"Huh?" Jeremiah's brows shot up. "Goodnight? But we still have not—"

But the door slammed in his face before he could finish.

Jeremiah stood frozen, staring at the wood in disbelief. They haven't finished talking about the burial arrangement. Nonetheless, he was going to make use of this break. So he left.

Asher dropped onto the couch immediately and opened the first clip. His stomach tightened the moment Roman's voice filled the room, commanding Griffin to bring the camera closer.

Then Asher got a full screen of Violet's pink folds glistening with her wetness and the way Roman deliciously spread her with his fingers as if she were dessert he intended to savour.

Goddess help him.

The groan escaped before Asher could stop it. His pulse thundered and heat surged through him so strong it hurt.

Damn Roman for taunting and feeding him this temptation.

In a split second, Asher had his pants down, his hand wrapped around his hard dick. He rubbed himself slow at first, mesmerized by the way Roman's finger disappeared in and out of Violet's heat. Violet arching her back, and trembling under Roman's hand, left him dizzy.

Then Roman began pumping her faster with fingers and Asher increased his speed, groaning in pleasure.

"Oh fuck!"

Asher cursed as he spurted all over, his body locking up in release. His chest heaved, breaths dragging out of him as if he'd just survived a war. The pleasure was intoxicating, but the aftermath was worse.

He glanced around, the air thick with sweat and the proof of his need, and snarled under his breath. What a mess.

He needed to clean up. However, there were more videos and Asher knew without a doubt, this was going to be a long night.

Damn it.

Chapter 533: Poison Asher

It was no surprise that, after such an intense confrontation, Dominic met with Patricia in secret that night.

"That boy is beginning to get on my nerves," Dominic thundered. "You should've seen him throwing his weight around in the meeting with the alphas."

"Tell me something," Patricia sighed, rubbing her temple. She added her own grievance. "The boy had the nerve to order his Beta to change all my staff in the pack house and replace them with his own people. When I dared to confront him, do you know what he said to me?"

Dominic didn't say a word, his expectant silence telling her to go on.

At once, Patricia's demeanor shifted; she lifted her chin and fixed Dominic with the same arrogant stare Asher was known for. She even dropped her voice, imitating him: "Henry's widow, why are you worried about the house staff? Shouldn't you be busy mourning my father?"

Patricia broke the act with a scoff. "You should've seen his audacity. Although..." her tone darkened, "for a moment there, I swore I was staring at my late husband. The boy is just too damn similar to him. Henry trained him well."

"Perhaps a little too well," Dominic said, eyes thoughtful. "If he's anything like Henry, then Asher Nightshade already suspects we want him out of the way. The boy's always been a little too smart for my liking."

Patricia's poise cracked. "Does he know the two of us...?" She let the question die, suddenly aware of the walls. Even with her own people guarding the door, and loyal to death, Asher's presence within these walls left her unsettled.

She whispered, "What do we do? Should we just end him tonight and be done with it?"

"No." Dominic shook his head. "It's too late for that. Alpha King Elijah arrives tomorrow, and Asher is still his heir whether we like it or not. It would look bad if the heir were murdered on his watch, and he'd have to root out the culprit to save face."

He went on to say in a low tone. "Had we known the boy would be this difficult, we should've arranged an 'accident' on his way here."

"Or poisoned him," Patricia added. "A slow one, something that eats him from the inside until he withers." She blew out a frustrated breath. "But then, the boy is as paranoid as his father."

Dominic reached out, threading his fingers through Patricia's hair, letting them linger. "The only option now is challenging him outright."

"You're stronger than he is, you'd defeat him," Patricia said with a coy smile. "I'll find a way to give you an advantage. I promise."

She didn't say more, but the glint in her eyes told him enough. She had something planned for Asher.

Dominic's lips stretched into a wide smile. "My love," he murmured, before leaning in to steal a kiss once. Twice.

However, the quick brushes only seemed to ignite the hunger in him, and by the third time, Dominic devoured her fully, his lips crushing against hers, the pressure hard and demanding.

Patricia stiffened at first, but the heat between them rose too fast. His hand slid to the back of her neck, holding her in place as his tongue pressed greedily into her mouth.

The air between them thickened, the kiss turning urgent, the kind that left no room for breath. His other hand roamed beneath the folds of her skirt, rough fingers sliding across her thigh as if he had been starving for this touch all night.

Patricia gasped, managing to break the kiss, her lips swollen, while her voice rushed with panic. "Dominic, this is not the time. There are too many eyes." Her gaze darted toward the door, her mind racing with the danger of being caught.

But Dominic was relentless, his eyes dark with hunger. "Don't worry, I'll be quick," he swore, though his rough kiss said otherwise.

Dominic pressed Patricia hard against the wall, the force of it knocking the air from her lungs. She clung to him instinctively, her legs wrapping tight around his waist. Then he pulled down his pants and entered her in one move, groaning as he settled in her moist heat.

Patricia sighed in pleasure. It felt so good.

Then he was thrusting into her hard and fast just the way she wanted it. Patricia had to bite down on her lips, smothering the moan that threatened to escape.

Dominic was a beast, plowing through her until while her nails raked down his shoulders, leaving welts he'd wear proudly. And it wasn't long before he pushed her off the edge.

Patricia pressed her face into his chest to muffle the cries he ripped from her, while his growl reverberated through her as his forehead thudded against the wall, the sound swallowed by their ragged breaths.

They collapsed together trembling, and damp with sweat. Their gazes met, and they smiled. That had been awesome.

Dominic eased her back to the ground, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

"Stay safe," he murmured.

"You too," Patricia whispered back, steadying herself.

And then Dominic slipped into the darkness, leaving her chambers as quietly as he had entered.

With Dominic gone, Patricia slipped into the bathroom and scrubbed his scent off her body. She bathed thoroughly, but that wasn't enough.

When Patricia returned to her chambers, she opened a small lacquered box, rubbing a strange cream over her skin before lighting a stick of incense. Dominic had gotten both for her from the black market. They were specially made for masking scent so no werewolf could trace what had transpired.

This was how they had cheated right under Henry's nose without suspicion. Although they had always been careful.

Feeling clean, hidden, and satisfied, Patricia slid into her bed. Her body melted into the silken sheets, her lips curled with triumph.

It must have been near midnight when she felt a presence in the room.

Her eyes flew open only for gray, slitted eyes to stared back at her from the darkness.

Patricia's heart slammed against her ribs. Terror seized her throat, and she opened her mouth to scream—

"Silence."

The compulsion wrapped around her like a noose, freezing her in place. Horror widened her gaze, her body going rigid as Asher's smiled at her darkly.

"It's high time we talked, don't you think... mother?"

Chapter 534: Reset Alaric

Alaric Storm jolted awake from the nightmare. His parents' voices still rang in his head as they plotted to tear him away from Violet, and chain him back under their control.

His vision was hazy at first until the shapes above came into focus — a white ceiling cluttered with planets and constellations, suspended in their slow, glow-in-the-dark orbit.

His pulse spiked.

There was only one place designed like this. His room in the North Pack.

No way.

The constellations were the same ones he'd plastered across his ceiling as a boy, born from his obsession with the universe. He had never taken them down. Just like the half-broken gadgets, notebooks, and scraps of experiments scattered across the room, relics of childhood that had followed him into adulthood.

But right now, Alaric didn't care for any of it. His heart pounded in his chest like the hooves of a horse as he sat up. Without wasting a second, he shoved the sheets aside and strode straight to the window.

Alaric shoved the ceiling panel aside, cold air spilling into the room as he pushed himself up to see through the opening. Nothing but endless white stretched out before him. Snow blanketed the trees, the tall buildings and mountains beyond. His stomach sank to the floor.

The North.

He didn't need a map to tell him where he was. The North pack was known for its long winter and cruel cold that never loosened its grip. And that was all the evidence he needed.

He was home.

The door snapped open behind him.

"Hello, brother. Long time no see."

Ace swaggered in with a smirk on his face as if this was just another casual morning.

But Alaric wasn't in the mood for theatrics. His hand shot out with speed, fisting the front of Ace's shirt, and slammed him back into the wall.

"Where is Mother?" he snarled at him.

Ace froze, startled. His lips fumbled around the truth before he could stop it. "Downstairs!" he blurted, eyes wide.

Alaric didn't wait another second and left. He didn't walk but leap down the stairs, his body vibrating with rage.

The moment he spotted her, his vision tunneled.

Zara.

She stood in the foyer, calmly conversing with the Cook, as if everything were normal, and she hadn't just ripped his life apart.

Alaric's chest rumbled with a sound halfway between a growl and a roar. His mother lifted her head at the noise, and her lips curved into that warm smile she always wore when pretending to be nurturing.

"Son," she greeted him softly.

But Alaric wasn't smiling.

He charged straight at her, his hand closing around her throat with crushing force.

"How dare you?!"

The cook screamed. "Alpha Alaric! What are you doing?!"

Zara's eyes widened, panic flashing as her hands clawed at his wrists. He wasn't supposed to be this strong, not with the suppressor cuffs still locked around his wrists. But Alaric wasn't running on wolf strength, but on adrenaline. This was raw, violent fury.

And she couldn't break his grip.

"Alaric!" Ace shouted, rushing down after him. He grabbed at his brother's shoulders, only to be met with a brutal backward elbow. The blow knocked the wind out of him and sent him staggering, white lights exploding in his vision.

But Alaric didn't even turn. He was consumed with anger.

He had told them about the prophecy. Told his mother that Violet might be his mate, the one thing in this wretched world that gave him hope. And what had Zara done? She had drugged and dragged him back to the North pack like he was a child to be locked away.

How could she do this to him?

How could his own mother betray him?

The commotion brought guards pounding into the foyer. It took three of them to pull him off her, one grappling his arms, another forcing him down, and the third pinning his legs. He thrashed, snarling like a cornered wolf, his eyes blazing with hate.

Zara fell to the ground, coughing violently, clutching her throat. Her skin was mottled red where his hands had been.

"You fucking bitch!" Alaric roared, his voice cracking with fury even as the guards forced his face to the floor. "How could you do that to me!"

"Mom?" Ace stumbled to her, horrified.

But Zara only rasped, "Get the sedatives."

"What?" Ace froze.

"Get the fucking sedatives!" she snapped, her voice hoarse and raw from his chokehold.

Ace hesitated, fear and confusion written across his face.

"Now!"

He scrambled, sprinting down the hall, returning in record time with a small vial and needle. Zara snatched it from him with shaking hands and forced herself back to her feet.

"Mom..." Ace's voice wavered. He hated this.

But Zara silenced him with a cutting glare.

She strode to where her son writhed against the guards. His chest heaved, his face twisted with hatred.

"You betrayed me!" Alaric snarled, thrashing harder when he saw the needle glint in her hand. His voice carried the kind of rage that could burn a city down.

"Hold him tight!" Zara barked at the guards. They bore down on him harder, forcing his arms and legs immobile.

Alaric roared, muscles straining, but the sharp sting of the needle pierced his neck.

"Gah!" His groan was filled with fury and despair.

Zara's face was void of emotion, cold as a blade, as the sedative coursed through his blood.

Once, Alaric had admired her. Once, he had looked at her brilliance in science and medicine with awe. Now, all he saw was a monster in a white coat, a woman who valued control above her own son's freedom.

The guards began to relax as his body sagged. But Zara snapped, "Don't slip up. Not yet."

Alaric panted heavily, his strength waning. But his glare never faltered. His eyes locked on his mother, blazing with venom.

"I'll never forgive you," he heaved. His voice shook, but his hatred was steady. "Never."

For a moment, something flickered in her eyes but it was gone as quickly as it came.

"I'm sorry, Alaric. I'm sorry it's come to this," she said almost tenderly.

He bared his teeth, a wolf's warning, forcing her hand back.

"This is her fault!" Zara hissed. "That girl, Violet. But don't worry, I'll reset you. You'll be mine again, my boy."

Alaric's eyes widened. "What—?" But the drug dragged him under before he could finish.

The last thing he heard was her cold, resolute voice.

"Lock him up. It's time I undo all that witch has done to my son."

#### Chapter 535: Project Clean Slate

Ace stood at the observation pane with a deep frown. On the other side of the one-way glass was the containment room. As its name implied, it was built to cage or to isolate, depending on the need. For Alaric, it was both.

The walls were blinding white, and sterile to the point of cruelty.. The bed was bolted to the ground, and it had a desk that looked more like it belonged in an asylum than in a packhouse. The wide glass turned the space into a specimen box, built so others could watch but never be seen.

It reminded Ace of those setups you saw in movies where the government stole people away and conducted secret experiments on them. But this place was built for controlled experiments, not family.

Right now, his brother, Alaric, looked vulnerable lying on that bed. His wrists hung heavy at his sides, chest rising in shallow breaths. Even unconscious, Alaric's face was drawn tight, with his jaw clenched as though his rage had followed him into sleep. The sight twisted something in Ace's stomach.

Ace pressed his palm against the glass and snatched it back when his own reflection stared back at him, wide-eyed and shaken. He still could not forget what happened.

All his life he had envied Alaric, their parents' golden son, the one who carried all their pride. But watching Zara cough and clutch her throat on the floor while guards dragged Alaric away had knocked the envy clean out of him. All that was left was shock and a cold knot of dread.

Ace knew his mother can be cold and go to the extreme at times but locking Alaric in the containment room like a dangerous animal was a little too much. He was his brother after all.

Then again, strangling your mother was also too far. That part wasn't negotiable.

Ace exhaled through his nose. Staring wouldn't fix anything. There had to be a reason for that kind of rage. If he could understand what made his brother attack his mother, perhaps, he could come up with a solution to settle the dispute.

For once, he wasn't going to be selfish. They were family after all. So Ace turned from the glass and headed for the labs.

Out of the four major wolf packs, the North Pack was the most technically advanced and industrialized pack. The main packhouse sat at the crest of a slope, stone and glass stacked in clean lines and

screamed of wealth. That was the face they showed the pack. But behind it, the estate unfolded into what truly made the North different.

Three long, low buildings stretched out like arms, linked with enclosed walkways that never iced even in winter. This was the Storm Complex. The left wing specialized in biomedicine and neural science. The right wing built the government approved weapons, and restraints. The central wing fused the two together, where blueprints were made into prototypes.

Off to the side, two warehouses squatted under heavy roofs, marked with black stenciled letters. W-A housed raw materials and volatile compounds in temperature-controlled bays. W-B held crates of finished prototypes, sealed drums, and racks of parts waiting for shipment. A narrow, rails-on-concrete corridor connected W-B to a loading platform. From there, shipments moved out to Storm Enterprise HQ—also in the North—and from HQ they split into subsidiaries in human cities.

Beneath the central building was the sublevel where Alaric was being held.

Ace and Alaric had their own floors aboveground where they made their own discoveries. It was a strange privilege—being raised in a house where playrooms came with fume hoods and centrifuges—but it was theirs.

Ace took the north bridge to Zara's floor. The guard outside the door glanced at him and looked away. Family didn't need clearance.

The lab hit him in layers. The cold and the antiseptic bite that lived in the vents no matter the season. Underneath it, his mother's scent still lingered, meaning she'd been here only minutes ago. Ace contemplated coming back later when a clutter of work on the table caught his attention.

Curiosity tugged him forward before he could stop it and he picked the old, brown, edges furred from too much handling. Notations in Zara's precise writing crawled along the margins.

The sketch in the center was of some sort of helmet. It was designed in such a way the cap flared at the temples, ridged along the crown, with petals of some metallic mesh resting over where a werewolf's umbra lobe would swell when the shift pressed at the skin. Silver thread traced a lattice around the ear cups, which were not cups at all but discs cut with strange grooves.

He leafed through the next page and there were more detailed drawings and cross-sections. A map of the lupine cortex, what old papers called the "beast brain," and what the new ones called the lupine network, and it was curved like a second hand around the hippocampus.

There were arrows pointing from scent centers to association clusters, thickened lines where bond responses burned brightest. A paragraph was underlined three times: bond recall pathways are reinforced by scent anchoring, tactile imprinting, and hormonal surge—episodic memories 'baked in' under the bond response are resistant to standard inhibition.

Ace flipped to the diary and saw trial entries, dates, subjects and results.

Subject K-7:beta male. Exposure to Crown—low amplitude, short duration. Result: disorientation, mild dissociation, temporary scent dulling. Recovered baseline in 36 hours.

Subject D-3:omega female. Crown—moderate amplitude with micro-dose wolfsbane. Result: erasure of recent episodic recall; bond-linked memory unaffected; increased anxiety; recovered partial recall after 72 hours.

Subject H-1: rogue. Crown—high amplitude with silver resonance. Result: blackout rage; loss of shift control; feral snap; terminated.

Ace's grip tightened, dread growing inside of him. He noted a line of text below it that said procedure aborted in subsequent trials; resonance threshold recalibrated—pretended to make it better. It didn't.

He turned one more page and saw the name of the device : Mnemosyne Crown.

The name had been printed at the top of a draft protocol and below it was the codename Zara had given the program in the first few months of development.

Project Clean Slate.

Chapter 536: The Mnemosyne Crown

Ace's mouth went dry, but he continued reading especially when it came to to the risk part.

Werewolf Physiology: Lupine cortex rebound; scent-blindness (temporary to permanent); dissociation; split-shift episodes; blackouts; aggression spikes. Outcome for human Physiology: brain-dead risk at moderate amplitudes.

Notes: Werewolf neuro-regeneration reduces catastrophic failure probability. Memory "bleed" into adjacent non-target recall clusters expected; can be managed post-procedure with guided re-imprinting.

Ace set the paper down slowly, as if any sudden movements might set off whatever trap he'd just walked into. He tore his eyes from the text and scanned the table and there he saw it.

It was exactly like the sketch. A crown of matte metal and braided leads, petals of mesh overlapping like armored leaves.

The Mnemosyne Crown.

"What are you doing?"

Ace froze and turned slowly. His mother Zara stood in the doorway. The mark on her throat was fading, but the bruise was still there, covered with salve. The herbal scent drifted with her, but her eyes were sharp and cold.

Her gaze slid from Ace's face to the Mnemosyne Crown in his hands and the temperature in the room seemed to drop.

She crossed the lab in three clean strides and plucked it from his grip. "Who told you to intrude on my work?"

"What are you doing, mother?" Ace snapped back, anger rising in his chest. He gestured to the spread of papers. "I saw the drawings and the diary. Don't tell me you're going to put that thing on him."

Zara set the crown down with more care than she'd used with Ace.

"You saw what your brother did out there," she said, closing the diary. "Do you think he's in his right mind?"

"Because he was angry?" Ace shot back. "Because you drugged him and dragged him home? He said you betrayed him. What did you do to him?"

He wanted to know so bad the curiosity was eating him from the inside out.

Zara straightened and looked him squarely in the eyes. She stepped forward and he stepped back unconsciously. "What any mother in my position would do," she said. "I saved him from the hands of that witch, Violet Purple."

"Violet Purple?" Ace repeated, bewildered. He had heard about his brother dating her and seen once or so on the news.

"Your brother believes he's going to be mated to her," Zara said flatly. "Despite the fact that she already has a mate. Not just one but two. He believes he'll be the next."

Ace blinked. The sentence didn't fit in his head. "What?"

It was nearly impossible to get a Matebond these days. Having two, that was pretty wild and incredibly lucky.

"That doesn't make sense. It's —"

"Insane," Zara finished for him. "She's feeding my son with nonsense and I would not stand still and let that happen. I won't lose my baby to her."

"Or," Ace said, dragging air into his lungs, "he's confused. And given time, Alaric will come back to himself."

"Your brother strangled me, Ace." Zara's voice cracked like a whip. "He tried to kill me. You saw it. That girl has her claws deeper in him than you want to admit. What will she ask him to do next? To finish the job by slitting my throat in my sleep? I won't give her the chance."

"Or maybe you're just being paranoid," Ace said before he could stop himself.

Zara's head snapped toward him. "Do not tell me I'm paranoid."

Silence cut the room in half. Ace swallowed and he picked his next words carefully.

"The Mnemosyne Crown is too risky,. Mother," he said, tapping the stack of papers. "You're talking about attenuation of episodic memory anchored in the bond lattice. The lupine cortex wraps the hippocampus. You start damping CA1 and DG with that much weight, you're not just blurring a few dates, you're tearing the scaffold holding his shift and his sense of self together."

He pointed at the side note she'd written in the margin. "Dissociation? Split-shift episodes? He could lose control mid-shift and never know why. He could black out and wake up covered in someone else's blood. You interrupt scent-triggered reactivation, you're not just targeting her, you're taking a hammer to his instincts."

"He's a werewolf," Zara said, cool and clinical. "His neuro-regeneration will soften the blow. We target the episodic track—the where, the when, the faces—and leave the procedural memory intact. He will still know how to shift, how to fight, how to breathe. He just won't remember her. And anything that tries to bring her back—scent first—we shut that pathway down before it lights."

Ace stared. "You're saying you would rather erase him than lose him."

"I would rather lose what is poisoning him," Zara said. "And refill the space with better memory than what that witch has stuffed inside my son. If the useless bond with her carves grooves in his brain, then I will smooth them. If the grooves won't smooth, I will cut around them."

"Mother..." The word came out smaller than he intended. "Does Father know about this?"

The look she gave him made his skin prickle. "Your father is very busy with Alpha Henry's burial," she said, each word measured. "And under no circumstance is he to return to the pack while I am working."

She stepped closer. The air between them thinned. "You would not like to see me angry, Ace."

He swallowed hard. "No."

"Can Mother trust you?" Zara asked softly, except he could sense the threat beneath it.

Ace hesitated. It was only a second but it sure felt like an hour.

He nodded.

"I want to hear you say it."

"Yes, Mother."

"Good." She patted his shoulder once, the gesture almost tender if you didn't know what lived behind it. "Now give me space. Bringing this online will take time, and I don't enjoy distractions."

Ace looked at the crown again and swallowed. Then he turned and walked out. But one thing was clear to Ace, his mother was more dangerous than he thought.

#### Chapter 537: The King's Spectacle

Alpha King Elijah was a really tenacious man. But of course, he wouldn't be king after all if he wasn't relentless.

Not only were they expected to see him tonight, but he had even thrown a party for them. It would have probably been more glamorous, but Elijah must have kept it low-key out of respect for Alpha Henry's death.

Knowing she would undoubtedly be the "star" of the occasion, Violet had been wondering what to wear to the party when one of the staff knocked on their door and handed over the dress Alpha King Elijah had ordered made for her.

Of course, it was unsettling that Elijah had arranged a dress for her, as if he had been planning this moment all along. Roman and Griffin practically tore the thing apart shaking it for foul play, but there was nothing. Roman had even gone as far as to put it on first—which was downright hilarious—and Violet had a picture to prove it. If there was magic sewn into it, he would've been the first to die.

It was sweet, though. The fact that they'd test it and willingly die first for her hit Violet in all the right places. She felt blessed. Besides, Elijah had probably just ordered the dress, not stitched it with his own hands. Last she checked, the man didn't have sewing skills. There was nothing to fear.

When Violet slipped it on, she immediately fell in love. The dress was a deep shade of royal purple, clinging to her figure so perfectly it was unnerving how they had gotten her measurements right. The fabric was smooth and rich, and she didn't need a god to tell her it had cost a fortune.

The neckline bared her shoulders completely, her collarbones exposed in a way that drew eyes to the rune at her neck. At her waist, two circular cut-outs framed her sides. The left one revealed Roman's rune as if the dress itself had been crafted just to showcase it.

A narrow cinch bound the fabric at her midsection, shaping her frame into the silhouette of a goddess. She went for minimal jewelry, just a single coiled bangle wrapped around her upper arm. Her makeup was pared down too—a sweep of color on her lips, a shadow to frame her eyes—just enough to sharpen her beauty without being excessive.

"You look divine, Violet," Roman murmured, lowering his mouth to kiss the rune at her neck. Violet sighed, tilting her head to give him more space.

She couldn't help it. She was like a cat in heat, arching instinctively, and begging for more attention the moment his lips brushed her rune.

"Roman." Griffin's growl cut in, not just because Roman was seconds away from seducing their mate back into bed when they didn't have the time, but because that kiss had hit him straight in the groin.

The mating rune was sensitive. After all, it was a sacred mark. If it had been any other male putting his mouth there, Griffin would have ripped their intestines out without hesitation. Mated pairs were possessive to the point of violence.

But theirs was different and rare. Rules bent around them and Griffin didn't feel the urge to tear Roman apart, at least, not for that reason.

Still, Griffin scowled darkly. He wasn't about to walk out of the room with a raging erection thanks to Roman's antics. For that alone, Roman was going to get a piece of his mind.

Roman broke away with a dark smile, fully aware of what he was doing. Violet missed the heat of him instantly, a frustrating ache in her chest, but this wasn't the time for it. She forced herself to breathe. Maybe it was high time she started learning to rein in that maddening libido of hers.

The three of them finally left the room, and made their way through the halls. Outside, the night air was cool, carrying the faint smell of roses that laced the gardens where the party was already underway.

White lanterns strung between the trees, spilling soft light across the trimmed hedges and marble fountains. Tables draped in silk lined the pathways, heavy with wine and steaming dishes, while a string quartet played a romantic piece from beneath a rose arbor.

Everyone wore fine clothes and were clustered in small groups, laughter and conversations rolling quite easily.

But when Violet stepped in, framed by the men at her side, the atmosphere in the garden changed.

Roman flanked her left, and wore tailored black trousers that he paired with a deep charcoal dress shirt, the fabric carrying a sheen that caught the lantern glow. Two buttons were left open at his throat, flashing his tan skin while a slim leather belt sat snug at his waist, with the polished boots completing the look. As expected of Roman, he looked effortlessly sexy.

Griffin was her anchor on the right, looking every inch like a warlord. He wore hunter-green trousers that fitted around his massive frame but tapered neatly at the ankle. His black long-sleeved Henley clung

to his chest and shoulders, the neckline half-buttoned to tease his bulk. Over it, he'd thrown on a dark gray vest, emphasizing his broadness without the need for a jacket.

Together they were quite the sight and wolves who had been so loud a moment ago found themselves watching in silence as the three crossed the garden like they owned it.

However, that confidence shattered in seconds. Violet didn't even know where they came from, but suddenly a wave of reporters swarmed them, their microphones thrust forward as blinding flashes lit the night like lightning.

"Look here, Violet Purple!"

"Is that Roman's rune on your belly?"

"Could you tilt your head, let us catch the one on your neck?"

The questions came rapid-fire, overlapping, and each flash seared her eyes until Violet felt like a prey caught in a cage. And just like that, it dawned on her the reason Elijah had sent her this dress. The bare skin, and the cut-outs on the dress.

She wasn't dressed to attend the party. She was dressed to be the spectacle.

#### Chapter 538: What Happened At The Pine Lodge

Roman immediately tugged Violet into his side, his glare promising blood if anyone got too close. Griffin stepped in front of them, his broad shoulders blocking the cameras, and he growled, "Back. Off."

The reporters slowed at last, but the damage was already done.

Roman and Griffin each grabbed Violet's arm and steered her through the throng, shielding her with their bodies. Flashes still sparked from behind as a few persistent reporters tried to follow them, but security formed a wall at the threshold.

"No further," one of the guards barked.

Violet's pulse was still racing. She felt flustered, like some cheap product displayed at a market stall for anyone to appraise. The Matebond was important, yes, but she was more than just the mark on her skin. And damn it, a little warning would have been nice.

"Wasn't this supposed to be a small party?" she asked, annoyed.

Where did the reporters come from?

Roman exhaled loudly, his hand rubbing her arm. "Elijah does whatever he likes."

Griffin's jaw was clenched hard. He said, his voice clipped. "And I bet he did this on purpose to rattle us. We should be ready for whatever else he has planned tonight."

They stepped into the center of the garden, and Violet immediately felt the weight of dozens of stares. Not just the wolves, important humans too, probably politicians, and businessmen, all mingled together, sipping wine under the glow of the lights strung from the branches.

Their gazes slid toward her, curious, awed and impressed. Violet's throat tightened. She had never been a fan of attention, and certainly, not now.

She caught sight of Leon Draven standing with Alexa. Roman's father looked straight at his son, hurt flashing in his eyes when Roman pretended not to see him. Alexa's expression softened with guilt, perhaps, before vanishing behind her usual mask.

Violet said nothing. Roman's parents deserved every ounce of his silence and she wasn't about to interfere.

"Here you are."

Alpha Irene approached them with commanding poise, her sculpted body filling out a red dress that bared her strong arms. The fabric hugged her figure, bold without being gaudy. Clearly, the woman had a love for red.

She smiled warmly at Violet, her eyes lighting up. "You look marvelous in that dress."

"Thank you," Violet said, managing a small smile.

She turned to the boys. "Both of you don't look bad either."

Unlike Griffin, who only gave a cool nod, Roman grinned as if she had handed him the highest compliment of his life.

However, Irene's smile faded into business. "Come. Elijah awaits."

At the mention of his name, Violet swallowed hard.

Both Griffin and Roman reached for her hand at once, and instead of choosing between them, Violet looped her arms through theirs. With her shoulders squared, and chin lifted high, she walked proudly forward with them into the lion's den.

Her heels sank lightly into the grass as they followed Irene through the garden, her stride powerful. A thought nagged at Violet until she leaned closer to Griffin and whispered, "Why does your mother look like she's running errands for Elijah?"

To Violet, Irene had always been the image of pride, hence seeing her act as though she were Elijah's attendant felt off.

Griffin answered. "Better one of our own at Elijah's side at a time like this."

And then Violet understood. Irene wasn't bending to Elijah rather she was subtly spying on him. The thought eased something in her chest, and she felt a surge of respect for her mother-in-law. Goddess, she admired that woman.

It wasn't long before they found Elijah.

He stood at the heart of it all, dressed exquisitely in a tailored black and gold apparel, a glass of wine balanced in his hand. His attention was on the man beside him until Irene announced them.

"Your Majesty," Irene announced, "Violet Purple and her mates."

Elijah's gaze snapped to her at once. It pinned her mercilessly at the spot, as if he could strip her secrets bare with his eyes. Slowly, and deliberately, his gaze dropped, lingering on Griffin's rune at her throat, and finally, Roman's rune on her belly. His lips curved, as if he was satisfied by what he saw.

"You're just in time," Elijah said, turning slightly toward his companion. "This is Vincent, Commander of Intelligence, Lycanthrope Intelligence Agency. He's overseeing the Pine Ridge incident."

Violet's gaze followed.

Vincent towered, taller even than some of the alphas she'd seen, his frame broad with thick muscle. His presence was suffocating, and he was dressed in black thoroughly, even to the gloves on his hands. His aura was cold, predatory, and it wasn't difficult to see why he was a leader.

Griffin straightened the instant Vincent's eyes locked with his. It wasn't intentional, his body just reacted as if refusing to let another male intimidate him.

Vincent had him by a few inches, and was broader too, his frame cut from years of training. But Griffin was young, his body still filling out, his muscles not yet at their peak. In a few years, he would be every bit as imposing. For now, though, the silent clash between them was electric.

The stare-off lasted a beat too long, the air tight with challenge, before Vincent finally broke it. His voice was cold, detached, and stripped of any pleasantry.

"I would've preferred to take your statements in a proper office, but the Alpha King informed me you would leave for the West pack tomorrow. Hence my presence here tonight was inevitable. I'll need your account of the Pine Ridge incident. Now."

The way he said now left no room for argument.

Elijah didn't look bothered. He simply gestured toward the table set apart from the others, one draped in white linen with enough chairs for them all. "You can sit right there," he said smoothly, as if this had been planned all along.

Irene didn't follow them this time. She gave Violet a nod, her expression unreadable, then stayed back. That alone made Violet's chest tighten. If Irene wasn't coming, it meant she expected them to handle this themselves.

The three of them—Violet between Griffin and Roman, exactly where they needed her to be—moved to the table and sat. Elijah settled across from them elegantly, while Vincent remained standing for a moment longer, before settling.

Then he reached into his coat, pulling out a slim leather-bound notebook and a fountain pen. He flipped the notebook open, set the pen to the page, and lifted his gaze.

"Tell me what exactly happened the night of Pine Lodge?"

Chapter 539: Welcome To The Family

"Tell me, what exactly happened the night of Pine Ridge Lodge?"

Roman was the first to break the silence, pointing lazily between the three of them. "Me? Him? Or my sweet mate?" His hand slid over Violet's shoulder with a little smile. "You'll have to be more specific, Commander of Intelligence." His tone was light, almost playful, but the taunt was clear at the end.

"Roman Draven." Vincent's jaw tightened as he spoke the name. "I've heard enough about your antics. Let's start with you."

"Ooh," Roman leaned back, grinning. "Hit me, baby." The way he stretched his arms and cracked his knuckles, you'd think he was gearing up for a party, not an interrogation.

Vincent set his pen down on the paper, the nib hovering just over the first line. "From the beginning, Roman, Draven," he ordered. "Why Pine Ridge Lodge? What happened that night? Who was there, and what exactly transpired?"

Violet and Griffin exchanged a glance, worry flashing between them. They both knew how easily Roman could get carried away.

The safest plan would have been to recite the story word for word—unified, airtight, and rehearsed. But professionals like Vincent despised perfect stories. Wolves could pick up on stress levels, heartbeats, and micro-expressions. Too clean, and he'd smell the lie instantly. One slip, and everything falls apart.

That's why the plan was simple but risky: they would keep the same backbone story, but each of them would tell it in their own way. Variations were natural, after all, they had been separated that night. That way, it gave their story layers, and not cracks.

So keep it vague enough to cover the gaps, and speak with the pride of survivors, not the guilt of suspects. It would feel natural and believable.

It was planned to perfection.

The only question was whether they could stick to it— and it started with Roman.

"You might want to sit comfortably for this one," Roman drawled, lounging back in his seat before he began. "Why Pine Ridge Lodge? You'll have to ask my boy Alaric about that one. But hey, solid choice. We turned it into a little vacation. Beautiful scenery, mountain air so fresh the animal in me nearly had an orgasm just breathing it in. Then again, nothing beats a real orgasm when you've got your mate-in-law and your girlfriend in the same place." He winked at Violet, who promptly rolled her eyes.

Vincent's voice cracked up a notch. "Do you think this is a joke?"

Roman's smile vanished, and his face hardened in an instant. "Do I look like I'm laughing, Commander Vincent?" he shot back, his voice flat and cold. "You asked a question. I'm answering. Forgive me if you're not used to my charming personality and my answers don't sound like one of your little soldiers kissing your boots. I just don't take commands well."

For a heartbeat, Roman's wolf flashed in his eyes, a glint of wild danger that froze Vincent's pen mid-scratch.

Violet and Griffin exchanged a quick look. They hadn't seen that coming.

Roman was reckless, yes. A joker who never seemed to shut up. But in moments like this, he was unpredictable, and damn shrewd.

It seems they might have nothing to worry about at this rate.

"Fine, where were you at the time of the attack?" Vincent insisted.

"Chained up like some animal. Asher and Alaric believed I had gone feral when it was only the Matebond activating. So I wasn't there to support Griffin and Violet when the attack began?" Roman answered, annoyed.

Vincent scribbled something, then paused, before watching his face. "Did you ever suspect there would be an ambush?"

Roman shot him a dirty look. "Honey, I was having the time of my life. Why would I want anyone to interrupt that?" he drawled smoothly.

Unlike Violet, who had gone as red as a beet, Vincent wasn't affected at all. Sex was, after all, as common as breathing in their world.

"So what happened afterwards?"

"What do you think? Of course, I ran to find my mate."

"And Henry?"

Roman lifted a brow. "What about Henry?"

Vincent flipped through the pages of his book. "From what I gathered from Asher and Alaric's testimony, Henry was the first to find Violet. What happened next?"

"We all joined forces on arrival. But Patrick's men were overwhelming. However, Henry fought the bravest, bought us time, and died when the explosion ripped the site. End of story."

Vincent watched him longer this time, waiting for a crack, but Roman held his gaze, unflinching. There was no fear or guilt on him. He had told that lie as easily as drinking water.

Violet slid her hand onto his under the table, squeezing lightly and subtly reminding him not to get carried away.

Roman backed down while King Elijah chortled. "What a way to go, Henry."

Vincent proceeded to write down something and then asked, "And the explosion? You remember that?"

"I remember the air changing," Roman answered. "The next thing I knew, Micah grabbed me and we made an impromptu visit to hell. Not that we were welcomed there. But of course, you already know that from Micah's testimony."

"Yes, I have," Vincent responded, "which is why I'm also grateful His Majesty invited him tonight."

"Huh?" All three of them lifted their heads, surprised.

As if on cue, Micah appeared at that moment. Just like Vincent, he too was dressed thoroughly in black, as if they had agreed on a color for a couple date. The same surprise flickered across Vincent's face when he noticed his appearance, though he quickly masked it, his expression returning to blank and unruffled.

For a long moment, Micah's gaze lingered on him before shifting to his uncle. "Your Majesty." He bowed his head.

"You're here, finally." Elijah's eyes fell on the rune at his neck, then slid to Violet. "The family's complete now, don't you think so, Violet?"

"Yes," Violet said without a thought, only for it to dawn on her. "What?!"

#### Chapter 540: Griffin's Move

"What?!" Violet blurted out, her eyes widening as it sank in what she had just said. "No, I'm not—" She tried to fix it, fumbling instead. "I mean—no—it's not that, I mean, it's not like I'm part of your family and when you put it—"

Violet stopped. She was babbling, and judging by the looks she was getting, she was only making it worse. Her face heated with embarrassment and she wished the ground would open up and swallow her at this point.

Elijah's lips curved into a sly smile. He was enjoying this. "Of course you're not part of the family," he said, tilting his glass in her direction. "But then, Micah now wears a rune. And you, Violet, are mate-bonded to not just one, but two of my heirs." His eyes glinted. "I'd say that makes you family, in a certain way. Wouldn't you agree?"

Every word was a trap.

"If you say so, Your Majesty." Violet laughed weakly, the sound awkward and thin. She tried to calm her breathing, but her heart was hammering like a drum. And she knew Elijah could hear every beat.

His eyes stayed on her a little too long as if he was peeling away her skin to see what lay hidden beneath.

And inside her chest, a heavy, dreadful thought took root.

Elijah knew.

Violet felt it in her bones. He was onto her.

Her hands shook under the table where no one could see. She wanted to get up, leave, and breathe, but she couldn't. If she moved now, it would only confirm whatever piece Elijah already had on her. But what did he know? What part of her secret had slipped? And worse, what would he do with it?

Her heart was pounding so loudly she was certain everyone at the table could hear. Roman must have sensed it because he reached for her hand. She gripped him tight like he was her lifeline. The warmth of his skin anchored her, and when his thumb brushed slowly across her palm, the simple rhythm soothed her just enough to keep her from falling apart.

"Violet Purple. You're up next."

Vincent's voice cut through her chest like a knife. He flipped to a fresh page in his notebook, eyes sharp and fixed on her.

No.

Violet panicked inside. Not now.

She was still too rattled by Elijah's trap, and

too flustered to keep her heartbeat even. If she spoke now, Vincent would smell her fear, needle into it, and drag the truth out of her.

Before she could force words past her dry lips, Griffin demanded.

"No. Ask me next."

Vincent's pen stilled. Slowly, he lifted his head, one brow arching in challenge. "I give the orders here."

The tension spiked and Violet froze, every nerve on fire. Vincent had seen her crack. If ever there was a time to press her until she broke, this was it.

And Vincent knew it.

But Griffin growled, "And I order you to interview me now, or I'll invoke the Sovereign Soil Law."

Roman gave a low whistle, grinning at Griffin's bold move.

Vincent's gaze darkened. "You wouldn't dare."

Griffin leaned in slightly, unbothered, his size casting a shadow across the table. "Try me."

Because of the sharp glares both men were trading across the table, Violet leaned closer to Roman and whispered, "What's the Sovereign Soil Law?"

"The law that says any werewolf, no matter their rank, can only be questioned within their own pack's soil. Not here, in Aster City, where humans pull the strings. Griffin's soil is the East Pack. That's where he'd answer." Roman's eyes gleamed as he explained, almost excited by the loophole.

"Oh..." Violet blinked as it clicked. Griffin had just played a smart one on Vincent.

"So what's it going to be, Commander?" Griffin's eyes flashed dangerously. "Refuse me now, and you'll be making the trip all the way to the East Pack to try again. And even if you get there, you'd still have to crawl through my lawyers first. No guarantee they'd ever let you in the same room with me. We could drag it out for months, hell, for years. Or..." His voice dropped lower, steady and hard. "You can question me right here, right now."

He let the threat hang, heavy, daring Vincent to choose.

The table went dead silent, and for the first time, Vincent's jaw twitched. His eyes slid to Alpha King Elijah subtly demanding he intervened, but the king only shrugged and sipped his drink, detached as ever.

Violet couldn't help but wonder whose side Elijah was really on, because it sure looked like he had just abandoned his comrade.

"Fine. Let's do it," Vincent hissed out finally, each word sounding like it cost him blood.

Griffin didn't smile, not outright. But the pride in his posture was impossible to miss. He had won this round. Still, the fire in Vincent's eyes told Violet this was far from over, if anything, he was about to push harder. But she had confidence in her men.

"Tell me what happened that night, Griffin Hale."

Griffin began. "I was in bed with my mate when a strange noise woke me. Heavy boots. More than one. The scent of oil and metal. The first two that came through the door didn't last long. The rest came prepared and turned on a sonic emitter that stopped my shifting cold. Even so, the only thing keeping me upright was her." He nodded toward Violet. "I told her to run for her life and she did."

Vincent's face didn't move. "How many men?"

"Eight inside. More outside. They swarmed the place, and it's no wonder I went down. Three silver rounds lodged in my body, one on my shoulder, lower right quadrant, and high back. I remember the heat of it more than the pain. But I also remember Adele's hands pulling me back from death."

This time, Violet placed her hand over his and squeezed, giving him a small smile. Griffin smiled back.

Vincent was unmoved. "How did you know it was Patrick's men in the middle of a firefight?"