

Defy 551

Chapter 551: DNA Test

The moment Violet saw Elijah standing beside the sleek black limousine at the entrance, she knew their plan had just gone to hell.

"Ahh, just the couples I was looking for," Elijah's eyes lit up, assessing them. "Come, we're riding together to the airport."

Violet, Roman, and Griffin exchanged a glance. This wasn't just bad news, it was a nightmare.

"Your Majesty, that is so kind of you," Violet said, forcing a flattering smile through clenched teeth. "However, my mates and I wouldn't want to inconvenience you. We already—"

"Are you refusing a king's order, Violet?" Elijah's voice dropped, cold and dangerous, his gaze pinning her at the spot.

"Of course not," Violet said quickly, her tongue burning with all the curses she wanted to hurl at him. Instead, she bit down hard on her lip.

This man was a grade A asshole, and she wanted nothing more than to claw that smug expression off his face.

"Just give me the word and I'll do it for you," Thalia growled in her mind, her hackles up. Somehow, with Violet's emotions running high, the wolf had burst past the mental barrier she had locked her in.

"Back down, Thalia," Violet hissed silently.

"Ugh, you're no fun,"

Thalia sulked. "I'm itching for a fight. Sadly, he's not even worthy of me. Still, let me put this arrogant loser in his place."

"Loser or not, he holds our lives in his hands. You so much as breathe wrong at him, and we both lose our pretty head," Violet snapped.

A low reluctant growl rumbled through her mind. "Fine. I'll claw out his eyes another time."

Before Violet could reply, Thalia slipped back into slumber, leaving Violet rattled.

"Are you even listening to me?" Elijah's sharp voice yanked her back to reality. His brow was furrowed. "What's with you and your lack of focus?"

Before Violet could dig herself deeper, Griffin smoothly stepped between them. "Forgive her, Your Majesty. Having two bonds pulls at her human body. She's often overwhelmed." He slid his arm protectively around Violet's waist. "Of course, we'd love to ride with you."

Elijah's nose wrinkled in open disdain. "This is why humans should never be bound by a matebond, let alone two. I wonder what the goddess was thinking."

"That fucking son of a—" Violet seethed internally, Thalia snarling faintly in agreement.

And to think his wife was human. Violet couldn't help but feel for Luna Beatrice, who had no choice but to put up with this werewolf garbage for a husband. Women really did go through a lot.

With a dramatic turn, Elijah climbed into the limousine, his power filling the air — or maybe it was just his rotten attitude choking the space.

Violet had no choice but to follow, her jaw tight, knowing their escape had just gone from difficult to nearly impossible.

Inside, the cool air smelled of citrus polish and rich leather. Roman and Griffin took their usual positions beside her, instinctively forming a protective wall, like two shields guarding her on both sides.

The limousine's interior was pure luxury with plush pale lavender leather seats stretching along the sides in a wave-like pattern.

A mini-bar ran along one side, glowing with soft purple and blue lights. Rows of crystal glasses sat neatly arranged, and a silver bucket filled with ice held bottles of champagne, the cold mist rising gently around them.

The ceiling shone, lined with mirrors and tiny lights that made it look like a sky full of stars.

Across from them, Elijah sat alone on a separate seat, perfectly positioned like a king on his throne, his eyes watching them carefully.

Without a word, he reached into the bucket, uncorked the champagne with a loud pop, and poured himself a drink.

"Would you care for a glass?" he offered, the corners of his mouth twisting in a way that made the tension worse. Right now, they were like sheep before a wolf.

Griffin didn't hesitate. "No, thank you. It's too early for a drink," he turned it down, his deep voice edged with caution.

Elijah merely shrugged, clearly unfazed. "Your loss," he replied, raising the glass in a mock toast before sipping leisurely.

Then, with a snap of his fingers, he ordered music to play. A smooth melody filled the limousine as it rolled forward, signaling the start of their journey to the airport.

The ride was awkward and boring as hell.

Griffin was typing furiously on his phone, probably updating his mother that they were riding with the Alpha King. Roman, for once, was quiet, his thumbs moving over his own screen. That left Violet alone with her thoughts.

"Make yourself comfortable, Violet," Elijah said suddenly.

"Huh?" Violet blinked.

"You just look so tense..." He dragged the words out on purpose, clearly enjoying himself.

Why wouldn't I be tense when I'm trapped in a box with a bastard like you? Violet thought bitterly.

Instead, she gave him her brightest, fakest smile. "It's just my first time riding with the Alpha King. It feels surreal."

"I know," Elijah replied without a hint of shame. "I'm the king, after all."

Violet swore she was smiling so hard the corners of her mouth might split. Keep it together, Violet.

"And that's why," Elijah continued, "I'm curious about you."

At once, both Griffin and Roman froze mid-typing, their full attention snapping to her.

Violet kept her face carefully neutral. "What are you curious about, Your Majesty?"

"It came to my attention that you're an orphan," Elijah said, watching her closely.

"You're right, Your Majesty. My foster mother, Nancy, raised me."

"Aren't you curious about your birth parents?"

Violet calmly shook her head. "To be honest, I won't lie and say I don't wonder about them. But they left me, and Nancy, well, she raised me to the best of her ability. I'd rather leave that hornet's nest unpoked."

She hoped that would be enough to pacify him.

It wasn't.

"What nonsense!" Elijah objected. "You're mated to two of my heirs. That makes you a potential Luna if either of them becomes Alpha King. My people cannot have a Luna with unknown origins."

Violet's polite smile was starting to hurt.

"That's why, once we return from the burial, I intend to have a DNA test done on you. We will trace your ancestry. For all we know, you might even have werewolf blood with that hair and those eyes."

Violet's fingers dug into her dress beneath the folds of fabric. "If you say so, Your Majesty," she said lightly, her voice calm even though inside her wolf was ready to rip his throat out.

Chapter 552: Failed Plans

The ride to the airport lasted only fifteen minutes, but to Violet, it felt like an eternity in hell.

By the time the limousine rolled past the final stretch of road, she knew without a single doubt. Elijah knew.

He knew she was his brother's daughter.

And just like he tormented his own heirs, he had shifted his twisted games onto her.

He wasn't confronting her outright. No, that would have been too easy. Instead, Elijah taunted her with the truth, needling at her composure, savoring the slow, deliberate torment of keeping her on edge until she cracked and confessed.

Violet refused to give him that satisfaction.

Her face remained perfectly calm and polite, a mask she wore with brutal discipline. But inside, her wolf snarled and thrashed against its cage. Thalia wanted blood. Violet wanted to scream.

Every breath she took felt poisoned by Elijah's suffocating presence, his musky, dominating scent filling the enclosed space like a trap.

So when the limousine finally stopped and she stepped outside, it felt like coming back to life. The crisp, fresh air hit her lungs, washing away the stench of him. Her shoulders loosened ever so slightly, though the tension in her gut remained.

On the bright side, it was time to execute Plan B.

If Violet was being honest, it wasn't the most brilliant plan ever, but it was the best they had come up with considering the situation.

The airport for private planes wasn't like a commercial one. There were no endless lines of passengers or giant terminals. Private jets loaded in a smaller, quieter section off to the side — just a few hangars, a couple of runways, and a single building for paperwork and security checks. Most of the time, security here was lighter because everyone flying private was "trusted," especially the Alpha King.

Their plan was simple: escape before the plane ever left the ground.

The moment Elijah's jet stopped and everyone got caught up with luggage and greetings, Violet and Griffin would slip out through the back of the hangar. Most hangars had two exits, the large front gate for the planes, and a smaller side door for ground staff.

Once they were through that door, they'd only need to get past a chain-link fence with a single guard. It wouldn't be hard for Griffin to knock him out if it came to that.

From there, they'd make their break for freedom.

Roman would stay behind with Elijah and play dumb, keeping the Alpha King's attention on him long enough for them to disappear completely. By the time Elijah realized they were gone, his jet would already be in the air, and they'd be miles away heading for the North Pack to find Alaric.

It was risky, and they weren't even sure it would work, but it was better than doing nothing.

Hence Violet and Griffin moved quickly, their hearts pounding, eager to get this over with before anyone noticed.

The plan was working perfectly—almost too perfectly — as they slipped from out the back of the hangar. For one brief, shining moment, Violet thought they were actually going to make it until they stepped outside and her breath caught.

Right there, by the perimeter fence, stood six guards. And not just any guards, but werewolves.

They weren't just stationed casually either. Their stances were tight, alert, and shoulders squared, like they had been expecting someone to come through this exit.

Violet and Griffin froze, exchanging a tense glance.

Griffin swallowed, then rolled his shoulders, muscles flexing beneath his shirt. The message was clear to Violet, he'd

take them all down if he had to.

But before he could make a move, someone said from behind,

"What are the two of you doing here?"

Violet spun around to see Christian, Elijah's beta, striding toward them with suspicion in his eyes. "The plane is about to take off," he added, his tone dangerously calm.

The truth hit Violet like a punch to the gut. Elijah had been one step ahead of them all along. Not that they haven't seen this coming, but failure still hurts.

With no other choice, they returned to the jet, Griffin's jaw locked tight. Violet's stomach churned the entire walk back.

When they reboarded, the atmosphere inside the cabin was completely different. Elijah was seated comfortably in his leather chair, sunlight streaming through the oval windows, laughter booming as Roman leaned toward him, clearly entertaining the Alpha King with some elaborate story.

Roman's green eyes flicked up at their arrival. The brief widening of his eyes said everything—he had fully expected them to be gone by now.

"Oh, Roman," Elijah chuckled, wiping a tear of laughter from the corner of his eye, "you truly are a delight."

Then his gaze shifted toward Violet and Griffin. "Did you two go somewhere?" he asked innocently.

Griffin lied. "Violet has a fear of flying, I was just trying to calm her down before we took off."

"Is that so?" Elijah's lips curved into a knowing smile. His tone was even, but Violet could feel the disbelief beneath his words. He didn't believe them for a second, but he wasn't calling them out. Not yet.

Instead, he turned his full attention to Violet, his eyes gleaming darkly. "Well then," he said, "amid your discomfort, I hope you enjoy your flight."

With that, he rose, motioning for Christian to follow him as he disappeared into the private forward cabin reserved for the Alpha King.

The moment the door slid shut, Violet, Griffin, and Roman let out a collective, defeated sigh.

On the bright side, at least they weren't stuck sitting with the smug bastard for the next four hours.

"We have only one option left now." Griffin said, holding Roman and Violet's gaze.

"Asher's." Violet breathed.

Of course, they hadn't made all these plans without keeping the puppet master informed.

Asher had let them plan their escape, then quietly added a final move of his own, just in case the others failed.

Now, everything rested on him, and their own timing.

Chapter 553: Arrival At The West Pack

Violet watched as the jet knifed through a ceiling of clouds and descended toward the private strip, her hand clammy and her heart pounding.

It had finally begun, the final plan that would decide their fate, and whether they'd reach Alaric.

Thankfully, they hadn't been subjected to Elijah's insufferable presence. The other Alphas had been the ones to endure that torment, giving Violet and her mates the chance to rest and save up their energy for what lay ahead.

But now, her nerves were at an all-time high, not just because of the plan, but because of the thought of seeing Asher again.

The original plan had been to never even make it to the West. Yet here they were, and Violet couldn't stop the fear twisting in her chest.

What if the West Pack had changed Asher? What if being here had dragged him back into the darkness he'd fought so hard to escape?

Selfish guilt gnawed at her. The thought of leaving him behind in this place while she went to search for Alaric felt like betrayal.

But there was no choice. Violet's instincts kept pricking at her, and she had always trusted them.

What unsettled her most was how calm Alpha Caspian seemed. He wasn't worried about his son at all, certain that Alaric was safe in his mother's care.

Either Caspian trusted his wife far too much, or he was a brainwashed fool.

Zara had never liked her, and Violet wasn't naïve enough to forget that. The fact that Alaric hadn't called her, or even reached out to his cardinal brothers was a warning sign all on its own.

Moreover, Micah had sent her a response earlier that day. According to him, information was tight in the North Pack right now, but one thing was certain — Alaric was being held against his will by his mother.

What in the world was Zara thinking, holding her own son hostage? Did she really believe that once she released him, Alaric would simply forgive her and fall back in line? Unless, of course, she planned to threaten him with something far worse...

"Gah," Violet groaned, rubbing her temples as countless disturbing scenarios ran through her head.

No. Zara wouldn't go that far.

But if Henry and Elijah had taught Violet anything, it was that parents like them would go to terrifying lengths to secure their ambitions even if it meant destroying their children in the process.

Violet was still lost in thought when suddenly Roman, who was sitting beside her, cupped her face. Before she could brace herself, his mouth crashed against hers.

The kiss was hard and possessive, his lips claiming hers with an intensity that knocked the breath out of her lungs. His teeth grazed her lower lip, demanding, and nearly punishing, before softening slowly, and lingering, as if he wanted to carve himself into her soul.

At first, Violet thought this was Roman trying to calm her before the dangerous journey ahead. But as his grip tightened at the back of her neck and his chest trembled against hers, the truth hit her like ice water.

This wasn't just a kiss. It was goodbye.

Her chest squeezed painfully. Roman wasn't coming with them to the North Pack. This was his way of telling her that even if miles separated them, she was his and he was hers.

When they finally broke apart, Violet's lips were swollen, her breathing ragged. Roman said nothing. Instead, his green eyes were locked on hers, fierce and aching, communicating everything his mouth wouldn't say—at least not against her lips.

"Aren't you both so adorable?"

The tender moment shattered like glass. Violet and Roman's heads snapped up, and there he was—Elijah, standing over them with that insufferable, knowing smirk.

For the first time, Violet didn't bother to hide her anger. Her golden eyes burned as she glared up at him, every ounce of rage and loathing she'd buried simmering to the surface.

Elijah, shameless as ever, only widened his smile. "Oops, my bad," he said lightly, as though he hadn't just intruded on a moment that wasn't his.

Violet swallowed the anger in her chest, smoothing her features into polite neutrality. She couldn't afford to cross the line with this man.

"It's nothing," she lied through her teeth, the words tasting like ash in her mouth.

Inside of her, Violet was seconds away from wrapping her hands around his throat and squeezing until his smug grin faded forever. And to think this man was her uncle—the family she had spent her entire life longing for. Fate had a cruel sense of humor.

"The moment we step down," Elijah continued, "there will be a lot of a commotion. That is why I've decided to leave Christian behind to take care of my precious heirs."

Oh fuck you. Violet cursed mentally.

They weren't fooled by Elijah's words. This wasn't care or protection, no, it was surveillance. He was putting Christian on them like a leash to make sure they didn't slip away.

Griffin's voice broke the tense silence, his words edged with sarcasm. "We are so honored, Your Majesty. Truly, I feel flattered by the way you care about us."

He sat in the aisle seat across from them, his broad frame radiating a quiet anger beneath his calm demeanor.

Elijah's eyes gleamed, his smile snake-like. "You're welcome, of course. Anything for my heirs."

And that was how, moments later, Christian was glued to their side like an annoying pest as they descended the metal stairs of the jet.

From the distance, Violet saw him.

Her Asher.

He stood at the foot of the crimson carpet, unruffled and devastatingly handsome, carrying that same cool, mysterious aura that had always drawn her in.

Asher was dressed in a tailored black suit with the collar left slightly open. His slitted eyes were exposed and unblinking, watching his visitors.

He hadn't come alone. Ezra stood a half-pace behind him, silent and imposing, while a row of West Pack alphas flanked the approach, their expressions carefully schooled into respect. Their posture radiated discipline and power; it was impressive.

Violet's breath caught as their gazes collided across the distance, and for a heartbeat, the rest of the world fell away. Relief filled her as the attraction still thrummed between them. Inside her mind, Thalia was losing her damn mind, flirting, howling and pacing with wild excitement.

Her chest ached with all the things she wanted to say, but before she could even take a step, Elijah was already before Asher.

"Asher Nightshade," Elijah said, his tone deliberately pointed, refusing to bestow the title of Alpha.

Chapter 554: See Their King

"Your Majesty." Asher didn't kneel and inclined his head the exact amount tradition demanded and not a fraction more.

"It's an honor to have you here at the West Pack." His face was unreadable, a mask of perfect stoicism that gave nothing away.

Elijah answered. "I couldn't have missed this for anything in the world. It's only right that I pay my respects to your father, Alpha Henry, especially knowing he died a hero."

His words sounded sincere, but the barb beneath them was obvious. Elijah was poking, prodding, and testing Asher.

Asher felt the sting, but he didn't flinch. His tone was calm but cutting. "You're right. I may never be able to surpass my father's record when I take my place as Alpha."

Tension rippled between them.

Elijah studied him, twisted amusement gleaming in his eyes. Asher Nightshade wasn't bowing — he was matching Elijah step for step, turning his game back on him. They were two predators circling, neither willing to bow first.

For a moment, both men simply stared at each other. Elijah's black orbs locked onto Asher's slitted gray eyes without a hint of fear. Those eyes had made countless wolves bow their heads, and had forced even the boldest to look away, but not Elijah.

His powers were not effective on him.

Slowly, Elijah stepped forward, his presence commanding, until he stopped before the line of West Pack alphas.

At once, they dropped to their knees, heads bowed low in perfect unison as they called out, their voices ringing like a single echo.

"Welcome to the West Pack, Your Majesty!"

Elijah's gaze swept over them, pleased by the flawless display of respect.

"This," he said with a nod, "is why I've always loved the West Pack. So disciplined. So organized."

But Asher hadn't moved. He remained upright, his gaze fixed in the distance yet sharp.

"Well then," Elijah murmured, tilting his head ever so slightly toward Asher. "Lead the way, shall we?"

Everyone fell into line the moment Elijah gave a subtle nod.

"This way," Asher said with a clipped tone before turning sharply on his heel.

The power dynamic shifted. Elijah walked directly beside Asher, both men at the head of the group. The line of West Pack alphas immediately filed in behind Elijah, their steps in perfect unison, while Asher's personal guards spread out to the sides, creating a moving wall of protection as they walked briskly across the strip.

The jet's metal stairs folded up with a hydraulic hiss now that everyone had disembarked.

Directly ahead, a fleet of black luxury SUVs stood in a perfect line. Their tinted windows glimmered under the sun, reflecting the expanse of the runway. A handful of uniformed drivers waited motionless beside the vehicles.

The group moved toward the largest and most lavish SUV, clearly reserved for Elijah. As they reached it, two of Asher's guards stepped forward, opening the doors with flawless precision.

Elijah entered first, claiming the far end of the plush leather back seat, his movements slow and regal. Asher followed silently, taking his place beside him.

Up front, one of Asher's security guards slid into the passenger seat, while the driver — already waiting — started the engine with a low, smooth purr.

Behind them, the other SUVs filled with alphas and dignitaries, engines rumbling to life one after the other. Asher had clearly gone all out to stage a grand, orderly welcome.

As their own vehicle rolled forward, the convoy fell into formation, gliding down the narrow runway road. The private strip faded behind them, swallowed by the sweeping, open land of the West Pack territory.

"I don't see your beta, Your Majesty," Asher observed, his tone carefully neutral.

"Oh, don't worry about him. He's tending to your cardinal brothers and their precious mate." His voice carried a note of casual mockery.

"How considerate of you, Your Majesty," Asher replied, not bothering to hide the sarcasm in his tone.

Elijah's black eyes glinted, seizing the opportunity to strike back. "Speaking of mates, you must have heard by now that your ex-girlfriend is bound to Roman. That must sting, knowing the goddess didn't even consider you a second option for her."

The jab hit its mark. Asher didn't flinch outwardly, but the tight flex of his jaw betrayed him.

"We do not question the will of the goddess," Asher said, clearly trying to soften the blow.

"Indeed," Elijah murmured, his agreement loaded with unspoken meaning.

For a moment, the two men locked eyes, their gazes clashing in a silent battle. Neither of them was deceived; the understanding between them was mutual.

Almost simultaneously, they looked away, though the tension lingered like a live wire ready to snap.

Meanwhile, Violet and the others were dealing with their own nightmare.

Christian had joined them in the ride and if he'd been pretending before, now he wasn't even hiding it. Every move he made screamed spy. His eyes flicked between them constantly, as if waiting for a slip.

Roman had taken the front passenger seat, leaving Violet pressed to one side of the backseat with Griffin in the middle, and Christian on the far end like an unwanted shadow.

The ride had barely begun when the SUV slowed, then slowed even further. Outside was the sound of cheers, chants, and excited shouts of the people.

Through the tinted glass, Violet could make out a sea of West Pack members, crowding the narrow road. They were waving, pounding on the windows, and craning their necks to peer inside. The vehicle crawled forward at a snail's pace, surrounded by people desperate to see their king.

And then it happened suddenly.

Roman's skin shimmered, taking on a slick, scaled sheen. In a single, smooth motion, he twisted and spat a spray of venom directly into Christian's face before the man could react.

Christian went rigid, paralyzed instantly, his mouth frozen mid-snarl. Before the driver even registered the commotion, Roman's head snapped forward and another shot of his venom struck him squarely.

The SUV lurched.

"Go, go, go!" Roman shouted with urgency. "Griffin, Violet—MOVE!"

Chapter 555: To The North pack

This had been the plan all along.

From the stories they'd fed him, Asher had predicted Elijah would assign someone to shadow Violet, Griffin, and Roman to make sure they didn't try anything reckless. That part was predictable. So Asher did what he did best—he planned ahead.

He had made sure the people of the West Pack would be gathered here to welcome their king. With a crowd this massive blocking the road, the convoy would have no choice but to slow down. And that slow crawl was the perfect window for Violet and Griffin to make their escape.

Everything was in place.

Except now, with the moment finally here, Violet didn't have the heart to go again, not without Roman.

"You should come with us, Roman," Violet urged, her voice tight with worry.

Her eyes moved to Christian, who was still slumped against the seat. The paralysis from Roman's venom held him frozen, but only just. His teeth were gritted, his jaw trembling violently, and a vein bulged along his temple as his body fought to overcome the toxin. His eyes burned with pure rage, locked on Roman with a promise of retribution.

Roman didn't even glance at him. His focus stayed on Violet. "You know I can't leave Asher alone, love. We're mates. We promised to be there for one another."

"I know," Violet said with emotion, "but look at him!" She gestured at Christian, whose furious gaze promised violence the moment he regained control. "He's going to hurt you, Roman. Elijah won't let this go."

Roman only smiled, his dimples showing. "Don't worry, Asher will handle it. You don't need to worry about me. We'll be fine."

"Violet!" Griffin's urgent voice cut through the moment.

He was outside now, bracing his shoulders as he used his sheer, raw strength to shove back the pressing crowd that was pressing so close it was suffocating. Griffin's muscles strained, his feet digging into the pavement as he forced a narrow path clear for Violet.

"Go!" Roman barked at her.

Violet's eyes stung, but she forced herself to nod. "Look after Asher for me. We'll come back for you soon. Both of you ."

"I know," Roman said, giving her a cheeky wink even now.

Then, before she could lose her nerve, he moved into action. Dragging the paralyzed driver aside, Roman slid behind the wheel and slammed his foot down.

The car lurched forward smoothly, closing the growing gap between them and the other convoy. He needed to keep the line moving, to keep up appearances, and make sure no one came back to investigate what was causing the holdup. It was the perfect distraction, and the last gift he could give them.

"Now!" Griffin growled.

Before Violet could brace herself, his hand closed firmly around hers and he yanked her forward. They plunged into the sea of bodies, the crowd roaring around them. People shoved back, confused and angry, but they were no match for Griffin's supernatural strength. His broad shoulders cut a path through them with ease, his grip unrelenting as he bulldozed forward, dragging Violet behind him.

Violet's heart was pounding. The noise, the heat, the crush of bodies— everything! It was overwhelming. Someone grabbed for her arm, and she stumbled, but Griffin's strength yanked her upright before she could fall.

"Don't stop!" he barked over the din.

And she didn't.

At last, the crowd broke apart and they stumbled free into open space. Fresh air hit Violet like a shock. They didn't slow, sprinting down a narrow side street as the noise faded behind them. Only when they'd put several blocks between them and the commotion did Griffin finally slow.

They ducked into an alleyway, hidden between two shuttered shops. Elijah's visit had practically shut the whole district down and the silence here was almost eerie after the uproar they'd just escaped.

Griffin yanked out his phone, breathing hard. He tapped the screen, and once the moment the call connected, he spoke with an urgent voice. "We're out. What's the next plan?"

On the other end, Jeremiah's voice came alive. "Stay exactly where you are. We're tracking your location. Don't move until we get there."

Griffin ended the call and shoved the phone back into his pocket. He turned to Violet, studying her pale, tense face. "How are you holding up?"

"Horrible," Violet admitted, her voice shaking. Her hands fisted at her sides. "I feel awful for leaving Roman behind like that. What if this just lands him in serious trouble? Elijah's going to punish him, and we won't even be there to do anything about it. He's going to take it all alone and—"

"Violet."

Griffin caught her face in his hands, tilting her gaze up to his. "Roman knew the risk," he said, his voice calm and sure. "He was willing to take it. And Asher is there, he won't let anything happen to him."

"But... "

"Listen to me." His tone sharpened, cutting through her panic. "It's not like Elijah's going to kill him. We've been through worse, Violet. One punishment? Two? That's nothing new to us. So maybe trust Roman a little, and stop worrying so much. If you break down now, it'll throw off everything we've worked for. We can't afford a setback. Not now."

Violet swallowed hard and nodded. Fine, she had to be strong. They'd go to the North pack, get Alaric and then come back for Roman and Asher. Damn Elijah and whatever antics he'd come up with next.

The quietness of the alley was broken by the sound of an approaching engine. Griffin tensed instantly, shoving Violet behind him.

His body literally was a wall of muscle, shielding her completely as his sharp gaze locked on the narrow entrance.

Then the car rolled into view. The back window slid down, and Jeremiah's familiar head popped out.

"It's me!" he called out with a loud voice.

Griffin relaxed at once. "Come on," he muttered, grabbing Violet's hand and leading her forward.

They scrambled into the car, Griffin pushing her in first before sliding in after her. The door slammed shut, and the vehicle moved on.

Jeremiah grinned at them from the front seat. "Slick move back there. You two were amazing. By the time Elijah even gets his bearings, you'll be long gone."

Violet managed a weak smile. "Where are we going?" she asked.

Jeremiah's grin widened. "Asher set up a chopper to take you straight toward the North Pack. Fastest way there, and you'll be out of reach before anyone catches up."

He gestured toward the back compartment of the SUV. "There's a package behind you. North weather is always nasty so you'll need those."

Griffin didn't even glance back. "I'm good." His voice was confident.

Violet wasn't surprised. Werewolves had naturally high metabolism, their bodies burning through cold like it was nothing. She, however, didn't share that luxury, even though she was half-werewolf. Guess, you can't have all the good traits, right.

Twisting around, she reached for the package. Inside of it was a thick coat made of dark wool and lined with fur. The moment she slipped it on, its warmth wrapped around her, cocooning her completely. Yep, she would sweat in here if they drove too long.

Thankfully before long, their car rolled onto a wide, open field. A helicopter sat there, its blades already whirring, cutting through the air with a rhythmic

thump-thump-thump. The smell of fuel was in the air, and a lone pilot stood waiting beside it.

Jeremiah hopped out first, then helped Violet down.

"This is where we part ways," he said, leading them toward the helicopter. "The pilot will drop you at the closest village to the North Pack border. Any closer and the chopper could be flagged. Asher wants you guys to slip in unnoticed. Especially you, Violet. If Zara gets wind of this, you'll never get near Alaric."

Griffin said to Jeremiah. "Thank you."

"Just doing my job, man."

Then Violet hugged him tightly. "Please, look after Asher for me."

"I will," Jeremiah promised with a rare softness in his tone.

As the pilot climbed into position, Griffin and Violet boarded the chopper. The interior smelled faintly of oil and leather, and the seats were small but sturdy.

The engine roared, and the helicopter lifted smoothly into the sky. Violet glanced down through the window just in time to see Jeremiah standing below, watching them go. His head tilted up, confirming they were safely airborne before he finally turned and walked away.

The ground fell away beneath them as they flew from the west pack, and toward the North.

"So what's the plan?!" Violet shouted over the roar of the helicopter blades, her voice straining to reach Griffin.

Griffin leaned closer, saying. "Getting into the North Pack is easy. The real problem is the packhouse. But I've been friends with Alaric since we were in diapers. Zara won't refuse me entry. I can get inside."

"And me?" she yelled back.

Griffin's expression darkened. "That's the tricky part. Zara won't let you anywhere near him. We'll have to sneak you in."

Her heart skipped. "How?"

"Thankfully," Griffin said, "I have someone I trust. He'll help you get inside. The plan is simple: you find Alaric while I distract Zara or at least convince her to let me see him. Either that..." Griffin trailed, "or we improvise."

Violet shook her head unsure. That didn't sound like much of a plan.

Goddess help them.

Chapter 556: The Righteous Son

Asher knew the moment Elijah's phone rang that the hornet's nest had been poked. He didn't so much as blink, his expression perfectly neutral, and body language betraying nothing as Elijah lifted the phone to his ear.

"Hello?" Elijah answered, sounding almost bored.

With his keen hearing, Asher caught the faint words from the other end, "They're gone."

For the briefest moment, a flicker of annoyance crossed Elijah's face, and then it was gone. "Is that so?" he said quietly, the edge beneath his tone unmistakable. "Hold onto him. We'll arrive soon."

Asher knew exactly who him was.

Roman.

And judging by Elijah's tone, whatever awaited his brother wasn't going to be pleasant.

Yet Asher didn't so much as twitch. He sat there with his hands relaxed, his posture casual, and his expression practically carved from ice. He gave Elijah nothing to read.

Elijah ended the call and slowly set the phone aside. Then, deliberately, he turned his head toward Asher.

Asher met his gaze without flinching.

For several long, suffocating heartbeats, they simply stared at one another. The tension was thick and electric, the air between them almost crackling with heat. At that moment, they were two predators circling each other in silence.

Then, without warning, Elijah's face split into a wide, twisted grin. A chuckle escaped him, building until it became full-blown, raucous laughter. It went on and on until tears streaked his face.

"This..." Elijah gasped between peals of laughter, "this is going to be fun."

He turned back to the front, still laughing as though someone had told the funniest joke in the world, except no one had.

Asher remained still, his face unreadable. But beneath his tough exterior, his hand shook slightly. He thought he had the situation under control. Still, one could never truly predict the moves of a madman.

And so, with that manic laughter still lingering in the air, they continued the tortured journey to the packhouse.

Patricia and Beta Dominic were the first figures they saw as soon as the convoy of cars rolled into the compound.

"Your Majesty," both of them bowed their heads in deep reverence the moment Elijah stepped out.

Behind them, the other cars came to a halt, and the loud thunk-thunk of doors opening and slamming shut reverberated across the space as the rest of the alphas and dignitaries disembarked.

Elijah was still exchanging formal greetings with the high-ranking members of the West Pack when the commotion broke out.

A loud snarl rent the air.

Roman was resisting violently as Christian slammed him face-first against the hood of a car, his arm twisted painfully behind his back. His muscles strained as his body writhed like a coiled serpent, green scales rippling across his skin as his slitted eyes blazed with fury.

"What the hell is going on here?!" Alpha Leon stormed forward. His chest heaved with rage at the sight of his son being handled like a common criminal.

Christian didn't answer. He kept Roman pinned, his grip iron-tight, his expression cold and unyielding. Roman snarled again, the sound guttural and dangerous.

Leon's wolf surged forward, his eyes glowing fiercely. His voice dropped into a deadly growl. "You'd better unhand my son right now, Christian, or you won't have hands left to use."

Finally, Christian raised his head, his own wolf flaring as his eyes glowed in response.

"King's orders," he snarled back.

Leon froze for a heartbeat, stunned by the answer. The glow in his eyes faltered, confusion and disbelief twisting his face. Slowly, he turned toward Elijah, who was now approaching them with a razor-sharp smile.

"What is the meaning of this, Your Majesty?" Leon demanded, his voice trembling with restrained fury.

Elijah said to him, "Your son, Roman, attacked my beta and aided Griffin and their mate, Violet, in escaping to goddess knows where."

Leon's head whipped toward Roman, his voice breaking with disbelief. "You did what?!"

He tried speaking to Roman through the pack link, but his son had shut the link between them. The meaning was clear: Roman didn't want to speak to him.

Raw hurt flashed in Leon's eyes. How could his son shut him out like this? How could Roman take such a reckless risk and not keep him informed? This wasn't just betrayal he felt, no, it was deep gnawing fear twisting inside his chest. He feared for him.

"What do you mean Griffin and Violet are gone?" Irene asked, her tone laced with confusion so convincing it was almost believable. Well, almost, because Elijah was not deceived.

"Are you trying to tell me," Elijah said, his voice dangerously calm, "that you, Irene, had no idea your children were planning this stunt?"

"Of course not!" Irene's eyes widened as she clasped her hands in front of her. "I would have discouraged them from such madness had I known. It's Alpha Henry's burial, after all. They're supposed to pay their respects."

Technically, Irene hadn't known for certain. Griffin hadn't shared his plan with her. But from the moment they arrived at Elijah's estate and there had been no sign of Alaric, she knew in her heart what the children were planning. Their behavior last night had only confirmed it.

Griffin had been smart not to involve her directly — if questioned, she could deny any involvement without lying outright. Surely, omission didn't count as lying, right?

"Irene is right," Asher said, stepping forward. His voice went up a notch, thundering, "This is Alpha Henry's burial. Is this how you all intend to pay respect to my father?!"

His gaze swept over everyone, landing on Elijah last. There wasn't a hint of fear in his eyes, only righteous indignation. The way he carried himself, one would think he was a son truly outraged at the chaos marring his father's final moments.

The effect was immediate.

Everyone fell silent. Words died on their tongues. Slowly, their eyes turned to Elijah, their expressions accusing. It was clear now who was being blamed for disrupting what should have been a solemn moment of mourning.

Elijah noticed those looks and scoffed in disbelief. Were they seriously making him the villain here?

He turned his burning glare back to Asher, his voice venomous. "Well played, boy."

Confusion rippled through the others at those words — only a few like Irene understood the game being played here — but Asher didn't back down.

He bowed his head just enough to look respectful and said, "All I want is for my father to be honored."

Elijah stared at him in disbelief, rage simmering beneath the surface. Who does Asher think he's fooling with this act? But with the tide of public opinion turned against him, Elijah could do nothing.

Checkmate. The bastard had won this round.

Lifting his head, Elijah barked, "Christian, release the boy." His teeth gleamed as he added, "As for the runaways, assemble a team and bring them back. They'll face their punishment when they're back.... and by then, the burial will be over. Don't you agree?"

Chapter 557: Helpful Venom

Apparently, release didn't mean freedom. Christian had assigned a werewolf guard to watch over Roman, and even now, as a servant led him toward his quarters, the guard followed closely behind.

Leon was there too, walking silently at his side. His presence said everything Roman needed to know, though he didn't speak. Roman's jaw clenched as he stalked down the hall, anger burning in every step.

"This is your—" the servant began, trying to introduce the room, but Roman didn't wait. He shoved the door open and stormed inside.

Leon caught the door before it slammed shut and stepped in after him. "Roman," he called after him firmly.

But Roman ignored him, striding inside. Unfortunately, there wasn't much space to retreat to, and Leon quickly caught up. He grabbed Roman's shoulder and spun him around.

"What the hell do you want?!" Roman barked, his voice raw with rage.

For a split second, Leon froze, stunned by the sheer fury on his son's face. Then his own jaw tightened. "I get that you're angry," he shot back, "but making reckless moves like this isn't an option!"

"What do you even care?!" Roman shouted, his voice breaking at the edges.

"I CARE BECAUSE I'M YOUR FATHER!" Leon roared, his chest heaving. His voice cracked, guttural with emotion. "I care because I'm a father terrified of losing his only child!"

Roman's breath hitched, but he didn't move.

"I might not win any awards for Father of the Year, but I am concerned when my son throws himself into danger and shuts me out. You have no idea what it does to me, knowing I'm helpless to protect you."

The air between them was electric, raw with years of hurt and unspoken words. Roman's shoulders shook. His eyes filled, brimming with tears he couldn't hold back.

Then, like a dam breaking, the pack link opened between them. Roman's voice echoed painfully in Leon's mind. "You hurt me!"

"I know," Leon answered instantly, his own eyes misting over. Through the link, he could feel Roman's pain as clearly as his own heartbeat.

"I'm so sorry. A thousand apologies won't erase what I've done, but I'll keep saying them if I must. I don't care if you hate me, if you never forgive me—just... don't put yourself in danger like this without telling me. I can't lose you, Roman. I can't."

Something deep within Roman shattered at those words. With a choked sound, he lunged forward, wrapping his arms around Leon.

Leon held him tight, clutching his son like he might vanish if he let go, both of them crying like children.

"My little Romy, I'm so sorry."

Leon used the childhood pet name he hadn't spoken in years, and it only made him cry even harder.

Compared to other Alphas, Roman had always been the most sensitive, deeply in touch with his emotions. And right now, he was baring it all, every raw, aching piece of himself.

It felt like forever before they broke apart. Roman wiped at the tears in his eyes furiously. He wasn't a child anymore, for crying out loud.

His father was looking at him with a new glint in his eyes. Roman knew what it was.

Hope.

It made him uneasy but a little comforted at the same time. He hadn't forgiven his father, not yet. But he wasn't as angry as he had been before.

"About Alexa—"

"What your mother said is true, Roman. She never wanted you. It's all my fault."

The light in Roman's eyes dimmed.

Leon immediately added, "We might not have wanted you, but that doesn't mean I regret having you, Roman."

Roman gulped as Leon placed one hand on his shoulder and the other gently cupped his face. His voice softened.

"I will never forget the happiness I felt when I first carried you. When those tiny hands wrapped around my finger and pulled it into your mouth. Or your naming ceremony, when you peed straight into my mouth while I was proudly showing you off to the pack."

A startled snort escaped Roman's lips, unbidden.

Leon chuckled, smiling fondly at the memory. "You've been mischievous since birth."

His tone turned firm. "Forget what your mother said. Don't let the words of a disturbed woman sink into you. You are not a mistake, Roman Draven. You're my son, the future Alpha of the South Pack. Don't provoke Elijah carelessly and make me lose my heir."

Then Leon turned toward the door, careful of the guard outside. Through the pack link, his voice reached Roman's mind. "How's Violet?"

"Safe," Roman answered curtly. Just because they'd shared a moment didn't mean he trusted Leon completely. The less his father knew about their plans, the better. Who knew if Elijah hadn't already anticipated all this? Roman wasn't taking that risk.

Leon understood and didn't press further. Out loud, he said, "No more reckless fighting."

"No promises," Roman replied dryly.

An awkward silence followed. Then Leon finally gestured at the door. "You know where to find me if you need me."

"Sure." Roman played it cool.

"I'll leave then." Leon opened the door, and nearly collided with Asher Nightshade. The guard who'd been posted outside was gone.

Asher simply tilted his head in acknowledgment. Leon nodded and stepped aside to let him through.

The moment the door shut, Roman let out a relieved breath. He and Asher crossed the room and embraced tightly, like brothers reunited after years apart.

"That was close," Roman said, pulling back. He searched Asher's face carefully. "Violet and Griffin?"

"They made it out."

Roman exhaled, relief flooding him. One plan down. Countless more to go.

Then he studied Asher's tired expression. "How are you holding up?"

"Super," Asher replied with abnormal cheer. "Every single one of my father's Alphas wants me dead."

"That's twisted." Roman grimaced at first, only for his lips to curl in a dangerous grin. "And exciting. Where do we begin?"

"First," Asher said. "I need your venom."

Roman's brow arched.

"Preferably bottled."

Chapter 558: Oscar? Violet?

Jeremiah hadn't been kidding, the cold here stung the cheeks and brought tears to the eyes. The moment they disembarked from the chopper, they were swallowed by a crystal-white field, the snow so deep it reached up to their knees.

Violet shivered violently as they trudged through it, each step crunching underfoot. The mid-day sun hung overhead, pale and weak, casting a dull light that made the world feel like it was already evening.

"So..." Violet's breath puffed white in the air, "I was thinking about our plan."

Griffin glanced at her, his grip tightening protectively around her hand as he guided her forward. "What about the plan?" His voice was calm, but there was an edge to it — a subtle readiness to adapt if needed. If Violet would let him, he'd gladly carry her on his back, but he knew better. Her stubborn independence wouldn't allow it.

Violet hesitated, biting her lip before blurting out, "What if you didn't need to sneak me in at all?"

Griffin froze mid-step, boots sinking deeper into the snow. Slowly, he turned to face her, his brows furrowing. "What?"

Closing the space between them, Violet looked up at him with a spark of determination in her eyes. "I've been thinking about this since the ride. If I can glamour myself to look human, what if I can glamour myself to look like someone else entirely?"

Her voice quickened with excitement, even as her teeth chattered. "I mean, come on. From all the books I've read, Fae are tricksters. Illusions, mimicry, that kind of magic runs deep in our blood. Why shouldn't I be able to use that to our advantage?"

Griffin tilted his head, unsure. "I don't know, Violet. I guess it's possible. But these powers are still new to you, and I don't know what it will cost to pull that off."

"But I can still try. Please." Her eyes pleaded with him, full of stubborn determination and raw hope.

Griffin sighed. Unfortunately, he could never refuse her anything.

"Fine, you can try. But the moment you show even the slightest sign of distress, I'm pulling you out. I mean it."

Violet's face lit up with a smile so bright it seemed to shame the dull sun above.

"Fine," she agreed eagerly.

She released his hand, flexing her shoulders as if preparing for battle. Alright, she told herself, this is how it goes.

Closing her eyes, Violet focused. She conjured the image of the person she wanted to mimic, bringing every detail to the forefront of her mind. Then, she imagined her own body melting away, reshaping into theirs. It was like hiding her fae features, only it was much more intense.

And she wasn't prepared for the pain that followed.

"Ugh..." Violet gasped, her body trembling as sweat broke across her brow.

"Violet...?" Griffin's voice sharpened with concern. He didn't like the sound of her ragged breathing. The groans grew louder, her face twisting with agony. She looked like she was being ripped apart from the inside out.

"That's it," Griffin growled, moving toward her. "I said we'd stop if it came to this—"

He reached for her, but an unseen force lashed out violently, slamming into his chest. Griffin was thrown backward, hitting the frozen ground with bone-jarring impact. The breath was knocked clean out of him.

"Great," he groaned, flat on his back, glaring up at the gray sky. "I should've known better than to agree to this."

Violet's flesh rippled, moving unnaturally like water beneath the surface. Her arms stretched first, bones lengthening until they no longer felt like her own. The sleeves of her coat split at the seams, fabric shredding as her muscles swelled, cords twisting and bulging beneath her skin.

Her legs gave way, unable to bear the violent changes wracking her body. She crashed into the snow, her knees sinking deep into the freezing powder. The cold bit into her, but she barely felt it beneath the white-hot agony of her transformation.

Her spine arched, a sickening series of pops echoing through the silent field as her back broadened, her chest expanding. It felt as though invisible hands were pulling her apart piece by piece, stretching her body beyond its limits.

And beneath the whole pain, there was her wolf Thalia, howling with confusion in the back of her mind. She could not understand what was happening.

"Violet!" Griffin ran over to her. Except when she lifted her head, what met him was the face of his beta.

"Oscar?" Griffin asked in pure confusion.

"Temporary," Violet answered tiredly, her voice rough. "It's still me, Violet."

She tried to stand but staggered, and Griffin caught her quickly.

"Damn, that took a lot more out of me than I expected," she muttered. Even while speaking, her voice sounded deep, and masculine. Just like Oscar's.

"Violet?" Griffin's tone was skeptical now, his brows furrowed. "Are you sure this is just glamouring?"

"Of course," she said, frowning. "Why would you say that?"

"Because..." he hesitated, giving her a wary once-over. "You look and feel weirder than usual."

Violet let out a nervous chuckle. "I know, right? That's what it's supposed to be. Last time, when I glamoured my Fae features, you and Roman both saw me as normal, but I could still feel my ears when I touched—"

Mid-sentence, Violet reached down to her chest to prove her point and froze. Her hand met flat muscle, not the familiar curve of her breasts.

Blinking rapidly, she took a proper look at herself. Violet now had broad shoulders, thickly muscled arms, and her usual feminine body was completely gone.

"Oh... no."

With panic speed, Violet yanked open the thick coat, then lifted her gown. Her panties hung in tatters, shredded from the sudden growth. She peered down and screamed.

She had a dick.

"Holy shit, Violet!" Griffin yelled, immediately throwing his hands over his eyes to block the view. "Public flashing! Not cool!"

Violet screamed again, louder this time, horrified beyond words.

What the actual fuck was going on?!

She hadn't imitated Oscar.

She had become Oscar.

Chapter 559: At His Mother's Mercy

"Okay, calm down," Violet muttered to herself, taking deep, forceful breaths. "This isn't permanent. You'll go back to normal as soon as this is over. Easy as breathing."

She tried to sound hopeful, but inside, she was freaking out. Badly.

She turned to Griffin, her voice mixed with nerves and determination. "This is a good thing, right? At least everyone knows Oscar is your beta, so I won't be refused entrance."

Griffin gave a short nod, his expression serious. "You're right about that part. While I keep Zara occupied, you'll sneak off to Alaric's room and release him. We'll figure out the rest from there." His intense gaze locked on hers. "You still remember the layout of the house from the map I showed you, right?"

"Yes, I do," Violet said obediently.

"As long as Zara hasn't made any major changes, this should be straightforward. Once Alaric is free, we'll regroup and hopefully settle things with his mother peacefully."

"Alright, captain. Let's go get our boy back." Violet gave Griffin a playful salute, her nerves hidden behind bravado.

Griffin nodded once, and started toward the village where they'd find a ride straight to the packhouse. Violet followed close behind, her boots crunching softly in the snow. Neither of them said a word, both focused on the mission ahead, blissfully unaware of just how dangerous the mission they had taken truly was.

Meanwhile, back at the Packhouse :

"What is it this time? Where are you taking me?" Alaric's voice rose in panic as he shot up from the bed the moment the guards entered the containment room.

Two of them came inside while the other two stayed posted at the door, their expressions hard and watchful.

One guard stepped forward, saying in a calm, nearly coaxing tone. "Alpha Alaric, we just need you to come peacefully with us. It's your mother's orders. There's no need for violence."

But damn it if Alaric was going to let them lay a single hand on him. His muscles tense as his mind raced. What the hell was his mother up to now?

From the wild, rugged look in his eyes, it was clear he was nearing his breaking point. It had been more than two days since they'd locked the suppressor cuffs on him, and he was starting to lose it.

This was the longest he had ever been separated from his wolf, and it was beginning to take its toll on him.

Suppressor cuffs were designed for criminal werewolves locked up in prison. Even then, the prisoners were given brief, scheduled releases to breathe and reconnect with their wolves.

But prolonged continuous use of the suppressor cuff was practically a death sentence. Weeks of this would lead to madness, and finally, death.

However, Alaric was no criminal. He had been raised like royalty, treated like a prince all his life. And now, here he was, chained, humiliated, and stripped of his freedom by the very people who should have protected him.

He knew why his mother wouldn't release him. Unlike ordinary wolves, he had powers — and he wasn't afraid to use it. Once these cuffs came off, he would roast every single traitorous fool who had stood by and let Zara do this to him.

"Come on, let's go, Alpha Alaric," the guard said.

Alaric let out a bitter laugh. "Oh, suddenly you remember I'm your Alpha?!" His voice dripped with sarcasm and rage. "You dare call me Alpha while standing there, letting my mother treat me like her personal prisoner?!"

"Alpha Alaric, this isn't the time for talks—" the guard began, trying to placate him.

"Don't touch me!" Alaric snarled, his voice a guttural hiss as he jerked back. The sound was so feral it made even the seasoned guard hesitate.

The man's jaw tightened, and after a tense beat, he gestured to the second guard. The two of them began circling Alaric, moving slowly and cautiously, like hunters closing in on a cornered beast.

With a guttural snarl, Alaric slammed his shoulder into the nearest guard, ramming him hard against the wall. The second guard then lunged in from behind, his arms locking around Alaric's torso.

But Alaric roared and dropped his weight, twisting violently. They both went down in a messy tangle, the sound of their bodies hitting the floor brutal.

Alaric tried to roll on top, his fists swinging wildly. But before he could regain control, the two guards stationed at the doorway charged in. It was now four against one, and with their combined strength, they crushed down on him.

"Get off me!" Alaric snarled with his teeth bared, electric blue eyes blazing with fury. He bucked and twisted, his muscles straining, but the suppressors were doing their job. His wolf's power was still there, howling furiously, yet unreachable.

They pulled him up to his feet, dragging him across the corridor. Alaric fought them with every ounce of strength he had left, snarling and thrashing, but exhaustion quickly settled into his bones.

The corridor felt endless, and by the time they reached his mother's laboratory, his strength had completely waned. His head hung low, sweat dampening his hair, but his eyes still burned with defiance.

Zara barely spared him a glance when they arrived, too busy arranging the instruments on the nearby table. Her voice was calm, if not detached, as she gave her order.

"Put him there and make sure he's strapped tight. As you can see, my son's a little rabid at the moment. We wouldn't want him hurting himself during the procedure."

"You're the one who's fucking sick, you bitch!" Alaric roared, his voice cracking with fury.

He didn't get to finish because the guards grabbed him, dragging him toward the table.

The sight of the thick leather restraints sent alarm bells screaming through his head. Alaric panicked. The thought of being bound and helpless while his mother did God-knows-what to him was unbearable.

"No! No, you can't tie me down!" Alaric thrashed violently, his voice raw with terror. "She's going to hurt me! You have to listen to me! Please!"

But no one listened.

The guards' faces were stone-cold, their loyalty unshaken as they followed the Luna's orders.

Zara had made sure of that. By painting Alaric as "mentally unstable," she'd given them a reason to ignore his desperate cries.

Helplessly, Alaric screamed until his throat burned, but it was no use. The straps locked into place, pinning his limbs to the cold table, leaving him completely at his mother's mercy.

Chapter 560: Alaric's Nightmare

Realizing that screaming and struggling would get him nowhere, Alaric forced himself to think. Since violence wouldn't work, maybe, just maybe, he could reach the part of his mother that still loved him.

"What do you plan to do to me, Mother?" Alaric rasped, his voice hoarse and raw from shouting.

Zara paused mid-motion, a syringe halfway filled with a clear, viscous solution intended to use on him. Her hand stilled as she turned toward him, surprise in her eyes.

It was the first time Alaric had called her "Mother" since this nightmare began. Before now, it had always been "Zara" or "Bitch," as if the word mother burned his tongue.

For a brief moment, her expression softened. She set the syringe on the metal tray and crossed to his side.

"Alaric, baby?" she whispered, testing him.

Alaric lay restrained on the cold table, sweat beading across his brow. Between the suppressor cuffs and the physical strain of fighting, he looked fragile and vulnerable. One might even say he lost weight.

"Why are you doing this to me?" His voice cracked, heavy with anguish. "Why, Mother?"

Zara cupped his face, wiping the sweat tenderly. "Because I want my son back," she said softly. "My sweet, obedient Alaric, not this violent creature who curses and fights me. I don't even recognize you anymore."

"Fine, I'm sorry," Alaric gasped, his chest heaving. "Just remove the suppressor cuffs. I miss my wolf, Mother. It's been days... I feel empty, and hollow inside. Please mother, it's killing me."

Zara smiled faintly, threading her hand through his damp hair. "I know, my love. Don't worry, the cuffs will come off soon. I can't perform the procedure without you and your wolf in perfect equilibrium."

Dread clawed at Alaric's insides. He forced his voice to stay calm. "What procedure?"

Then he turned his head and saw the strange, crown-like device with a matte metal frame branched into delicate braided wires, and fine mesh petals overlapping it.

His blood ran cold. "What is that, Mother?"

Zara followed his gaze. "Oh, that? The Mnemosyne Crown," she said casually, almost proudly.

Alaric's pulse spiked, but he kept his tone calm. "Why am I only hearing about this now? You never mentioned it to me."

"That's because your father ordered the project shut down after we lost a subject..." Zara trailed off, realizing that was the wrong thing to say to her son that she was about to perform the same experiment on.

Alaric's heart stopped. "Lost...?"

Zara's tone turned exasperated. "Technically, the experiment didn't kill him. He just wasn't strong enough. His mind fractured and he went feral. We had no choice but to put him down. Besides, he was a convicted criminal awaiting execution, anyway. It was a calculated risk."

Alaric's fury rose, though he kept his voice measured. "He didn't agree to this. You experimented on him without his consent." His breath caught as a horrifying realization dawned. "And now you plan to do the same thing to me."

His wild gaze swung to the two guards stationed by the door. "Did you hear that?!" Alaric shouted, straining against his restraints. "You're going to stand there and let her torture your future Alpha?!"

For the first time, hesitation showed in their eyes, a crack in their unquestioning obedience to their Luna.

Zara rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on, Alaric, stop being dramatic. Do you really think I'm cruel enough to harm my own son?"

Alaric grunted, yanking at the leather straps binding his wrists to prove his point without words.

Zara told him, "I've spent over twenty-four hours perfecting the Mnemosyne Crown. You can rest assured, you're not going to die. There will be side effects, of course, but nothing I can't manage."

Alaric froze. "What did you just say?"

Zara's voice grew soothing, as if she were speaking to a frightened child. "The purpose of this procedure is simple. Once it's done, your memories of that girl, Violet, will be completely erased. She'll be gone

from your life forever, and I'll finally have my son back. My real son. There may be some short-term blackouts, maybe a little disorientation, but that's normal after such a major neurological procedure. With rehabilitation, you'll be perfect again."

"Oh my God," Alaric whispered in horror. "You've lost your mind."

"No," Zara snapped. "I'm doing what any mother would do if she were about to lose her son to a witch like Violet. This is science, Alaric. Surely, you'll understand."

"There are boundaries you don't cross in science!" Alaric roared, thrashing against the restraints. "And the fact you're willing to do this to your own son makes you a monster!"

Alaric was done playing nice. Nothing was going to change his mother, he could see it. The woman had finally lost it.

"Does Father even know about this?!" He demanded. "No matter how spineless you think he is, do you really believe he'd applaud you for this?!"

Ignoring him, Zara went and picked up the syringe, saying, "By the time your father learns what I've accomplished here, your concerns will be meaningless."

Alaric's breathing quickened. "What is that?"

"A relaxant," Zara replied smoothly. "It will flood your system with endorphins and suppress adrenaline, making you calm and compliant. It's the easiest way to proceed since you refuse to cooperate."

"I swear to the goddess, Mother, if I ever—mmmph!" Alaric's threat cut off into a muffled groan as Zara plunged the needle into his arm.

He gritted his teeth, muscles tensing, while the medicine burned through his veins. Slowly, the fight began to drain from his body, leaving him heavy and limp.

"Prepare him," Zara ordered crisply.

The assistant doctor sprang into action, wheeling over a tray of equipment. One by one, they attached electrodes to Alaric's temples, chest, and wrists, connecting him to machines that displayed his vital signs on the monitor.

"Vitals," Zara commanded.

"Heart rate steady at eighty-two BPM," the doctor reported, glancing at the screen. "Blood pressure is stable. Oxygen saturation is ninety-nine percent."

"Good," Zara said with satisfaction. She turned to face the Mnemosyne Crown, its dark metallic petals gleaming like something born of nightmares.

"Take off the suppressor. It's time," she announced coldly.