

Defy 561

Chapter 561: Unexpected Visit

As soon as the suppressor cuffs were removed, Alaric gasped, dragging in air like a drowning man breaching the surface for the first time.

His back arched against the cold metal table, a guttural growl tearing from his throat as the gnawing emptiness inside him filled with the comforting energy of his wolf.

But his mortal body was too weak. Even with his wolf's return, Alaric could barely summon a weak crackle of lightning between his fingers. The tiny sparks fizzled out almost immediately, leaving him panting.

Zara stood to the side, her arms folded, watching with the cold detachment of a medical practitioner. Her lips curved in satisfaction, but her voice was sharp as she commanded. "Give him another dose."

The assistant doctor, a nervous young woman in pale blue scrubs, spun toward her in alarm. "Luna Zara, are you sure about that? A second dose could—"

"Do it!" Zara's tone was so cold and commanding that the assistant flinched.

Swallowing hard, the woman loaded another syringe and approached Alaric hesitantly. Left with no choice, he plunged the needle into his arm under Zara's watch.

Alaric gasped, his back arching again as the drug rushed through his bloodstream like liquid fire. His pupils blew wide, his breath hitched, and then a manic, unhinged laugh burst from his lips.

"Mother," he said in a sing-song voice, his eyes rolling with delirium, "why does Mother have two horns? You're the devil! The evil mother!" His words were nonsense.

Zara didn't bother with him. She simply leaned closer, saying with a controlled voice. "Now listen to me, Alaric. I want you to think about Violet."

At the mention of her name, Alaric stilled, his wild eyes sharpening in sudden focus. "Violet," he breathed reverently.

"Yes, Violet," Zara coaxed, her tone shifting into that of a skilled doctor guiding a fragile patient. "Tell me about her. Why do you like her so much?"

Alaric's face softened into wonder, his voice dreamy and filled with awe. "She's so pretty," he whispered. "The most beautiful girl I've ever seen. She's like... like a fairy. With purple hair ... and lips I want to kiss forever..." He giggled, a deep blush staining his cheeks. "Violet loves me. I love her too."

The disgust on Zara's face was so visceral it was nearly comical. But she forced herself to remain composed. This was exactly what she needed.

While Alaric was lost in his delirious ramblings, Zara reached for the Mnemosyne Crown and lowered it over Alaric's head, carefully positioning the sensors so they aligned with his temporal and parietal lobes. The metal adjusted with a soft hiss, clamping snugly in place. Alaric didn't even flinch, still babbling about Violet, the love of his life.

Nothing happened for now since the machine had not been activated.

Then Zara moved to the control console made for the Mnemosyne crown. Lines of code scrolled across one screen, while another showed a 3D model of Alaric's brain with pulsing red and blue markers highlighting neural activity.

The assistant doctor hurried to a secondary panel, her hands shaking. This screen tracked vital statistics, the heart rate, blood oxygen levels, and EEG readouts.

"Initializing synaptic interface," Zara announced, pressing an amber button. A soft hum filled the air, and the crown's petals vibrated.

"Neural activity spiking," the assistant reported, eyes flicking nervously over the readings. "EEG pattern holding steady."

"Good," Zara said. Her fingers danced over the console, flipping switches one by one. "Cortical stabilization."

"Stabilization complete," the assistant confirmed.

"Memory pathway isolation."

"Confirmed. Pathways isolated."

Zara's eyes gleamed with triumph as she touched another button, her voice rich with anticipation. "Mnemosyne Crown going online."

The entire machine began to hum, a low, ominous vibration filling the lab. Thin arcs of light rippled through the braided leads, crawling toward Alaric's temples like living threads.

Zara's finger hovered over the final activation switch. This was the moment she had suffered for. Time to erase that witch's mind from her son's mind forever.

But as her hand moved to press the button, the lab doors burst open.

"Luna Zara!" a voice barked urgently.

Zara spun around, her hand freezing mid-motion. The assistant gasped, nearly dropping her tablet, while even the dazed Alaric turned his head sluggishly toward the intruder.

"What is it?!" Zara thundered, the interruption shattering the carefully controlled tension in the room.

The guard who had barged in swallowed nervously, clearly intimidated by her wild, furious glare. "W-We have a little problem, Luna."

Zara's frown deepened, her tone cutting like a blade. "What problem?"

The guard announced.

"Griffin Hale is here."

"What?" Zara shouted, her shock breaking through her usual composure. This was the last name she'd expected to hear.

The guard shifted uneasily. "And he's demanding to see Alpha Alaric."

At that, Zara's head snapped toward Alaric. Her son had gone from babbling about Violet to singing praises about Griffin, giggling deliriously. The sound made her temples throb.

She pressed her fingers to her brow, closing her eyes against the building headache. Why now? This was the worst possible timing.

And yet, suspicion coiled in her chest like a serpent. Could Ace have betrayed her? No, if Ace had spoken, he would have reported to Caspian directly, not Griffin. Still, why would Griffin suddenly storm her territory like this?

Perhaps it was simple concern. Griffin and Alaric had been close since childhood. With Alaric missing from the burial, Griffin might just be here to check on him.

"Where is Ace?" she demanded, suspicion leaking into her voice.

"I don't know, Luna. Do you want me to search for him?" the guard asked.

"Don't bother," Zara said as she stood. "I'll handle this myself."

She turned to her assistant. "Keep everything here under control. I'll be back before you know it."

Crossing back to Alaric, Zara cupped his face gently and kissed his sweaty forehead.

"Don't worry, my darling," she whispered. "This will all be over soon."

Then she straightened, regal once more, and swept out of the lab with the guard leading the way.

They crossed the bridge spanning the gap between her lab and the main packhouse.

Inside the packhouse, Griffin was already waiting. He rose to his feet as she entered.

"Luna Zara," he greeted, his voice warm and polite, a friendly smile plastered across his face.

"Griffin, my dear boy."

Chapter 562: Where Was Alaric?

Micah hadn't been kidding, the North Packhouse was locked up tight. Guards were stationed at every corner, their eyes tracking every movement. It was so heavily secured that one might mistake it for the president's residence.

It took over thirty minutes before they finally reached the North Packhouse. Along the way, Griffin had been forced to stop for some impromptu shopping and buy clothes that would fit Violet's current form.

Technically, she wasn't Violet right now. She was Oscar, Griffin's beta.

And gods, it was weird.

Violet was still trying to come to terms with the fact that she was currently juggling a dick between her legs. A freak accident, one she knew she was never going to recover from mentally.

She was just grateful Griffin had stopped teasing her about her awkward walking stance. Now that she'd gotten used to it, she had fully embraced her temporary identity.

When they finally stepped inside the packhouse, Violet was struck by how empty it felt. The halls were quiet and for a moment she wondered if Zara had deliberately sent all the pack members away. Or maybe the North's packhouse was simply different.

Traditionally, a packhouse was meant to house the most important members of the pack — the Alpha, their family, the Beta, Gamma, and other key wolves — so that leadership could remain close and united, ready to act at a moment's notice. It was the heart of the pack's territory, and always always buzzing with activity.

Times had changed, of course. Most wolves now lived in their own homes scattered across the territory, districts and the packhouse functioned more like a political center and stronghold than a communal home.

But still, no packhouse ever felt this empty.

As they crossed into a massive foyer, Griffin suddenly turned to her, or rather, to Oscar.

"Wait here," he ordered.

The guard leading them stopped, frowning slightly in confusion.

"I want to speak with Zara privately," Griffin explained.

The guard gave a short nod, clearly not suspicious, and led Griffin further inside.

Now Violet was left alone with two silent guards who stood at the far end of the room. They didn't even speak or look at her. They just stood there like statues, which suited Violet perfectly.

She used the moment to study her surroundings. The foyer was grand, with towering pillars and two sweeping staircases leading up to the higher levels. Multiple hallways branched off in different directions. Violet mentally mapped them out, taking note of the narrow corridor to the east that would lead to the servants' wing, another hallway toward the west that seemed less guarded.

Five minutes ticked by. Violet intentionally shifted her weight restlessly. Finally, one of the guards' eyes landed on her.

"What's wrong?" he asked stiffly.

Violet crossed her legs dramatically and grimaced. "Uh... bathroom? I really need to piss."

The two guards exchanged a look, clearly baffled by the request. It was as if they couldn't believe she was asking about something like that in a place like this.

When they didn't respond, Violet exaggeratedly reached for her zipper.

"Fine, I'll just take a piss right here—"

"Whoa, whoa, no!" one of them barked, panic breaking his stone-cold demeanor.

He shot a glare at his companion. "Kelvin, show him to the bathroom. Now!"

Kelvin muttered under his breath, clearly annoyed, but stepped forward. "Fine. Follow me."

Violet hid a triumphant smile, obediently following after him.

From the structure of the hallway and the lack of decorative touches, Violet guessed they were headed toward the servants' wing. A visitor's bathroom would have been near the main hall, but this route was quieter.

They stopped in front of the door and

Kelvin opened it and jerked his chin toward the inside.

"Go ahead. I'll wait here," he commanded her.

Violet forced a stiff nod and stepped inside. The restroom was small, and she shut the door halfway, making a show of shuffling around as if she was getting comfortable.

From behind, Violet could hear Kelvin's stance relax as he leaned against the wall.

That was what she needed.

Violet moved fast. She swung the door open and lunged at him. Kelvin's eyes widened at the sudden attack, but he reacted just in time, blocking her first strike.

They slammed into the wall, the impact rattling the sink. Kelvin was strong as a man. He twisted his body, throwing Violet against the tiles so hard her breath whooshed out.

"You little—" he snarled, reaching for her throat.

But Violet ducked under his grip, kicking his knee with all her strength. Kelvin grunted but didn't go down. He swung a vicious punch at her and she barely blocked it, pain jolting up her arm. For a terrifying moment, Violet thought she would lose.

However, the thought of Alaric got her going. This was all for him.

Drawing on her training with Asher, she drove her elbow into his ribs, then used his brief stagger to leap onto his back. Kelvin roared, thrashing wildly, and slamming her into the stall door hard enough to splinter the wood.

Violet's head rang and spots danced in her vision. But not today!

Wrapping her arm around his throat, she locked her legs tight around his torso and applied pressure.

Kelvin clawed at her grip, choking, and stumbling backward in a desperate attempt to dislodge her. But Violet held on with sheer will, her muscles screaming with the effort. His movements grew sluggish, then stopped entirely. With a final wheeze, Kelvin slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Violet tumbled off him, gasping. Her body shook from adrenaline. She stumbled to the sink and caught herself, then froze when she saw the mirror.

Oscar's reflection stared back at her, but there was a raw wound across her cheek. And right in front of her, it healed up. Seeing that sent a strange thrill through her. She wasn't just a weak human anymore, she was now supernatural.

But there was no time to waste.

Violet silently slipped out of the bathroom, knowing it won't be long before the other guard comes to check the reason for the delay. She hugged the walls, moving through the servants' wing.

It was not an easy mission with her always ducking and finding spots to hide whenever footsteps echoed nearby. Twice, she slid beneath long curtains as the guards passed, her heartbeat so loud she swore they'd hear it. It was even more suspicious that the cameras stationed at certain spots didn't catch her. Perhaps, her luck or something.

Finally, she spotted a narrow staircase leading upward. Taking the steps two at a time, she emerged on the second floor.

This part of the hall was more quiet, lined with ornate doors and thick carpets that muffled sound. Better.

She crouched low, moving swiftly.

According to Griffin's map, Alaric's room was at the very end, past two turns. Violet crept forward, turning into a side passage when she heard voices. Two maids passed by, gossiping in hushed voices, oblivious to her presence.

When they were gone, Violet sprinted the last stretch. Her heart was pounding fast, while her muscles tense. She knew finding Alaric wouldn't be easy, but no one told her she'd be moving around like a ninja. Violet swore once this mission was over, she'd take her training more seriously.

Finally, she reached the door she believed was Alaric's and turned the handle.

Violet hadn't planned what she would say to Alaric once they met, but her words died in her throat when she opened the door and found nothing.

The room was completely empty.

For a moment, confusion hit her so hard she wondered if she'd gotten the wrong room. After all, this was her first time in the North Packhouse; she had no idea what Alaric's personal quarters looked like.

But her instincts screamed otherwise.

Alaric had been here.

His scent was everywhere, so potent and overwhelming it nearly choked her. Only now, fully tuned into her werewolf senses, did Violet truly understand just how sharp a wolf's abilities were. Alaric had clearly spent time here. So where was he?

A chill went through Violet as another possibility struck like lightning. Had Zara somehow sensed their arrival and moved him?

Something was very, very wrong.

Violet was still trying to piece it together, when—

BOOM!

A loud explosion thundered through the packhouse, the sound rattling the windows and sending her heart into her throat. Violet staggered back, then rushed to the window, yanking the curtains aside.

Her breath caught at the sight of a plume of dark smoke curling up into the pale winter sky. The blast had come from somewhere within the compound.

What was going on?

At the same time, inside her mind, Thalia began pacing restlessly, a growl building in her chest.

"We need to go there," her wolf snarled urgently.

Violet didn't need further convincing, she bolted out of the empty room at once.

Unfortunately, she wasn't the only one investigating the disturbance.

As she rounded a corner, she nearly slammed straight into a group of guards rushing in the opposite direction. They froze, blocking her path. Their gazes swept over her, confusion etched on their faces. Then their eyes shifted past her to Alaric's open door and realization dawned instantly in their expressions.

"Shit," Violet cursed under her breath.

And then she ran.

This mission had just gone to hell.

Chapter 563: Lock Griffin Up

"I have to say..." Zara began as she settled on her seat with a regal posture, "it's a real surprise seeing you here."

"Really?" Griffin said, giving her the look. "But should it be?"

"Excuse me?" Zara gave a light, awkward laugh, feigning confusion.

Griffin didn't take his eyes off her. "You took Alaric back to the North Pack while every other cardinal alpha fulfills their duty in the West Pack. Did you really think I wouldn't come back for him?"

Zara blinked, momentarily stunned, but quickly recovered, her pleasant mask slipping back into place. "Griffin Hale, I understand where you're coming from, truly I do. But I have a very solid reason for my actions. "Compared to the rest of you, Alaric has always been... fragile..."

She paused, as though savoring the word before continuing, "After such a traumatic experience, even though he wouldn't admit it, I knew my baby boy needed time away from all that chaos. My husband, Caspian, is in the West representing the North well. Alaric doesn't necessarily need to be there, wouldn't you agree?"

"Is that why I haven't been able to reach him on the phone?"

Zara's lashes lowered, her tone still sugary sweet. "When the mind is unwell, the body suffers. Alaric doesn't need distractions."

Griffin raised a brow. "I didn't realize, Luna Zara, that even I had become a distraction." His lips curved into a humorless smile, his tone soft but cutting, "A distraction who risked it all, walking away from the West Pack to see how his friend was doing."

Zara gasped dramatically, pressing a hand to her chest. "Oh my! Griffin, dear, that wasn't my intention at all. Please accept my apologies."

"It definitely sounded that way," Griffin retorted.

He was pushing her on purpose, dragging this conversation out to buy Violet time. His instincts screamed that something here was wrong. Very wrong.

Throughout their years of friendship, Alaric had always preferred spending holidays at the East Pack rather than staying here in the North. Zara had never once been this guarded or possessive over him. The shift in her behavior was setting off alarms in Griffin's head.

He could sense Violet through the bond. Times like this, he wished they could communicate telepathically like most mates. But for some reason, it didn't work between them. Not that he was complaining, but it would have made things simpler. Now, he had to rely on instinct alone to stall for her.

Zara offered him a polite smile. "I truly didn't mean to offend you, Griffin."

"It's alright," Griffin replied, mirroring her fake warmth with one of his own.

Her smile wavered with relief, only to freeze when he abruptly said, "So, can I see Alaric?"

The pleasant mask cracked. "What?"

"Since I'm clearly not a distraction," Griffin said firmly, "I'd like to see Alaric."

For the briefest moment, panic flashed in Zara's eyes. She recovered quickly, lacing her fingers together on her lap. "About that..." she began, her voice slow and careful, "I'm afraid you cannot see him right now."

Griffin's muscles tensed beneath his shirt as he crossed his arms, giving her a look that was nothing short of a challenge. "Why not?"

"Like I said," Zara explained, "Alaric suffered deeply from recent events. I've enrolled him in a specialized restorative program for the mind and spirit." She gestured vaguely, her tone posh and clinical. "It's a

form of advanced therapeutic meditation combined with sensory recalibration. During this process, his mind must remain undisturbed. Any interruptions could be detrimental."

Griffin nodded. "Yes, yes, I understand. Very scientific."

He didn't understand a single thing.

"But all I need is one peek at my Alaric and I'm good to go. The others have been very worried about him too. Who knows, maybe we'd all try this advanced therapeutic restorative of yours, considering we've all been through a lot." His tone was light, almost playful. "Good idea, right?"

Inwardly, Griffin wanted to throttle her, and demand the truth about what was really going on. But outwardly, he presented nothing but calm innocence.

But his gaze didn't miss the way Zara's fingers tightened slightly against her lap. She was smart, but she wasn't streetwise. And that was exactly where Griffin had the upper hand.

Zara's patience was slipping through her fingers. Time was running out and who knew what might be going on in the lab right now. She forced a controlled breath and said, "Fine. You'll see Alaric before the end of today."

She added almost immediately, "But first, make yourself comfortable. You came alone, right?"

Griffin had already planned to give an evasive answer, but before he could speak, Zara's expression shifted. Her sharp mind caught up with the situation, and suspicion dawned in her eyes.

When Griffin didn't answer quickly enough, she turned abruptly to the guard who had escorted him.

"He came alone, right?" she pressed.

The guard froze, startled by her tone. "No, Luna. He came with his beta."

"What?" Zara's voice cracked like a whip, the word filled with fury.

"Where's the beta?!" she demanded.

The guard stammered, sweat beading on his brow. "He—he's waiting at the foyer, Luna."

Zara's stomach dropped. In that instant, the truth hit her like ice water. Griffin had been dragging out this entire conversation, keeping her distracted while his beta moved freely inside her packhouse. She clenched her fists. How dare he?!

Most of all, how could she have missed something so obvious?

Her gaze snapped back to Griffin, wild and blazing with fury. She opened her mouth to tear him apart when a deafening boom shattered the air.

The floor trembled beneath them, rattling furniture and sending dust cascading from the ceiling. The walls seemed to pulse with the force of the explosion.

Zara staggered, her breath catching in shock. "What—what was that?!"

"I should be asking you that," Griffin snarled.

Before either could move, guards came flooding into the sitting room, their boots pounding against the floor. They fanned out instantly, forming a barrier around their Luna as they scanned for threats, their bodies tense and ready.

"Protect the Luna!" one barked.

Zara pointed straight at Griffin. "Get him! Lock him up. Make sure he doesn't escape!"

The guards moved toward Griffin.

Not wasting another second, Zara spun on her heel and fled. She didn't need to be told where the explosion had come from.

Chapter 564: Who Are You

Violet burst out of the main packhouse, her lungs on fire and her heart hammering like the grooves of horses during a race. Behind her, the shrill blaring of the alarm wailed across the compound, echoing through the surrounding like a death knell.

It was by sheer luck that Violet managed to escape the packhouse, and now, the guards were chasing after her with weapons. A sharp crack split the air and Violet dove forward as glowing blue projectiles sizzled past her head, slamming into the frozen ground and sending up bursts of frost.

"Those aren't ordinary bullets," Thalia growled inside her mind. "They're designed to disrupt a wolf's nervous system. They can't kill you, but they'll shut your body down."

"Good thing I'm not an ordinary wolf," Violet panted, pushing harder. Her legs screamed in protest, but there was no choice here. She was not falling into Zara's hands today.

The field ahead was chaotic. Smoke billowed from the first explosion in the central lab building. Dozens of pack members were running in panic, their white breath rising in clouds. Some were wearing white coats—scientists, by the look of them—while others looked like ordinary pack members. The flood of bodies created a wall of confusion, and the guards couldn't fire without risking their own people.

Violet weaved through the crowd, using them as cover. For a moment, she thought she might make it cleanly. Then a guard broke through, charging straight at her.

"Stop!" he roared, swinging a baton crackling with blue energy.

Violet ducked, the weapon passing inches above her head. She lunged forward, driving her shoulder into his stomach. They went down hard, rolling in the snow. The guard snarled and kicked her off, scrambling to his feet with feral speed.

Violet rose too, her chest heaving. The guard came at her again, striking fast. His first blow grazed her arm, sending a jolt of numbing pain through her muscles. Gritting her teeth, Violet blocked the next strike, twisting his wrist until the baton fell into the snow.

The guard didn't stop. He swung a fist at her head but Violet ducked, countering with an elbow to his jaw. He staggered, but his sheer size and strength kept him upright. He grabbed her around the waist and slammed her to the ground.

Air rushed out of her lungs.

"Move, Violet!" Thalia screamed.

With a desperate surge, Violet kicked upward, catching him under the chin. He stumbled back, giving her just enough room to roll to her feet. Before he could stand, Violet twisted around and kicked him so hard in the head he was knocked out and she felt the impact in her feet.

Staggering upright, Violet wiped the sweat and blood from her face. She didn't have a second to rest before more guards were pouring out of the packhouse, searching for her.

Her stomach sank. There were too many. Even if their electric bullets couldn't stop her, they would soon overpower her with their numbers.

Then, like a blessing, a second explosion rippled through the compound.

People screamed as fire and smoke erupted from the eastern wing of the complex, sending debris raining from the sky. The guards froze, shouting into radios. Their ranks broke apart as nearly all of them raced toward the new blast site.

Violet didn't wait to question who—or what—had caused it. She bolted, plunging into the swarm of fleeing civilians. People screamed and shoved, desperate to escape but Violet forced her way through.

Unlike everyone else running away from the danger, Violet sprinted toward it. Her instincts, sharpened by Thalia's presence, pulled her onward.

The crowd thinned as she neared the industrial section of the compound. Two massive warehouse buildings loomed ahead, their walls reinforced with steel and stamped with bold black letters: W-A and W-B.

Thalia's voice rumbled in her head. "The second one."

Violet sprinted for W-B, only to skid to a halt at the entrance. A scanner sat beside the heavy security door, waiting for proper identification.

"Damn it," Violet muttered, scanning for options.

Before she could come up with a plan, a man in a white coat ran toward her, shouting over the alarm. "Hey! You shouldn't be here! You need to evacuate now!"

Violet's gaze locked on the ID badge swinging from his neck.

Oh, sweet mercies.

"Sorry about this," she muttered, closing the distance in a heartbeat. One swift strike to his jaw, and he fell unconscious into the snow. Violet crouched, unhooked the badge, and pressed it against the scanner.

The door beeped and slid open with a hiss.

Inside, the warehouse was eerily quiet compared to the confusion outside. The air smelled of cold metal and chemicals. There were crates of weapons and machineries waiting for shipping.

Violet moved cautiously, weaving through the maze of storage racks. But the deeper she went, the emptier it became. There was no sign of Alaric.

Frustration gnawed at her. "Where exactly, Thalia?" she demanded aloud.

That's when it happened.

A shadow darted from the darkness and an arm shot out, aiming for her throat.

But Violet's instincts kicked in. She grabbed the attacker's wrist mid-strike, twisting it hard. But a second hand appeared from the gloom, jamming a device against her side. A burst of raw electricity rushed through her body, enough to drop a full-grown werewolf.

Violet's knees buckled, only to snap straight again. The current had passed through her like water, leaving nothing but a faint tingle.

The attacker froze, disbelief flashing across his face.

Violet's lips curled into a fierce, dangerous grin. "Wrong girl to mess with."

With a roar, she drove her knee into his chest, sending him sprawling backward into a stack of crates. The metal containers toppled with a deafening crash, scattering weapons across the floor.

She was just about to strike when the man shouted, "Wait—!"

He then yanked off his hoodie, and Violet froze. The face staring back at her was almost identical to Alaric's, but just different enough to know it wasn't him.

Then it hit her like a punch to the gut.

"Ace?" she breathed, stunned.

Ace groaned, struggling to sit upright. "Who are you?"

"It's me, Violet!" she blurted out.

"Huh?"

Chapter 565: Skin Him Alive

Oh, shit. She was still in Oscar's body.

Violet's thoughts raced as Ace's suspicious gaze burned into her. She cleared her throat at once.

"I mean..." she corrected quickly, "Violet sent me. Griffin is here too."

At the mention of Griffin's name, Ace's suspicion vanished immediately. If anything, his eyes lit up with hope, his earlier confusion melting away as if it never existed.

"He's here?" he asked, almost desperately.

"Yes," Violet said, nodding her head. But there was only one question pounding through her head.

"Where's Alaric?" she demanded.

As if the universe itself answered her, there was the unmistakable crash of something heavy falling over. Violet's head whipped toward the sound just in time to see a figure stumbling from behind a towering stack of crates.

Alaric.

For a second Violet couldn't move, her eyes trained on Alaric, or rather what had become of him.

His usually clean, refined presence was gone, replaced by a sluggish, barely coherent version of himself. The shirt he wore was dampened with sweat, his whitish blonde hair tangled while his eyes were glassy

and unfocused. His bare feet dragged across the cold floor as he tried to steady himself, each breath visibly ragged

Violet's heart shattered.

"Alaric..." she breathed, forgetting entirely that to him, she wasn't Violet. She was Oscar.

Alaric squinted at her through the haze of confusion written all over his face. "Oscar?" His voice was rough, and his words slurred.

Violet ran, closing the distance between them in a heartbeat. She threw her arms around Alaric, catching him before his legs could give out completely. The force of the embrace nearly toppled them both, but she held him tightly as if her life depended on it.

"Oscar," Alaric groaned, "Why do you smell so good?" His words tangled together as his head lolled heavily against her shoulder.

Then, with sudden desperation, he buried his face in the crook of her neck and inhaled deeply, his body pressing closer.

"Violet," he whispered, a shaky laugh bubbling from his throat like a man teetering on the edge of madness.

"Goddammit," Violet hissed under her breath, both impressed that he had recognized her beneath the disguise and furious at the state he was in.

Her hands flew over him in a frenzy, checking for injuries. She traced his jawline, skimmed over his ribs, and pressed against the tender skin at his throat. It wasn't until she reached his wrist that she froze, her stomach twisting. It was barely there but she saw the bruises.

"What the fuck, Ace?!" Violet cursed, lifting Alaric's hand like it was evidence, demanding answers with her glare.

Ace, who had been frozen by the bizarre exchange between them moments ago, snapped to attention when he saw the fury burning in Oscar's eyes. He understood instantly what he was accusing him of.

"No, it's not me!" he blurted, gesturing wildly.

"Then who?" Violet thundered. "What did you do to Alaric?!"

Ace opened his mouth but only stammered, tumbling over words that refused to form.

"Tell me!" Violet's voice dropped lower, her wolf bleeding through her eyes that were now glowing with barely controlled rage.

"It's our mother!" Ace shouted, the words tumbling out in a rush. "Alaric attacked her when he found out she brought him back to the North pack. Alaric has always been loyal to her, to the bone, and then suddenly, he's rebelling. She said it was Violet's fault that she bewitched him, so she tried to reset his memory."

One phrase echoed in Violet's mind, freezing her blood. She went completely still, so still that even Ace paused, nervous at the sight.

When she finally spoke, her voice carried a lethal intensity.

"What do you mean exactly by resetting his memory?" Her eyes were raw and red, rage simmering under the surface.

Ace swallowed hard. For some reason, Oscar — or what he thought was Oscar — was terrifying right now.

"Speak!" she snapped.

"My mother has this machine," Ace blurted, fear driving him on. "It's called the Mnemosyne Crown. It erases memories. The project was shut down years ago, but she started it again. She wanted to erase Violet completely like she never existed."

Violet didn't hear the rest. The only thing pounding in her head was Zara's intent: erase Alaric's memories of her.

Ace kept talking, oblivious to how close Violet was to losing control. "Alaric believed he was meant to be mated to Violet, but our mother thinks he's gone mad. That's why she did this."

Violet's breathing turned ragged. "I'm going to kill that bitch," she hissed with fury. She spun on her heel, ready to storm out.

"Whoa, whoa!" Ace jumped in front of her, panic on his face. "You can't do that!"

"Watch me!" Violet shoved past him, her tone dark with promise.

"No, listen!" Ace grabbed her arm, desperate to make her stop. "I just bombed my mother's lab! Forget the memory machine, she's going to skin me alive when she finds out. And even after I'm dead, she'll probably resurrect me with one of her creepy inventions just to torture me again and again. Probably forever!"

Violet rolled her eyes, unimpressed by his dramatics.

"The point is," Ace said quickly, "I just destroyed the Mnemosyne Crown... well, temporarily. My mother still has the knowledge in her head, and that's worse. And in case you don't know, the North packhouse is the most fortified place in the region. Escaping is nearly impossible without help. My plan was to break Alaric out of the lab so he could fight with his powers and get us both out. Instead, this is what I got!"

He turned and pointed at Alaric who was currently giggling like a fool while swatting at invisible shapes in the air, before stumbling face-first into a crate.

Violet's heart ached at the sight. To think Zara that wrench was cruel enough to do this to her own son.

Then her gaze shot past him to a massive control panel fixed against the far wall. A cluster of thick, insulated wires snaked out of it, humming with energy.

And just like that, it hit her.

Chapter 566: Sealed

"Electricity!" Violet shouted.

"What?"

She pointed at the panel. "What if we shock him? Give him a massive jolt, enough to wake him up. His body's been hijacked by those drugs, right? What if we override them and force his brain to reset?"

Ace's mouth fell open, then his face lit up with excitement. "That actually makes sense!" He rushed to the panel, eyes scanning the machinery like a man seeing treasure. "The drugs my mother gave him are chemical inhibitors. They suppress neural activity and disrupt his wolf bond. A high-voltage surge could flood his system, forcing his neurons to fire properly again."

"So," Violet said, "it's like jump-starting a dead battery. The drugs are the virus, and the electricity is the reboot."

"Oh, absolutely," Ace said, almost breathless. "Good thing Alaric's body is already adapted to channel lightning. If anyone can survive this, it's him." He face-palmed dramatically. "Why didn't I think of this earlier? Nice one, Oscar," he praised.

Violet found herself blushing. She might not be a genius like Alaric, but she wasn't stupid either.

Ace flicked several switches on the control panel. One by one, industrial lights blazed to life overhead, revealing the full scale of the warehouse. Rows of towering metal racks stretched into the distance, stacked with crates marked with various symbols.

Alaric froze mid-giggle, squinting up at the sudden brightness. "Pretty lights," he whispered, then began clapping like a delighted child.

"Good thing this is W-B," Ace said quickly. "W-A holds the really volatile stuff. I was careful with my little scale bombing. They know that too, which is why they'll be busy putting out the fire before it escalates. Hopefully, this works, and we get the hell out of here." He ripped open a side compartment and began twisting thick copper cables into a rough conduit.

Meanwhile, Violet went to get Alaric. "Come, Alaric."

Alaric didn't protest. He followed her excitedly, like a little kid.

Ace said, "Although Alaric's immune to electricity, flooding his system with it will still hurt."

"Alaric can take it. He's strong," Violet replied firmly.

Ace nodded.

Violet dragged Alaric toward the cleared space where Ace had kicked crates aside. She crouched in front of him and instructed softly, "You won't move from this spot, okay?"

Alaric nodded, then asked, "Will you stay with me?"

Violet nodded with a reassuring smile.

Ace attached one cable to the live panel and held the other above Alaric's chest. "Once I complete the circuit, there's no going back. You have to let go of him immediately," he warned, eyeing their intertwined hands.

"Do it," Violet said, her voice steady.

Ace hesitated for just a heartbeat, then counted down. "Five... four... three... two... Move now!" he commanded, slamming the cable down, fully expecting Oscar to move away.

But Violet didn't move a muscle.

When Ace realized what she'd done, it was already too late.

The effect was instantaneous. Alaric's body arched violently, a guttural scream tearing from his throat. Sparks raced across his skin, glowing patterns crawling beneath his flesh like veins of light and traveling straight into Violet, binding the two of them in a dangerous, unbreakable connection.

"Oscar!" Ace yelled, panicking. He reached for the controls to shut it off, but Violet's thunderous voice stopped him.

"Don't!"

Ace froze, utterly stunned. What the hell was going on? How was Oscar immune to electricity? No werewolf was—except his brother. He had brushed off their first encounter as luck, but this was something else entirely. This was impossible.

Violet gritted her teeth, muscles straining as she fought to hold on. Alaric's eyes rolled back, then snapped open, glowing with wild, unrestrained lightning. The ground beneath them trembled as his power surged, threatening to rip the warehouse apart.

"Almost there!" Violet shouted through the storm of energy. "One more surge should do it!"

Ace, shaken but desperate, frantically adjusted the controls. Goddess help him, he was going to need the longest vacation of his life after this nightmare.

He slammed the final lever.

Every light in the warehouse burst in a blinding shower as Alaric absorbed not just the charge in the room, but the entire North Pack's electrical grid. For one terrifying moment, the world seemed to hold its breath.

Then, just as suddenly, it was over.

Alaric and Violet collapsed to the floor, limp and gasping, while Ace stood frozen, unable to process what he was seeing.

Oscar was gone and in his place was Violet.

Ace's brain stuttered to a halt. One moment, Oscar had been standing there, and the next, Violet. Was it Violet all along?

Wait. Wasn't Violet supposed to be human?

Ace's throat worked, but no sound came out. His mind spun wildly, trying to make sense of the chaos. It was safe to say, he was seconds away from completely losing it.

And then, as if things weren't already insane enough, the next words he heard were:

"Mine!"

Followed immediately by another guttural, possessive, "Mine!"

Ace froze. What the actual hell?

His head turned slowly, painfully slow, like someone about to witness a horror they could never unsee.

Alaric's lips slammed into Violet's. The two of them devoured each other in a frenzy, kissing so fiercely it was more like a collision than an embrace. Their hands clawed at clothes, ripping fabric with desperate urgency.

Ace's expression crumbled into pure horror.

Goddess save him.

If this was punishment for not saving his brother earlier, then he was sorry. He was so, so sorry.

But watching his brother have sex? Absolutely not.

Ace whipped his head away and bolted, sprinting blindly until he turned a corner and pressed his back to a crate, his chest heaving. He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing he could block out reality.

But there was no escape.

His cursed werewolf hearing made sure he caught everything from the wet sound of their lips locking, to the sharp tear of fabric, and finally, Alaric's deep, strangled groan as he buried himself inside Violet's waiting heat.

Ace slapped his hands over his ears, groaning in despair. This was a living nightmare.

From the other side of the warehouse, Violet had her legs locked around Alaric's waist, her back pressed against a stack of crates. Alaric moved with feral hunger, thrusting into her as if he couldn't get enough.

The matebond had ignited, and there was no stopping it now.

Suddenly, the warehouse doors burst open as Zara stormed in with a squad of guards, only to freeze.

For a moment, the entire world seemed to stop. Zara's face went pale, her eyes wide with disbelief. "No..." The word left her lips in a whisper.

Violet's head turned toward her, and her lips pulled back into a sinister smile. Immediately, her sharp, gleaming fangs descended, a promise of violence and defiance.

"No!" Zara screamed, realizing what she was about to do.

But it was too late.

Violet sank her teeth into Alaric's neck and drank his blood.

Alaric's roar of pain and pleasure echoed through the warehouse. His own teeth sharpened in response, his instincts overwhelming thought, and he bit down on Violet's shoulder.

Their blood mingled, and their bond locked.

The matebond was sealed. Forever.

Chapter 567: Fake Runes

The scream that tore from Zara's throat when the Matebond sealed was so shrill that the guards instinctively clamped their hands over their ears.

"No, no, no..." Zara stumbled back, tears streaming down her face. This can't be. This can't be happening!

But her cries were drowned out by the sounds of the newly bonded couple, lost in the throes of primal pleasure.

Alaric groaned, a guttural sound of bliss, as he released inside her, his body trembling from the overwhelming rush. Violet gasped, her nails digging into his skin as her own climax shattered through her, sealing them together completely.

When it was over, Violet and Alaric stayed joined, breathing raggedly, their bodies shaking from the raw force of what had just occurred. Then, slowly, Violet moved,

climbing down from Alaric's body and he let her go.

The Violet of the past—the fragile, naive human girl—would have been drowning in shame at being caught in such a compromising situation. She would have

scrambled to cover herself, to hide from their stares.

But that Violet no longer existed.

Werewolves had no qualms about nudity. They embraced it, unashamed, and now Violet stood boldly before them all, utterly naked. Even as Alaric's seed slid down her thighs, she didn't flinch. Her chin was lifted high, her gaze defiant, and she faced the gathered members of the North Pack without a single shred of fear.

Yet it wasn't her nakedness that held them spellbound.

Their gazes moved as one, not daring to meet her eyes. They began at the red mating rune etched at her throat. Then they trailed lower, to the older green rune etched into the left side of her belly, and finally, to the newest mark, still fresh and raw, pulsing with the magic of a newly sealed bond on the right side of her abdomen.

The rune was in Alaric's signature color, blue, and had a long vertical main line with two smaller diagonal strokes branching out at the top left, forming a shape similar to an angular "R".

Alaric shifted at that moment, and they saw his own purple rune, which had a diamond shape intersected by a vertical line. At the top, a small branch extended diagonally to the right, almost flag shaped.

But before anyone could marvel, Alaric growled. His lips peeled back to reveal long, razor-sharp teeth, his eyes raw with fury, while his stance was rigid and aggressive.

Mates were naturally possessive, and though none of them dared outrightly challenge him for his mate, there was only one female in that room —the shocked Zara.

Everyone else was male. That much testosterone in the air was a provocation, and Alaric's primal instincts saw it as a threat.

His wolf didn't just claim Violet with a guttural, "Mine!", he sent the command surging through the newly forged pack link, a raw wave of dominance that crashed over the room.

Every knee hit the ground at once, bowing in submission not just to Alaric's power but to the sacred bond they had just witnessed.

"She's goddess-touched!" one of them shouted from the back.

"Goddess-blessed!" another echoed.

"The goddess has visited the North Pack!"

Various praises rang out, echoing across the warehouse.

The North Pack might not be as deeply religious as the East, but they were still werewolves who respected tradition. And right now, the sight of three mating runes blazing across Violet's body struck them with overwhelming awe.

But one person was not awed.

Zara's face twisted with pure horror, unable to process what she was seeing.

"No," she whispered, shaking her head in disbelief. Then louder, "No!" Her voice broke into a scream. "I will not accept this!" There was no way in hell she would accept Violet as a daughter-in-law.

"She's a witch!" Zara snarled, pointing a finger at Violet. "She's a fucking witch! Those runes are fake! She's fooling you all!"

From the wild look in Zara's eyes, it was clear she had completely lost her grip on reality.

Everyone else thought so too. There was no way to fake a matebond. To suggest a fake matebond was blasphemy, a direct insult to the goddess herself.

Zara seemed to realize this as her gaze swept over each person, seeing only disbelief and silent condemnation staring back at her.

The realization hit her like a physical blow.

"You traitors," she hissed, lips curling into a vicious snarl.

Then her expression hardened into cold resolve. "Fine. I'll handle this myself."

She took a threatening step forward, but Alaric immediately yanked Violet behind him, his lips curving back into a warning snarl that promised blood.

Zara barely made it three strides before her entire body went rigid. She convulsed violently and collapsed to the ground.

Every gaze swung to Ace.

He stood over their fallen Luna, clutching a baton that hummed with crackling electricity.

The warehouse fell into utter silence. No one moved, nor spoke.

For a long moment, they simply stared at Ace. Ace stared back at them, then cleared his throat and forced authority into his voice. "Take the Luna out of here! Lock her up!"

For a tense second, he thought no one would obey. Then a guard stepped forward, scooped Zara over his shoulder, and carried her out.

Ace let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. For once, he actually felt proud of himself.

His gaze drifted to Alaric and Violet—but he quickly looked away, not wanting to provoke his brother's matebond-fueled rage.

And in that moment, Ace wondered why he had hated his brother so much. Seeing everything unfold, he realized maybe Alaric hadn't had the perfect life he had always imagined. Maybe his brother had been fighting his own battles all along.

Just when the place seemed to calm, a thunderous roar shattered the peace.

A massive, seven-foot form of Griffin barreled into the warehouse, and guards scattered like frightened rabbits at the sight.

"Down, boy!" Violet rushed forward before Griffin could rip through them. Judging by the blood already smeared across his chest, she might have been too late.

The Beast's brown eyes locked on her. He sniffed the air, his massive body tense.

Then, shockingly, the deadly snarl melted into a wide, almost puppy-like grin of delight.

In the next breath, his monstrous form shrank and shifted, revealing Griffin himself, grinning like a madman.

"Welcome to the circle of the bond, Alaric Storm."

Chapter 568: Henry's Wake keep

Tonight was the wake-keep ceremony for the late Alpha Henry.

Aside from the earlier commotion caused by Griffin and Violet's escape, nothing monumental had happened since. For now, things had settled into an uneasy calm.

Tonight, they would mourn, and honor the fallen hero, Alpha Henry with proper respect. Then tomorrow, he will finally be laid to rest.

The ceremony was open to all members of the West Pack. Men, women, and even children were permitted to attend, and they had arrived in full force.

Rows of chairs stretched across the wide ceremonial grounds, perfectly aligned, creating neat pathways down the center. At the very front, an exclusive row of high-backed, cushioned chairs was set aside for the high-ranking wolves.

The entire place glowed with the soft light of torches and candles. The electricity had been deliberately turned off to honor tradition and give the night a sacred feel. The moment was heavy with grief, the scent of burning wax and incense saturating the air.

Members of the West pack sat in complete silence, their gazes lowered. Women clutched handkerchiefs or the hems of their dark mourning shawls, while men sat stiff-backed, their hands clasped tightly, and their jaws clenched. Even the usually restless children were subdued, their wide and innocent eyes reflecting the torchlight.

Asher, draped in black from head to toe, was the first to enter, and every head lifted. His expression was so stoic and unreadable, it looked like he was made from stone.

As soon as they saw him, the women began to wail. Their cries were piercing, rising in a haunting chorus that sent chills down people's spines. Some dropped to their knees, clutching their heads, while others reached out desperately to touch Asher as he passed.

It was customary for the women of the West pack to mourn loudly, and express their grief in raw, unfiltered waves of sound. Tugging on Asher's clothes was their way of showing deep condolence, a physical gesture that they shared in his pain.

As expected of him, Asher didn't waver. He moved forward with unflinching resolve, letting their hands fall away as he passed through them. For once, the West Pack's traditions suited him because he wasn't burdened by grief at all.

Roman was right beside Asher. He stole a glance at his friend, relaxing when he realized he was good. Then he kept moving, falling into step with the other Alphas.

When they reached the front, Asher took his reserved seat. Roman sat just beside him, and the others filled in the row. Just like that, a heavy, expectant silence fell again.

Then the atmosphere shifted as Alpha King Elijah entered with all the authority of his title. His presence radiated power that had all spines straightening and heads bowing without being told. The remaining Alphas and his guests trailed right behind him.

Unlike Asher, no one dared to touch Elijah, their earlier wailing ceasing. The crowd parted for him instinctively, leaving a clear path down the center aisle.

Elijah's stride was regal and unhurried, his gaze sweeping over his subjects with a predator's calm detachment.

At the front, a chair had been prepared for him. Though not as ornate as his throne back home, it was still luxurious, the cushions draped in deep crimson fabric.

Elijah reached his seat and settled beside Asher, his presence dominating the space without a single word spoken. The two figures sat side by side, one the heir of the West, the other the King of all wolves, as the wake-keep began.

Then a sudden commotion rippled through the gathered crowd, breaking the heavy silence. From the far end of the ceremonial grounds, Luna Patricia appeared, draped head to toe in mourning apparel. Her black gown flowed around her, a dark veil covering her face.

She was not alone.

Surrounding her was a circle of women from the pack, all dressed in similar dark colors. Their movements were perfectly in sync, as though the ritual had been rehearsed countless times. This was their tradition, and even Alpha King Elijah watched with rapt attention.

Patricia staggered slightly, as if she wanted to flee, but no matter which direction she turned, the women closed ranks, herding her forward. They forced her back into the ceremonial path until she reached the raised stage at the heart of the grounds, where a massive framed portrait of Alpha Henry stood tall. Before it lay the sealed coffin draped with the West Pack's sigil, a lone torch burning at either side.

The women's grip loosened as Patricia fell to her knees before the coffin, clutching at it desperately, and wailing. Her cries were infectious that women in the crowd began to weep openly, their voices joining hers in a mournful chorus.

Even children, too young to understand the ritual, began to sob too. It was only the men who held back, trained not to show weakness. They would cry in secret as tradition demanded.

The leader of the women stepped forward, carrying a thin black thread. She tied one end around Patricia's wrist and the other to a carved nook in the coffin. The thread symbolized the spiritual bond between husband and wife—the one final tether to be severed.

Another woman emerged, this time holding a pair of ceremonial scissors. At the sight of them, Patricia's wailing intensified into raw hysteria.

She shook her head wildly, clutching at the thread as if her very life depended on it. "No! I don't want to leave my husband yet!" she screamed, her voice breaking with grief.

From his seat, Elijah let out a derisive snort, loud enough to be heard by Asher. Their gazes met briefly, before they looked away. They could fool the pack, but not each other. Elijah knew Patricia's grief was an act. She had never truly wanted to stay married to Henry. This was all performance, albeit a very convincing one at that.

Patricia tried to run as the women advanced, but they seized her firmly. The leader raised the scissors high and cut the thread.

The instant the severed thread fell to the floor, Patricia collapsed, her body wracked with bitter, gut-deep sobs.

Her performance was so convincing that many in the crowd fell into deeper mourning, their own tears streaming freely. She must have loved their Alpha dearly to be so undone by his passing, they thought.

Asher let out a troubled sigh. To think this was only the beginning of what promised to be a long, miserable night.

Chapter 569: The Last Bond

The final part of the wake keep was when the priestess stepped up and prayed for Alpha Henry's soul. They entreated the goddess to give him smooth sailing through the bowels of death and grant him the rest he deserved.

The scene was laughable to Asher, considering he knew where Henry was truly resting, and it wasn't in the bosom of the goddess, but in the fiery torment of hell. Perhaps if Micah had been present, he could have given them a personal tour of the underworld so they could see Henry's "place of rest" for themselves.

Micah, however, had been excused by Alpha King Elijah to tend to his hospitalized mate, Adele.

As soon as the ceremony was over, Elijah gave one of his usual motivational speeches. And of course, he couldn't leave without the final word.

"Tonight was interesting. We'll see how tomorrow turns out then." He chuckled darkly and departed the same way he had arrived.

Asher was then left with the alphas of the West Pack, who had surprisingly been on their best behavior all evening. Although they were doing their best to impress the Alpha King and uphold the discipline of the West Pack, Asher knew feel the tension beneath their civility. They were merely biding their time.

Once Alpha Henry was buried, this fragile illusion of peace would shatter.

"You're surprisingly good at this, Alpha Asher," Dominic assessed him, though the distaste in his tone was hard to miss.

"Of course. I was trained by the best of the best," Asher said proudly, lifting his chin high. "You should do well to remember that."

Their gazes locked, a silent challenge passing between them. But Dominic was the first to look away, feigning deference.

"Of course, I wouldn't expect anything less," he said lightly, meeting Asher's eyes again.

But that politeness was all teeth, and both men knew it.

Asher's attention was drawn away by Patricia's sudden sniffing. She sat at a corner, dabbing her eyes with a damp handkerchief, surrounded by women who murmured soft words of comfort.

"I didn't realize Patricia loved my father that much," Asher remarked dryly, his gaze fixed on her.

Dominic, who had been doing his best to remain stoic all night, couldn't resist glancing her way.

"You're right," he said slowly. "Luna Patricia was extremely loyal to your father. She's a role model to the women of the West Pack in the way she served your father."

"Served my father," Asher repeated, his tone edged with derision. "That almost sounds like a slave relationship, not a union between a husband and wife."

Dominic stiffened at the comment. "It's a woman's place to be submissive to her husband. Luna Patricia never once complained."

"Of course, submission..." Asher said with a twisted curve of his lips. "A word most men of the West Pack love to abuse." He paused, his gaze narrowing. "And you seem to know my stepmother very well, Beta Dominic."

Dominic nearly slipped at that moment, but he quickly masked his emotions. "I was your father's beta. That means I was privy to the relationship between your father and Luna Patricia."

"Uh-huh." Asher gave a convincing nod, though he wasn't fooled. "That means you were quite close to her."

Dominic's composure slipped further. "I don't understand what you're suggesting here, Asher. Luna Patricia was your father's wife."

"Why so defensive, Dominic?" Asher asked casually. "Of course, you were my father's beta and wouldn't dare do anything inappropriate with his wife. That would be so... scandalous." His tone was deliberately provocative.

Dominic's frown deepened as unease gripped him. Did Asher know about his affair with Patricia? Many thoughts began to run through his mind, panic creeping in.

Asher suddenly laughed, the sound loud and jarring. "Don't look so serious, Dominic. All I'm saying is that Patricia is quite young to be left alone. Once I'm crowned Alpha, I'm considering demoting her from her position as Luna and gifting her to you. It's been years since your wife died, hasn't it? You must have been starved for a woman's touch. Tsk, tsk. What a poor life you've lived." He clicked his tongue in false sympathy.

Warning bells blared in Dominic's head. Those words didn't sound like innocent teasing, they were veiled threat. When his eyes met Asher's slitted gaze, it dawned on him.

Asher knew.

"Are you alright, Beta Dominic?" Asher asked, his tone dripping with mock concern. "You suddenly look ill."

"I think the stress is catching up with me," Dominic muttered tightly.

"Then you must rest. Retreat for the night," Asher said, his smile cold and calculating.

"Yes, I'll do just that." Dominic cleared his throat. "And thank you for the offer, but I must decline. I'm sure Patricia would not be pleased to be demoted from her position as Luna. I don't want her to resent you for that."

"Oh, don't worry about me," Asher dismissed easily. "She's a woman, after all. She's meant to be submissive and would serve you just fine." He threw Dominic's earlier words back at him with a venomous twist.

Then he leaned in close, whispering. "She's young, too. I'm sure you'd enjoy her energy in bed. With her by your side, you'd live longer. Women do have a revitalizing touch, don't you think?" Asher laughed cruelly.

Dominic's smile was now stretched so tightly it hurt. "Thank you for your concern, Alpha Asher. But I'll take my leave now."

"Of course. Go on. Tomorrow will be a long day for all of us," Asher said.

Dominic bowed respectfully, but the moment he turned away, his smile dissolved, replaced by restrained fury.

That insolent pup!

He clenched his fist, only to find it trembling with fear. If Asher had gotten into Patricia's head, how much did he really know? This was bad. No, he had to act now.

Asher watched Dominic go, smirking.

"I didn't think you'd play that card so early," Roman said, appearing beside him with two glasses of wine.

Asher took one. "I wasn't going to, until I remembered people make the worst mistakes when they're pushed to the wall." He savored a slow sip.

Roman studied him. "You'd make a perfect Alpha King. You're just like Elijah."

Asher raised a brow.

"If not worse," Roman added with a half-smile. "Speaking of Violet, I just got word from Aeron." His eyes locked on Asher's. "The third bond is locked."

Asher froze mid-sip.

"Good," he said finally, draining the rest of the wine and setting the empty glass down.

He knew what this meant. He was the last bond waiting to be sealed.

Chapter 570: Dominic's Gift To Elijah

"Your Majesty, there's someone here to see you."

Elijah wasn't surprised to hear he had a late-night visitor. All day, guests had been arriving to pay their respects to the Alpha King. And, of course, when night fell, it was time for the secret alliances to come crawling out of the dark.

With Henry's burial set for tomorrow and the position of the next West Pack Alpha still dangling precariously over everyone's heads, he had been expecting this.

"Let him in," Elijah said, crossing one leg over the other. His mind went over a mental list of possible late-night visitors, his eyes lit up with satisfaction when the guest turned out to be exactly who he'd suspected.

"Beta Dominic," Elijah addressed smoothly, "This is quite a pleasant visit."

"Your Majesty," Dominic bowed his head low in respect. "I decided to come at a convenient hour and take the opportunity to discuss an important matter with you."

"You are a wise man, Beta Dominic. Sit." Elijah gestured to the chair beside him.

Dominic obeyed immediately, settling into the seat.

Almost at once, Christian appeared with a servant girl carrying a tray. She poured Elijah's wine first, her hands trembling slightly, then filled Dominic's glass. Elijah gave a slight nod, dismissing her, and she scurried out quickly.

Christian, however, remained standing behind the Alpha King, and keeping watch.

"To the progress of the West Pack," Elijah toasted.

"To the progress of the West Pack," Dominic repeated with enthusiasm, lifting his glass before drinking on cue.

They both set their half-emptied glasses on the table between them.

Elijah relaxed back, his piercing gaze fixed on Dominic. "Now, tell me what brings you here so late at night, Beta Dominic?"

Dominic cleared his throat. "Before I proceed, Your Majesty, I wished to present you with this."

He then reached into the bag he had come with and with both hands, carefully withdrew a masterfully crafted box. It's surface was a deep burgundy red, and had runic etchings around it's edges. It obviously was a relic of some sorts.

Elijah's eyes narrowed with intrigue at the craftsmanship alone. He then flicked his fingers, and Christian moved, taking the box from Dominic.

He rotated it slightly, inspecting every angle before carefully unlatching it to ensure there was no danger hidden within. Only when he was fully satisfied did he present it to the Alpha King.

Elijah's eyes shone, a small smile touching his lips as he gazed inside. Nestled within the box was a golden ring, its centerpiece forged into the fierce head of a roaring lion. The detail was so exquisite that each strand of its mane was individually etched, and the tooth gleamed like it was ready to bite.

Elijah was a collector himself, and the sight of such a masterpiece left him undeniably enticed.

Pleased with the Alpha King's reaction, Dominic's chest swelled with great pride.

His voice carried a reverent tone as he explained. "When I learned of Your Majesty's visit," Dominic began, "I knew at once that an ordinary offering would not suffice. A king must be honored with a gift worthy of his stature."

He gestured to the box in Elijah's hands, his eyes gleaming. "That ring you hold was forged from three tons of purest gold, mined from the deepest veins of the Eastern mountains. It took master artisans to shape the lion's head to such perfection. The lion, as Your Majesty surely knows, represents power, strength, and absolute dominance, qualities that are the very essence of your reign."

Elijah's gaze remained fixed on the ring, the excitement in his eyes showing he was well pleased with it.

"And the box," Dominic continued, lowering his voice as if he was sharing a sacred secret here, "is no mere container. It is called 'The Moon's Vessel.' It was blessed by the previous High Mother herself beneath the light of the full moon. Legend says it brings good fortune to whomever possesses it, protecting them from betrayal and evil. There is only one such vessel at the moment, and acquiring it..."

Dominic paused, deliberately cracking his neck to hint he had suffered in the process, "...took more effort and sacrifice than I care to admit."

His message was clear: I have given you something priceless.

Elijah nodded his head in understanding. He said, "You flatter me, Dominic. Few men understand the meaning of true tribute." He slipped the ring on, pleased that it fit, his fingers stroking the edge. "That is why I accept your gift and the loyalty it represents."

Dominic bowed his head humbly, though his heart pounded beneath his calm facade.

"Now," Elijah said, his voice like the distant rumble of thunder, "tell me, what matter is so great that it brings you to my door with such a gift?"

He was tired of the flattery. A man like Dominic didn't just crawl into his chambers at this hour with gold and relics unless he wanted something in return.

Dominic's throat bobbed as he swallowed nervously. His palms were suddenly damp knowing this was the moment he had been waiting for — the point of no return.

Suddenly, Dominic dropped to his knees, bowing low before Elijah. His voice rang out with urgency.

"Give the West Pack to me, Your Majesty!"

"Dear lord," Elijah gasped dramatically, clutching his chest like an actor on stage. "That was startling." His tone shifted to a casual mutter, as though Dominic's plea was nothing more than mild entertainment.

Then, with a tilt of his head and an almost innocent lilt, Elijah asked, "What do you mean, give you the West Pack, Dominic? I am not the one who crowns alphas."

Dominic's head snapped up, a small frown forming. Was Elijah really going to make him work for it, even after the lavish gift he'd just presented?

Swallowing his pride, Dominic met Elijah's gaze. His voice dropped, heavy with dark intent.

"I want Asher Nightshade dead, Your Majesty. Grant me permission to strike, and I will see to it myself."