

Defy 591

Chapter 591: Finding Patrick's People

Alaric asked, "Violet, what's going on?" The question was still on his lips when the door slammed open.

And exactly like in her dream, Griffin stepped in with an unreadable look carved into his face. The only difference was in the vision, she had stared at him lustfully, but now, her mind was clear.

Griffin opened his mouth to speak, but Violet cut him off. "I hope you both got enough sex, because we have a fucking problem!"

Griffin's mouth fell open, his eyes wide. "Did you get some kind of power? Can you read minds—?"

"No." Violet didn't have time for guesses.

She stripped her bathrobe from her shoulders and moved to the wardrobe, grabbing the first clothes her hands touched without even looking.

"Alice sent me a vision," Violet said, pulling a red shirt on as she spoke. "We're all going to die."

"What?!" Griffin and Alaric shouted together, then looked at each other, alarmed.

"I know it sounds crazy," Violet said, tugging on pink trousers and slipping her feet into them, voice tight. "But I saw it. I saw both of you die. It was traumatic. I won't let it happen."

They looked at each other, the room suddenly tight with fear. Violet was wearing a red shirt with a pink pants which was a horrible combo, but she didn't care. There was no time for fashion.

Griffin asked her carefully. "What exactly did you see in the vision, Violet?"

Violet's expression darkened. "There was an explosion. A massive one." Her voice dropped, heavy with foreboding. "It destroyed the North pack... or at least the entire packhouse from what I could see. There wasn't a single stone left standing."

She added with a sneer, "And to think it's all Patrick's doing. Alice said he has his people embedded all over the North pack." She turned to Alaric, urgency burning in her golden-flecked eyes. "I don't think there's much time left. We have to find the source of the explosion and stop it before it happens."

Alaric, muttered under his breath, half to himself, "There are so many volatile supplies in..." His eyes widened suddenly, his head snapping up as a horrifying realization struck him. "W-A."

Griffin groaned, "Oh, no."

Alaric went on to say, fear creeping into his usually steady tone. "Warehouse A stores volatile compounds that must be kept under strict, room-controlled temperatures. If W-A is bombed, the shockwave wouldn't just destroy the packhouse. It would destabilize the chemicals stored there."

Violet's stomach dropped. "Destabilize? As in...?"

Alaric's gaze was grim, his next words clipped. "As in chain reactions, massive explosions, toxic fumes flooding the area. We're talking fire, poison clouds, maybe even a chemical meltdown that spreads for miles." He looked between Violet and Griffin, his expression deadly serious. "If W-A goes, half the North pack will be wiped out instantly."

Griffin's claws slid out, his voice a dangerous growl. "Then we don't have a second to waste."

Violet nodded, her features. "We move now before Patrick turns this place into a graveyard."

"I need to contact Ace—fuck, where's my phone?" Alaric was a mess, pacing back and forth, his voice edged with raw panic. He was disorganized, thanks to the haze of the mating fever. He hadn't been paying attention to anything outside his fever-driven world with Violet, and now it was hitting him all at once.

"Here," Griffin said tightly, tossing his phone across the room to him.

Alaric caught it on instinct, his hands fumbling as he swiped the screen open. The moment the call connected, he didn't bother with pleasantries. His voice was sharp, rushed, and filled with command.

"Ace, listen to me carefully," he barked the second his brother picked up. "Send all of our men to Warehouse A—now! It's been sabotaged."

There was a stunned pause on the other end before Ace's voice came through, rough with confusion. "What the hell are you talking about, Alaric? Sabotaged? By who?"

"There's no time for questions!" Alaric snapped, his grip tight on the phone, his knuckles white. "Patrick's people are in the North pack, Ace. If W-A blows, the entire packhouse is gone. You have minutes, maybe less. Mobilize everyone. Seal off the area. NOW!"

Griffin was ready to move. "Tell him to check every entry point. If Patrick planted anything, there's more than one access route."

Alaric repeated Griffin's orders into the phone without hesitation, his tone like a whip. "Check everything, Ace. Doors, vents, hidden tunnels—I don't care. If you see even a hint of sabotage, get everyone out and lock it down."

On the other end, Ace swore viciously. "I'm on it."

The call cut off.

Alaric lowered the phone, his face pale but eyes blazing with determination. "We need to get the hell out of here!"

Meanwhile in Warehouse A....

Workers moved around with some wheeling in metal carts stacked with sealed containers, while others carefully logged inventory on clipboards and touch screens. At a corner, a pair of technicians adjusted the cooling systems that kept the compounds stable. The atmosphere was calm like every other day.

The lower-ranked laborers were mostly humans, hired to maintain the warehouse. They were professional in their work except for a small cluster of five individuals near the back.

They appeared to be restocking crates like the others, their heads down, blending seamlessly into the busy environment. But one by one, they slipped into the corner of the warehouse where the surveillance cameras had a natural blind spot.

Hidden from the rest of the staff, one of them crouched and unzipped a heavy, black duffel bag concealed beneath a loose floor grate. Inside were compact, metallic devices with blinking red lights.

"Move fast," the leader hissed, pulling out the first detonator. "We need three set before anyone notices."

The group worked in tense silence, attaching the first device to the base of a large shelving unit. The second was halfway installed when a sharp voice cut through the air.

"Hey!"

They froze, their heads snapping up.

A guard stood at the end of the aisle, suspicion etched on his face. "What the hell are you doing back here?!"

Chapter 592: Only The Beginning

"Hey, what are you doing back there!" the guard bellowed.

At once, the five men scattered like cockroaches.

"Stop!" the guard roared, already on his radio. "Targets located! All units converge on Warehouse A, East Rack! Device located! Code Red! Timer at Ten! Repeat, timer at Ten! Move!"

"Spread out!" the leader snapped to his crew and they bolted in five directions.

Sirens came to life immediately, a harsh female voice echoing through the building. "Attention all personnel: this is not a drill. Evacuate Warehouse A immediately. Proceed to Muster Point North. Do not use the east bay exits."

Workers dropped their clipboards and scanners, with some abandoning their carts. What followed next was screaming, as chaos broke out.

Ace Storm hit the rolling door at a dead sprint with a dozen wolves behind him. "Security Teams A and B, on me! Ralph, lock down the south dock! Bomb unit, to East Rack now. Everyone else, evac lanes clear, get the workers out!"

He jabbed a finger across the floor plan mounted near the entry. "Contain the device. Catch those traitors and no shooting near volatile lines. Do it clean, and fast. Our life is on the line."

"Copy!"

The first guard who had discovered Patrick's men was still chasing after the leader. Realizing the both of them hit the central aisle at the same time, he then cut hard left, hopped onto a narrow steel catwalk that ran above the aisle, and sprinted.

Seeing that, the werewolf huffed in annoyance and took the stairs three at a time. The saboteur cursed when he saw that but kept moving. Instead, he shoved a rolling ladder into the guard's path, trying to slow him down.

The ladder clanged, toppled, and pinned the rail, but the guard vaulted it. Breathless and frustrated, the idiot human tripped over a hose, fell on his ass, and scrambled backwards.

"Stay down!" the guard commanded when he got to him but the leader instead swung a box cutter at him.

But werewolves were stronger, all the guard did was swat his wrist aside, drove a punch into the man's jaw, and he fell to the ground, limp.

At once, the guard yanked the duffel off his shoulder and tore it open. Except there was no device in there.

"Damn it!" He slammed his radio. "East floor, suspect down, no device. Be advised, two more devices are still in play."

"Copy," Ace's voice snapped back. "Camera room, talk to me."

In the control booth, a werewolf tech with headphones already on dragged video feeds up across four screens. "I've got them. Two moving, one north, one west."

"Give me grid," Ace said through gritted teeth. They were running out of time here.

"Runner One: Aisle C-17, heading south toward Dock Three. Runner Two: between B-12 and B-13, moving west, level two catwalk"

"A Team, cut off C-17 south to Dock Three," Ace barked. "B team, level two catwalk B-12, pin him."

On the west side, Runner Two turned a corner hard, and met two werewolf guards in grey tactical vests.

Without a word, they fired at him with their weapon, the crack of blue leaping through the air. The man jerked and hit the concrete face-first, convulsing.

The guards were on him in a heartbeat, searching him quickly but there was also nothing on him.

"Control, Runner Two is down," the guard reported. "There's no device on him."

Ace growled into the communication device. "Find the rest. Bomb Unit, status."

The bomb techs were on their knees at East Rack. One popped a hard case, and inside of it was non-sparking tools, dielectric gloves, fiber-optic scope, X-ray tablet. Another man held a handheld jammer; its tiny screen showed a spectrum of noise. The tech eased a mirror under the device, inspecting it carefully.

"This is not a standard bomb," he replied calmly even though he was in the face of danger, "Homemade shell, pro internals. Anti-tamper loop on the clamp, dual power. It looks like shock and motion triggers both."

"EMP?" Ace shot back.

"Negative. Local EMP risks our own controls and the chillers."

Sweat formed on Ace's forehead, "How much time do we have?"

The tech man swallowed, "Just a minute."

While he spoke, the control room man's voice cut back in. "Runner One is approaching Dock Three."

"B Team cut him off," Ace said. "Dock Three choke point. Note! Don't shoot near the solvents. Disable only."

"On it," a calm voice answered.

"Also, west mezzanine, motion on the fire stairs, possible Runner Three," the camera man added, his fingers tapping furiously across the keyboard. "Yes, Runner Three, heading south on the mezz, toward Aisle D-10."

"C Team, intercept D-10 mezz," Ace ordered, frantic now. "None of those traitors leave this building. It's life or death."

While all this was going on, the alarms kept speaking, "Evacuate Warehouse A. Proceed to Muster Point North" over and over until it became a mantra.

At Dock Three, Patrick's man burst from between stacked pallets and sprinted for the roll-up door. The B team stepped out from behind a column at a perfect angle. They tackled him right to the floor, punching the daylight out of him. But they could not find any device on him.

The leader of the B Team spat into the radio. "Runner One in custody. No device."

"Where is it?" Ace snapped.

"We don't know sir,"

"Camera?" Ace demanded.

The tech swore. "I've got Runner Three, D-10 mezz. Wait, there, lower level, Aisle D-4, south end, he has something on him. He's placing it under the cross-brace of the rack."

Ace didn't waste breath. "Nearest unit to D-4, south end, take him down. Now."

A wolf in a grey vest came around the endcap at a dead run, and saw the man under the pallet. He kicked him on his side like a baseball player stealing home, smashed into the bastard, and drove him out from under the rack.

They rolled with the wolf guard coming on top. He hammered the man's wrist against the concrete until his fingers opened, then snatched the device from him.

"Neutralizing!" he shouted into the device.

Immediately, he ripped the battery with his right hand while his left thumb jammed the safety pin back into the arming wheel, locking the striker. The tiny LED stuttered and died.

He exhaled shakily. "Control, second device secured, inactive. Runner down."

"Copy, third device neutralized," Ace said. He didn't let his voice soften. "We still have the first. Bomb Unit?"

"We tried all methods but it's too late. We're out of time. East Rack, prepare for impact. Timer at five. Four..."

A chill went down Ace's spine. "All teams, pull back from East Rack! Get hard cover! Repeat, take cover now!"

"Three..."

"Ace, move!" someone yelled next to him.

"Two..."

Ace dove behind the heaviest thing within reach which was the counterweight block of a parked forklift, a solid chunk of metal as big as a tombstone. He tucked his forearms over his neck. Wolves around him slid behind concrete bollards, steel columns, and pallets of stone.

"One."

Just like that, the world blinked white.

Sound died and then slammed back in as a wall. The blast hit the warehouse like a truck. Heat punched Ace's exposed skin.

The shockwave rent down the aisle, fluttering the plastic strip curtains, while glass burst somewhere in a high, glittering sheet.

Ace stayed down even as the fire caught and ran along a ribbon of solvent. Immediately, water from the sprinklers came on. It hissed and popped where it met chemical fire and made a choking white cloud. Emergency lights threw a red pulse through steam and smoke. The alarms kept going, voice now warped by heat: "...Evacuate... Evacuate..."

Ace lifted his head, his ears ringing, slightly dizzy. He tasted copper and burnt plastic.

Someone screamed "Medic!" and another else coughed so hard it sounded like he would cough up his lungs.

He tapped his radio with a shaking knuckle. "Roll call. A Team, B Team, Talk to me."

"B Team intact," a voice answered, ragged but clear. "Two minors, one human down but breathing."

"A Team good," another voice said. "One sprain. We're up."

"Bomb Unit?" Ace asked.

"Here," the tech leader choked, coughing, his voice thready. "East Rack is gone. We got out at the nick of time. We're okay."

Ace put his back against the counterweight and stood. He could feel his heart in his teeth, and looked past the forklift.

The column where the device had been was no longer there, it was just empty air and a gaping void. The nearest row had collapsed into a glittering avalanche of twisted metal and shattered plastic.

Flames slithered along the base, devouring everything in their path. The heat surged in waves, stinging Ace's skin even from a distance.

His throat tightened as he realized what was about to happen.

"Shit..." he breathed, horror flashing across his face.

And just as he feared, another explosion ripped through the air. The blast wave hit like a thunderclap, the roar drowning out every other sound as fire burst outward in a violent bloom of orange and black.

It had begun.

Chapter 593: Doomed

The bombers weren't the only surprise Patrick had prepared for them.

The North Packhouse was under siege.

Screams filled the air as commotion broke out in every direction. People ran in blind panic, shoving and stumbling over one another as they scrambled to escape the heated battle, the metallic tang of blood filling the air.

The attackers were human, yet their strength rivaled that of the trained werewolf guards. They moved with unnatural speed, their eyes glazed with a wild, frenzied focus.

"Ignis!" Violet shouted over the noise, realization dawning on her, "They're all strong from the drug!"

Asher had warned her about the drug during his visit to District One, and now every single symptom he'd described was unfolding before her eyes. Violet watched in horror as the drugged humans rip through the ranks of the guards like rabid beasts, their confidence shocking, their movements wild and unrelenting.

Griffin's and Alaric's faces darkened the instant her words registered. Their gazes swept over the battlefield, and what they saw confirmed their fears. Patrick had unleashed drugged humans as weapons, turning them into his living tools of destruction.

"You have to warn your father!" Griffin said with urgency.

In the fog of shock, Alaric had nearly forgotten the new connection he'd forged with his pack. It was hardly surprising considering the link should have been a blessing to celebrate, not a lifeline in a war they weren't ready for.

He shut his eyes and leaned into it, forcing the signal to reach not just his father but every member of the pack. The feeling was like a hive mind, the sensation startling, and slightly overwhelming. Yet he pushed the message through.

"The humans are on Ignis. Don't try to match their strength, go straight for the kill. They'll burn out when the drug wears off. Don't underestimate them. They're strong and unpredictable. Repeat: invaders on Ignis. Kill quickly."

As soon as Alaric was done with the message, it was as if the humans zeroed in on them. Their heads snapped up, and the three of them charged at them.

Griffin instinctively shoved Violet behind him. "Stay behind me! I'll protect you—"

But before he could finish, Violet slipped from his shadow, darting straight toward the oncoming threat.

"Damn it, Violet!" Griffin swore under his breath, launching after her, Alaric right on his heels.

For once, it wouldn't have hurt if their mate stayed under his protection. But deep down, Griffin knew better than to try to clip Violet's wings.

With her momentum, Violet kicked her target squarely in the chest, the force of the blow sending the human flying several meters back. Around her, Griffin and Alaric engaged their own opponents with brutal attacks.

Her target crouched low, snarling like a wild beast. Violet's brow furrowed in disgust. Just what had Patrick promised them to make them take that wretched drug and turn themselves into this?

The human lunged at her and though Violet had braced herself, the first punch rattled her to the core, vibrating through every bone in her body. The strength behind it was terrifying. Dizziness washed over her, and she barely twisted aside in time to avoid a second strike aimed straight for her skull.

Before the human could attack again, Griffin slammed his fist into the attacker. The impact was devastating — Violet heard the crack as the man's body flew through the air and smashed into the side of a nearby building, leaving a jagged fracture across the wall.

Violet whirled on Griffin, "He's mine!" her eyes flared molten gold, Thalia's presence burning through her.

As an Alpha, Griffin reacted instinctively to what he sensed was a challenge, his own eyes flashing amber.

But instead of the crushing, intimidating pressure that would normally force submission, what radiated from Griffin instead was pure, protective instinct. He was still an Alpha, but in this moment, every ounce of his dominance was focused on protecting his mate.

At once, Thalia mentally sheathed her claws like a tamed kitty, her golden eyes softening. Through Violet's gaze, she stared at Griffin with pride. Her mate. Her equal.

Griffin's wolf stared right back at her, his mental tail wagging eagerly, desperate to please his mate and reassure her she was safe.

The fragile moment shattered when Griffin's opponent chose that exact second to strike back.

Without even glancing at him, Griffin snatched the man by the throat mid-lunge, his grip unyielding. In one brutal motion, Griffin yanked him forward and ripped his head clean off.

Blood sprayed across both of them in a hot crimson arc as the headless body collapsed at Griffin's feet.

Not slowing for even a breath, Griffin turned and hurled the severed head across the battlefield. It sailed like a stone launched from a catapult and struck Violet's opponent — who had just begun to rise — with bone-cracking force.

The impact was sickening. The human's skull split with an audible crack, and he dropped to the ground, writhing as blood poured from the fatal wound.

Wolves were apex predators, and males would go out of their way to impress their females.

So, even though Griffin was obviously showing off, Thalia was damn well impressed.

And Violet? She was being shown very vivid, explicit ways she could thank her mate later.

"Oh, come on, you horny beast!" Violet groaned in her head, exasperated. "We're in the middle of a battle!"

"After battle," Thalia replied with absolute confidence, leaving no room for debate.

And just like that, they plunged back into the fight.

But Griffin told Alaric with authority.

"You need to get to the warehouse, Alaric." He cracked his neck, his guts tight with anticipation. "This here is my forte. Your brains are needed back there before we all get blown to pieces."

"I'll go with him," Violet said firmly.

Griffin's head snapped toward her, ready to protest, but she cut him off before he could speak.

"My powers might be more suited there than here," she argued, her golden eyes blazing with determination.

Alaric didn't argue. He knew she wasn't entirely wrong having seen her powers manifest in unpredictable ways.

Griffin held Alaric's gaze, his voice low and deadly serious.

"You protect our girl. She comes first."

Alaric nodded with a hardened expression.

But before they could take a step, a deep, earth-shaking explosion split the air, and the ground trembled violently beneath their feet.

Alaric whirled around toward the direction of the warehouse. His face drained of color as a massive plume of dark smoke spiraled into the sky.

"Oh no..." he breathed, dread coiling in his gut.

Chapter 594: Run For Your Life

Outside, the siren in the yard began to wail, a high-pitched warning that made one's head throb. The temperature sensors pinged red, and the room-control monitors lit up with angry, flashing warnings.

"Ace!" someone shouted.

Ace spun around just in time to see his brother Alaric and Violet sprinting toward him through the smoke and haze. Relief crashed over him, and he caught Alaric in a rough hug. They held on for a heartbeat before pulling apart.

"What's the status?" Alaric demanded.

Ace's jaw tightened. "The first bomb went off. We intercepted the second, but we still haven't found the third's location."

As if mocking his words, a deafening boom rippled through the warehouse, the ground trembling beneath their feet. The lights above swayed, and the smell of burning chemicals intensified.

"Another volatile compound must have ignited," Ace muttered, his face grim.

"We need to cut power to the HVAC system and kill the main. Now!" Alaric barked.

Violet asked. "HVAC?"

"The HVAC controls airflow and temperature stability in this facility," Alaric explained quickly. "If it's not shut off, it'll pull toxic fumes into other areas and feed oxygen to the flames, making the fire spread faster."

Violet nodded in understanding. "So cutting it isolates the area and keeps the poison from spreading?"

"Exactly," Alaric confirmed. "Then we kill the main power to prevent sparks that could ignite another chemical explosion."

Ace didn't hesitate. He raised his radio. "Control room, report!"

Static crackled, then a voice shouted back, panicked. "We're in position, pulling the emergency red lever now!"

A low, deep rumble vibrated through the ceiling as the massive fans powering the HVAC whirled to a stop.

Suddenly, the air turned thick and suffocating, heavy with smoke and heat.

"Main power next!" Ace ordered.

A loud click echoed, and the bright overhead lights died, plunging the warehouse into red emergency strobes. Shadows stretched across the walls, the pulsing crimson light making everything feel hellish.

"There's no more time, Ace!" Alaric shouted over the roar of alarms and fire. "Tell them to flip the manual transfer switch now!"

Ace obeyed. "Route emergency generator power to the cooling system line only, not the whole facility!"

Violet glanced between the brothers. Moments like this made her realize how much raw courage and loyalty ran in this family.

Alaric turned to Ace, his tone urgent but steady. "Once the connection is made, the team must manually open the nitrogen valves and deploy the cooling hoses. That's the only way to stabilize the temperature around the volatile compounds." His grip on Violet's hand tightened. "We're heading there to help. You and your men find the last device before it's too late!"

"Noted," Ace replied, his jaw set. "Be careful out there. The flames aren't the only threat—" His gaze flicked upward to the cracking beams overhead. "The entire structure's ready to collapse."

"We'll be careful," Alaric promised. He pulled Violet close and sprinted toward the danger.

At the same time, Ace raised his radio, barking into it, "Move! Move! MOVE!"

Meanwhile, A Team had been the ones sent to the control room.

"Now for the purge," the team leader growled and punched up the manual override.

The inert-gas purge system lived in a hardened room below the loading bay. The automatic purge had been wired to the main panel, but he knew the manual line. He kicked open the hatch, shouting down, "Clear the way!" then descended quickly, the ladder cold and biting against his palms.

The room below was freezing, lined wall-to-wall with towering nitrogen tanks, frost clinging to their sides. Thick pipes stretched from the tanks into a cluster of valves and gauges at the far wall, crowned by a massive red-painted hand wheel. The hiss of escaping pressure was deafening.

"Check line integrity!" he roared.

His men scrambled, tapping gauges and calling out over the noise.

"Valve Two stable!" one shouted.

"Valve Three unresponsive, manual override needed!" another bellowed.

The leader's jaw clenched. "On it!"

He gripped the wheel and heaved with all his strength. The metal groaned, resisting him, but finally gave way with a grinding shriek. A deep, guttural hum filled the room as the system caught.

Frost exploded from the pipes as nitrogen surged, roaring through the lines.

Above them, vents clanked open one by one as white fog burst upward, rolling through the ceiling ducts, spilling into the warehouse to smother the flames.

"Pressure climbing!" someone yelled, panic edging his voice.

"Hold it steady!" the leader barked through gritted teeth. "If it spikes too high, those tanks blow, and take us with them!"

He slammed his palm against the comm clipped to his vest. "This is Control to A-team! Inert-gas purge is online. Get those hoses ready, NOW!"

Hence, when Alaric and Violet arrived, the team was already rolling out hoses connected to the massive foam pump. Water alone would only spread certain solvents, making the fire worse, but the foam could smother the flames and seal in the toxic vapors before they could feed the inferno.

Alaric immediately shifted into Alpha mode, his voice cutting through the chaos.

"Open valve three! Hold the pressure steady!"

He barked orders, directing the teams to layer foam across the burning drums. Under his command, the white waves gushed forward, coating the blackened metal and choking the fire. Slowly, the raging flames darkened, their roar fading to a sinister hiss before finally sinking into silence.

The victory was short-lived.

"Watch out!" Violet screamed.

Everyone froze, then dove aside just as a massive metal rack, weakened by heat, crashed down exactly where they'd been standing. The impact sent a shockwave through the floor, scattering debris and shaking the hoses loose.

Breathing hard, one of the men looked at Violet, wide-eyed. They didn't say a word, but the gratitude in their faces was unmistakable. Without her warning, they would've been crushed.

Alaric didn't let the relief linger. "Back to positions!" he barked, snapping them into motion.

With grim determination, the team resumed the foam assault. Minute by minute, they beat the last stubborn flames into submission until Warehouse A fell silent, save for the hiss of cooling metal.

A loud cheer broke out. The A-Team hugged one another, tears of relief mixing with soot and sweat. It was the sound of people who had stared death in the face and won.

Alaric spun, grabbing Violet and pulling her into a fierce embrace. "It's over," he whispered, breathless.

But Violet went rigid in his arms, her gut twisting. "Alaric, what about the other bomb?"

Alaric's eyes widened, horror dawning on his face. He opened his mouth to contact Ace through the link, only for his brother's panicked voice to slam into his mind:

"It's too late! Get out of there now! RUN!"

Chapter 595: Energy Rune

Alaric saw, in terrifying clarity, the many ways they could die if the third explosion went off.

With the nitrogen purge system and foam suppression in place, the bomb wouldn't level the entire packhouse, but they were the ones in danger now.

If that third device detonated, even without a full facility-wide chain reaction, the resulting shockwave would bring the warehouse down on top of them. Iron walkways, heavy racks, and massive pipes could come crashing down. Even supernaturals like werewolves weren't invincible against being crushed if pinned beneath a multi-ton structure.

And that wasn't the worst of it.

The wreckage could trap them deep inside, leaving them buried and scrambling for a way out while the toxic fumes crept in. If they couldn't dig or fight their way free in time, they'd choke to death, suffocated in darkness.

"We have to go now!" Alaric roared, his voice hoarse and raw over the chaos.

But even as he seized Violet's hand, ready to run, she saw the unsaid truth in his eyes: they weren't going to make it.

Alice's words flashed in Violet's mind — "Trust your instincts."

Up until now, she'd been second-guessing herself, afraid of her own power. But the thought of losing Alaric filled her with a desperate clarity. She couldn't let it happen.

Before Alaric could react, Violet wrenched her hand free.

"Violet—" His face went pale, his wolf blazing in panic. "What are you doing?"

Violet's voice was calm even with the impending threat. "You have to leave now. I need to concentrate."

"What are you talking about...?" Alaric started, but his words died on his tongue when he saw it happen.

Dark tendrils erupted from Violet's hand, slithering across the floor, and shot up the nearest rack, wrapping around it. In the next instant, the heavy steel structure crumbled into dust, vanishing into nothing.

The entire team froze.

Their jaws fell open, shock rippling across their faces. They had just witnessed the impossible. Wasn't Violet supposed to be human?

But to their credit, they recovered quickly.

So Violet wasn't human. So what? There was no time to dwell on it.

Violet stared down at her hands, muttering under her breath, "Didn't think it would work on inanimate objects."

Alaric's voice cracked like a whip. "This is too much structure, Violet. You'll never be able to cover it all in time!"

"I know." Her voice was oddly calm. Then her golden eyes flared, glowing with otherworldly light. "That's why I need to let go."

She turned to the leader of the A-Team, her tone commanding. "Take him out of here."

The man's jaw tightened. He nodded, resolve hardening in his eyes. With a subtle glance, he gestured for his men to move in.

But Alaric saw it coming and in an instant, lightning crackled across his entire body, his presence radiating Alpha authority.

"I suggest you leave me," he growled, his voice layered with power, "and get the hell out of here."

The men staggered back instinctively, caught between obedience and terror.

"I don't want to hurt you." Violet told him.

"You won't," Alaric said tightly. "I'm your mate."

Violet's gaze lingered on him, conflicted, and then she turned to the others with just one word, "Run."

The A-Team didn't need to be told twice. They bolted, sprinting like their lives depended on it.

As soon as they were gone, Violet closed her eyes.

Dark energy spewed from her like an endless flood of spilled ink, surging outward in violent waves. Alaric's breath caught when he saw how the darkness devoured everything it touched. Metal beams dissolved into nothing, eaten away as if by acid.

Then, to his horror, the darkness turned toward him.

Alaric's heartbeat thundered in his ears. Staring into that abyss was like staring at the end of existence itself. For a split second, pure fear clawed at him, whispering at him to run.

But he didn't. No matter what happened, he wouldn't blame her.

The darkness swallowed him whole.

He braced for pain — for cold agony or bone-deep destruction — but instead, it was warm. Warm like her. The shadows passed through him like vapor, rushing on to consume the surrounding structures.

Alaric let out a shaky, relieved laugh. "See? Nothing happened."

He wanted to tell Violet, but when he looked at her, her eyes were screwed shut, her entire body tight with concentration.

Then the explosion happened.

All they heard was a deafening boom, but they felt the shockwave tear through the warehouse like a living, furious beast, rattling the very ground beneath their feet.

Beams buckled, screeching in protest as metal twisted and tore apart. Overhead walkways snapped like brittle bones, sending sparks and jagged shards flying in every direction.

Above them, the ceiling sagged with a deep, ominous groan, and crashed. Massive chunks of steel and concrete plummeted, ripping through the air and smashing into the floor with bone-rattling force.

"Shit!" Alaric cursed, throwing himself over Violet just as scalding pipes burst, spraying deadly heat in every direction.

Superheated steam and nitrogen fog hissed violently, blanketing the air in a blinding white cloud. The entire structure was coming apart, threatening to bury them alive.

Although Violet's darkness worked like a shield around them, keeping the collapsing structure from crushing them, the rate it was spreading was not enough.

For how long could Violet keep it up before her strength gave out?

Alaric could already see the cold sweat forming on her forehead, her trembling body betraying the strain. If she faltered now, everything would come crashing down on them.

A desperate idea struck him. Without hesitation, Alaric lifted Violet's chin and kissed her.

This wasn't like any other kiss. No, Alaric pushed the electrifying force of his lightning into her through their bond.

Violet gasped against his lips, her back arching as the surge of energy rushed through her veins. Her eyes flared open, and if one looked closely, they would see her irises expanding, glowing brilliantly as power bloomed within her.

A moan slipped past her lips as she wrapped her arms around him, clinging tightly, siphoning his power without even realizing it. The energy rune etched on the side of her belly lit up, glowing brighter and brighter with every pulse.

They didn't stop kissing, nor did they care about the crumbling world around them. For that brief moment, there was only them — power and passion entwined.

Just like that, Violet's dark energy gained momentum, devouring everything around them. The steel beneath their feet dissolved into dust, but instead of falling, Violet and Alaric floated, locked in their kiss.

Finally, the darkness reached its fever pitch and burst free, a roaring maelstrom of power tearing through everything in its path.

Chapter 596: Goddess Reincarnate

"Move! Move! Move!" The leader of the A-team bellowed, his voice nearly drowned out by the roar of destruction.

The explosion had ripped through the warehouse, and being closest to the blast, the force slammed all four of them into concrete walls, knocking the breath clean out of their lungs.

Pain radiated through their bodies, but there was no time to waste. Gritting their teeth, they staggered upright and sprinted, driven by sheer will and adrenaline.

The entrance was in sight now, but the warehouse was collapsing around them, forcing them to duck falling pipes, leap over shattered debris, and weave between collapsing walkways.

Then, like some cruel joke from the heavens, a massive rack groaned and buckled above them. With a horrifying screech of twisting metal, it came crashing down, slamming across the doorway. In an instant, their way out was sealed beneath a tangle of burning steel and splintered crates.

"No, no, no..." The leader cried out in despair, his hands clawing at the debris blocking their way out. His team rushed over to help, straining against the wreckage, when another structure groaned and collapsed nearby.

They dove aside, narrowly avoiding being crushed, but one of them wasn't so lucky.

"My leg!" The man screamed, his voice raw with pain as a broken pillar came down on his foot.

"Shit!" the leader snarled, panic flashing in his yellow wolf eyes. "Abort! Head to the other entrance, now!"

One teammate heaved the pillar away while another hauled their injured brother upright. They barely had a moment to breathe before a massive slab plummeted toward them.

The leader planted his feet and caught it mid-fall. The force rattled his bones, his muscles screaming in protest, but he gritted his teeth and shoved it back with sheer werewolf strength.

"Move now!" he roared, his voice a guttural command.

The others didn't hesitate. Carrying their injured comrade, they leapt through falling debris, while the leader stayed at their backs, deflecting collapsing wreckage and taking the brunt of the danger, bloodied and covered in bruises.

However, when they arrived at the other side of the warehouse, just like the first exit, this one had been sealed by a mountain of wreckage.

The leader released a shout of frustration, the sound reverberating through the collapsing space. Was this how they would die? At least they'd die protecting their pack.

But he refused to die defeated. Snarling, he began to claw and shove at the rubble, moving it piece by piece even as the warehouse groaned and shook around them.

Then one of his men shouted with terror in his voice. "L-look, sir...!"

The leader turned, and froze. His breath caught in his throat.

A maelstrom of darkness hurtled toward them with terrifying speed, devouring steel, stone, and fire as though the very world was being erased. His blood ran cold. He knew this darkness. It was the same power he'd seen Violet wield, except now it had grown to the size of a ravenous monster.

The leader's shoulders slumped. So this was it. The end.

The werewolves tried to stand tall, but the scent of their fear was pungent in the air. They braced for pain as the darkness swallowed them whole.

But no pain came. Only a chill along their spines, goosebumps prickling their skin. The black tide passed through them like smoke, obliterating everything else in its path.

Slowly, they lowered their arms and looked around in disbelief. The warehouse had vanished as if it had never existed. They now stood on bare earth under an open sky.

Confused murmurs rippled through the group until they noticed Ace and the others nearby, their eyes wide, not with relief but shock.

The team turned, and their jaws dropped.

Above them, Violet and Alaric floated in the air, locked in a passionate kiss. Darkness and lightning twined around their bodies in a swirling dance of raw power. The sight was so unearthly, so overwhelming, that several pack members gasped audibly, some even dropping to their knees.

"Goddess reincarnate!" a woman cried, falling to her knees with tears streaming down her face.

One after the other, pack members followed her lead, dropping down in reverence until the whole ground seemed to tremble with their voices.

The noise jolted Violet out of her kiss with Alaric. She pulled back, blinking at the sight of half the damn pack kneeling, their eyes fixed on her as though she was some deity.

"What the fuck?!" Violet cursed, utterly thrown. Were they seriously worshiping her right now?!

That distraction shattered her focus. The darkness and lightning dissipated, and gravity slammed back into her. She and Alaric plummeted together, the wind rushing past them.

Before she could brace herself, Alaric twisted midair, wrapping her tight against him. He hit the ground back-first, the impact rattling his bones, while Violet landed safely on top of him.

His breath whooshed out in a painful gasp. "Gods..." he wheezed, clutching his ribs.

Violet grimaced. "Sorry." She added with a dramatic wink. "And thank you, my hero." She pecked him on the hips and Alaric practically melted on the ground.

"Violet!"

Griffin broke from the crowd and barreled toward her. Violet opened her arms, but Griffin swept her up so hard she squealed, spinning in his embrace. Before she could breathe, his mouth crashed against hers.

It was a hard kiss that left her head swimming. She clung to his arm, bracing herself as his lips moved furiously against hers. In the crushing way he held her, Violet felt his fear as if it was carved into her bones.

When Griffin finally pulled back, he rasped, "When Ace walked out of that warehouse without you and Alaric, I thought I was going to lose my fucking mind immediately the explosion happened."

"But I'm here now." Violet grinned. "That's what matters."

"Yes. You are." Griffin pulled her close again, burying his face in her hair, as if he'd never let go.

While they clung to each other, Alaric pushed himself to his feet. He opened his mouth to speak when a gunshot suddenly rent the air.

The crowd whipped toward the sound, gasps breaking out. But nothing compared to Violet's face when she turned and saw it.

The bullet hole gaped in Alaric's chest.

Chapter 597: Losing Him

Alaric didn't feel the pain at first. Not until Violet's face crumbled in terror, her golden eyes wide with horror. Then he looked down.

Not just one, but two gaping holes stared back at him from his chest.

It turned out Patrick's men hadn't all been killed. One had survived, and in the single moment the pack let their guard down, he did the one thing left since they had failed to destroy the North pack: kill its heir. Without hesitation, he fired two silver bullets straight into Alaric's chest.

The crowd froze. Shock slammed into them like ice water.

Hannah was there when it happened. Like everyone else, she had been stunned into silence at the sight of Violet and Alaric floating in the air, darkness and lightning curling around them like gods.

For the first time in her life, she had felt real hope. This was the savior she had been waiting for. Violet was the one who could end Ziva's tyranny. That was the moment Hannah decided: she would tell Violet the truth, no matter the cost.

But before that thought could bloom, she saw the bullets fly past her eyes and slam into Alaric. Hannah felt Violet's pain crash into her own chest. Without thinking, she moved. Fury and instinct carried her forward as she seized the bastard by the neck and snapped it in one brutal motion. His body hit the dirt with a sickening thud.

Violet barely registered the sight of that strange maid from earlier. She saw only Alaric.

"Alaric!" She was already moving, catching him as his legs gave way—though Griffin reached them first, lowering him gently to the ground.

Violet dropped beside him, hands cradling his cheeks. Her voice shook, ragged with panic. "Hey, you're going to be alright... you hear me? You'll be fine."

Griffin ripped his shirt open, revealing the wound. Violet's stomach churned at the sight of blood pouring from the holes.

"Why isn't he healing?!" Her voice trembled with fear.

Griffin's jaw tightened. He looked her dead in the eye. "Silver."

The words hit her like a slap across the face. Violet froze, horror etched across her face. "No... no, no, no..." She turned and screamed at the pack, her voice raw, and desperate. "He needs a healer! Bring me a healer now!"

But the pack members only exchanged helpless glances. Their faces were pale, their eyes wet with grief. They had no healer. They relied on science, not magic.

"Make way!" Ace shouted as he made his way over, dropping to his knees beside his brother.

"Hold him still," he barked, his voice hoarse as he pressed both hands down hard on Alaric's chest, the blood welling between his fingers. Violet sobbed beside him, trying to help, but her trembling hands only slipped uselessly against the gore.

Alpha Caspian appeared at that moment. "Alaric, son!" He crouched down on the other side, the deep line carved into his brow betraying the fear he usually never showed. But even as Ace fought to hold the bleeding, the blood kept soaking through.

Alaric's lashes fluttered. His lips parted into the faintest smile as his gaze found Violet. It wasn't the cocky grin he often wore, but a bittersweet one. "Don't cry..." he rasped, his voice thin, barely audible over the ringing in her ears. "I'll be okay..."

But Violet only shook her head, tears spilling down her cheeks. She knew he wasn't okay. Not at all.

Frustrated, Griffin ran a hand through his hair in agitation. "Shouldn't you move him to the pack hospital already? You're the damn North Pack, your healthcare is topnotch!"

Ace and Caspian exchanged a look. Both men knew the truth but didn't want to say it aloud. Finally, Caspian did. "We move him now, he dies faster."

Griffin's jaw clenched. "So what then? We just watch him bleed out?"

"We have to remove the silver first,"

Ace snapped his head toward him. "And with what, Father? We don't have the tools here. No clamps, no sterilizers, nothing. You know that. It would take time to go back to get that and Alaric doesn't have that."

"I don't care!" Caspian thundered, veins bulging in his neck. "I'll pull it out with my own hands if I must—"

"I'll do it."

They froze at Violet's voice. She lifted her hand, and it lengthened into sharp black-tipped claws. "Silver doesn't affect me."

Ace and Caspian both sucked in a breath. For a heartbeat, no one spoke. They knew what those claws meant. Violet wasn't human. She was just like them.

Caspian gave a stiff nod. "Do it."

Ace turned to Griffin. "Hold him down. No matter what, don't let him move."

Violet's throat bobbed as she looked down at Alaric, her voice breaking. "I'm so sorry, love..." She straddled him to pin him steady, tears dripping onto his bare chest as she pressed a claw against the wound. "I'm so sorry."

The moment her claw pierced his flesh, Alaric screamed. His back arched violently, lightning crackling across his skin as if his body itself rebelled against the pain. Violet sobbed through it, whispering the same words again and again. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Just hold on."

Her claws scraped against the metal, and with a wet, sickening sound, she pulled out the first silver bullet. She dropped it, the chunk of cursed metal sizzling against the ground. Blood gushed in its wake.

Violet searched for the second one immediately while Alaric's roar in pain, veins bulging against his temples as Griffin gritted his teeth, holding his brother's shoulders down. Violet finally hooked the second bullet and yanked it free.

Breathless, Violet grabbed Alaric's hand, her tear-streaked face lifting in fragile hope. "There, it's out. You can heal now. Please heal."

But her hope shattered when nothing happened. The wounds bled heavier, because the silver had already spread, poisoning his blood. Removing the bullets hadn't saved him, it had only unleashed the bleeding.

Alaric's skin was pale, drained of color. His lips turned blue while his chest heaved in shallow, ragged jerks, as if breathing was a war. His fingers, once gripping Violet's hand, slipped loose.

"No, no, no..." Violet shook his hand furiously, trying to force life back into him. "Don't you dare leave me!"

Ace recognized it immediately, the terror in his own voice breaking as he shouted, "He's going into shock! Keep pressure on the wound, NOW!"

Caspian growled through clenched teeth.

"We're losing him!"

Chapter 598: Can't Lose You

Alaric was going to die.

Violet didn't just see it on his face, no, she felt it tearing through the bond like a chasm opening in her chest. It was the same hollow feeling Alice had shown her in the vision, except now it wasn't some nightmare. It was real, and it was happening.

"No!" Violet screamed, clutching him tighter as though her arms alone could hold him here. His grip was loosening, slipping like sand between her fingers. Panic strangled her voice as she shook him. "No, no, no, you stay with me!"

Her throat burned as she threw her head back, her cry ripping into the sky. "You will not take him!" Her voice cracked but she roared anyway, a fury only grief could birth. "Do you hear me? If you're up there, if you can hear me, do something! You cannot give him to me only to rip him away. I refuse it! You will not take him!"

But the heavens stayed silent, and the only answer she got was Alaric's shallow breath rattling against her wrist, weaker. His skin turned clammy, and his lashes fluttered once, then began to fall.

"Alaric!" Griffin cried out with fear. His brown eyes widened in horror, his whole body shaking.

"Brother, no!" Ace was desperate now. His hands pressed harder, pumping his brother's chest with the brutal rhythm of resuscitation, his face carved into lines of anguish.

He said through gritted teeth, "Stay with me, damn you! Stay with me!" Blood smeared his palms and arms, slicking him in scarlet as he fought to hold on to his brother's life.

Unlike Ace who refused to let go, Alpha Caspian had already bowed his head, his shoulders shaking as he buried his face in his hands. The sound that left him was a broken noise, soft and guttural, like a father who knew he was about to lose his son.

All of this was his fault. If only he had taken the role of an Alpha more seriously, then this wouldn't have happened. His son wouldn't be paying for his sins.

Violet was hysterical now, screaming, "Damn you! They call me the goddess daughter, and yet you would let me lose my mate like this? What use have I then for you?! Tell me!" Her fists pounded against the floor, her voice hoarse and broken. "What good is this cursed title if I can't save him?!"

"Violet..." Griffin called out, concerned about her. But even him couldn't reach her through her grief.

Violet collapsed over Alaric's body, sobs wrecking her body until she shook from the force of them. Her tears soaked his chest as she clutched at him, refusing to let go. It dawned on her at that moment that cursing the goddess wouldn't save him.

Her voice broke as if all the fight had bled from her. "Please..." she whispered, her words tumbling out in desperate prayer. "Please, help me... don't take him from me... please, I beg of you." Her forehead pressed against Alaric's, her golden eyes brimming with tears. "If I am your daughter, if I am anything you claim me to be... then prove it. Save him. Save my mate."

Even Ace had stilled his hands, his palms hovering uselessly over Alaric's chest. The pressure wouldn't matter anymore. His brother was clinging to his final moments, and Ace couldn't take those away from Violet.

Griffin wiped at the hot tears burning his face, furious at himself for letting them fall. He had come to the North Pack to protect and save Alaric and he had failed. He was not Violet with the multiple bond, and yet, it still hurt. Alaric wasn't just a friend. He was a brother. And now he was going to die, leaving him with nothing but the unbearable ache of loss.

Violet stayed hunched over his body.

"Please... please..." she repeated the words over and over like a prayer, her voice hollow.

Violet was so carried away she didn't even notice the sudden gasp that broke out around her.

"Violet." Griffin shook her shoulder, forcing her to lift her tear-streaked face to him.

"What?" she rasped, exhausted, her lashes wet and heavy.

"Look," Griffin said, almost disbelieving.

Her gaze dropped and her breath hitched in her throat. On Alaric's neck, the Health rune was glowing with a blinding brilliance.

Violet's chest seized with hope. Her eyes fell to his body, and she saw color seeping back into his skin. The blue from his lips flushed pink, and the gaping wound sealed as though it had never existed, leaving not even a scar.

Then his chest rose with a steady breath. Alaric's eyes fluttered open, and for a heartbeat Violet thought she was dreaming.

But Alaric smirked, his voice teasing as it reached her.

"Hello, pretty lady."

Violet immediately threw her arms around him, hugging him with such force that Alaric gave a startled gasp, pain breaking through his smirk. His wound might have sealed, but the soreness lingered deep in his chest.

Violet didn't care. She buried her face into him, tears streaming hot down her cheeks, clutching him as though letting go would mean losing him all over again. "Don't you ever do that to me again," she sobbed.

Alaric didn't complain, folding his arms around her. "Didn't I tell you? I'm not going anywhere." He held her so tightly it was as if he wanted to fuse her to him.

At once, cheers broke out from the pack members. They had never seen anything like this in their lives — their heir brought back from death's door, saved by the goddess's daughter.

Ace said, "This is a miracle, but we still need to check him out."

Alaric was just about to push to his feet when Griffin stepped in. Without hesitation, the big guy bent and scooped him into his arms as though he weighed nothing, cradling him like a princess.

Alaric was caught completely off guard. "What the hell, Griffin, put me down!"

"Not happening." Griffin grumbled. He was not letting him get hurt again.

Alaric groaned, resigned, his head tipping back against Griffin's shoulder. "Oh, for Goddess' sake.."

Guess this was his fate now...

Chapter 599: Kill The Queen

"Ahh!" Vera Turner screamed her frustration into the air when she received the news that their attack on the North pack had been foiled.

She stormed over to the small bar where bottles and glasses still sat from their earlier celebration of "inevitable victory." In one furious sweep, she cleared the counter, shards exploding as glass shattered across the floor, startling everyone present.

"Vera, calm down," Moira urged, but Vera whirled on her, eyes flashing.

"No! Don't tell me to fucking calm down! I've had enough of this bullshit! Everything would have gone according to plan if he had eliminated all of those freaks of nature from the start!"

Her voice rose, mocking with venom. "But no. Leave Violet Purple alive. She's special. There's something about her, I want her..." She twisted Patrick's words in a cruel imitation, her tone dripping scorn.

Vera strode to where Patrick sat slouched in his chair, head bowed, hands limp in his lap like a chastised child.

"Well, look what your mistake cost us!" she snapped in his face. "I lost half my forces, and the North pack is still standing. Those men trusted me, and I let them die uselessly, all because of some little girl you should have squashed when you had the chance!"

Vera straightened, chest heaving, her glare fixed on him. But Patrick didn't look up. It was as if he had been dragged back to his miserable childhood, where his siblings were praised for their effortless strength while he was berated for his weakness, and failure to measure up to them.

This was why he had left in the first place and chosen the way of science—the only thing he was ever truly good at. Everything he had done since then was not only to fulfill the vision of his ancestors but also to shove it in the faces of his family, to prove he had turned out far better than they ever believed.

And it worked. They had been impressed with his creation of Ignis. With Ignis, Patrick believed at last that he would be accepted, that his mother would finally deem him worthy—like his other siblings.

But while Patrick was brilliant at innovation, he was not battle-wise. The recent failure of his plan exposed that weakness clearly. That was the difference between him and his family: they only dreamed of cleansing the world of werewolves, but Patrick was a scientist.

Science was all about discovery.

And Violet Purple was an anomaly he couldn't wait to get his hands on.

He had seen the footage of the attack. Violet Purple was far more powerful than he ever imagined. Even more than the cardinal alphas. What was she? She couldn't be just a werewolf. If she was, then what made her special? What blasphemous ritual had been done to forge her into this?

Even in defeat, Patrick was filled with anticipation. He couldn't wait to cut her open and uncover what made her tick. With her power as raw material, he would create wonders. He would be unstoppable.

Unlike the cardinal alphas, he had always been wary of their parents, and most of all, the Alpha King. In the past, he had to operate under Elijah's instruction, and thanks to that, secretly birthed Ignis. But now? Nothing bound him anymore. Once Violet was in his hands, there would be no ceiling to what he could do.

"We should have known better than to trust this mission to you," Vera raged on.

She took a deep breath, lifted her head, her decision clear. "I'm taking over this operation."

Patrick's head snapped up. "What?!"

"You've had your chance, Elias," she hissed. "We won't let another opportunity slip away because of your pathetic strategy and failures."

Patrick shot to his feet at once, anger creeping into his voice. "This mission is my hard work! My sweat! I brought it to life!"

Vera didn't flinch and told him flatly, "The only thing you brought to life is Ignis, and that's the only game changer in this mission. But might I remind you Elias that you've lost everything. And without our help, Ignis is useless in your hands."

Patrick's jaw ticked. "Then I'll find someone else to sell it to. I know people who can give me the resources I need."

"Really?" Vera scoffed. "People who share our family's mission? People who understand why the werewolves must go?" She stepped closer, brushing invisible dirt off her brother's shirt with calculated disdain. "Or people willing to do business with you while the Alpha King breathes down your neck?" She smirked, savoring the way she pierced through his bravado.

Patrick let out an annoyed huff. That damn bitch, always with the upper hand.

Joseph finally spoke, his voice dripping with mockery. "You should listen to her, little Elias. Right now, the only thing you're good for is making Ignis."

Patrick's face flushed hot, fury burning beneath his skin. That piece of shit, he cursed under his breath.

"That's not the way to talk to your brother," Moira chided him. But her voice held no bite, and Joseph's grin only widened at the lack of consequence.

This time Vera's hands closed on her brother's collar and yanked him forward so fast he was nose-to-nose with her. "So, do you agree, or are we going to have a problem?"

Her grip was so tight Patrick could barely breathe; his face flushed red. He spat, "If I say no, what will you do, kill me?"

Vera lifted a brow. "Trust me, you don't want to find out."

As always, Patrick didn't have the balls to stand up to her.

"Fine. Take over," he said, sourly. "That's what you're good at anyway."

Before he could blink, Vera kicked him in the groin. He fell to the floor, the pain folding him in half.

Vera muttered with contempt, "One-upmanship's also my specialty, if you hadn't noticed."

Patrick said nothing, wallowing in pain on the ground.

Joseph applauded, smirking. "Now that you've been promoted, General, what's the plan?"

Vera smiled, eyes alive. "Anarchy."

"What?" Moira snapped, confused.

"Look at us, we've been staging careful strikes and failing every time. Why not let others do the dirty work?" Vera's grin widened.

"And how, exactly?" Joseph asked, intrigued.

"Give Ignis to every racist human who wants it," Vera said, delight bubbling in her voice. "Why should we keep doing their fighting for them? Let them unleash chaos themselves."

Patrick groaned from the floor. "That's not a plan, you'll just create a war."

Vera's eyes glittered. "Exactly. The Second Great War." She almost laughed. "Gerald will be proud."

Moira and Joseph exchanged looks, and shrugged. It didn't sound so bad to them.

"But first," Vera said, eyes narrowing, "the cardinal alphas have to go."

"We tried and failed," Joseph reminded her.

"Because we followed Elias' plan," Vera said coldly. "The three cardinals are mated to Violet. That's our target. Kill the queen and the knights fall."

Chapter 600: New Alpha Of The West

"Careful," Nancy said firmly as Asher was guided into his quarters —formerly Henry's— his arms thrown around Roman's shoulder while Jeremiah cleared the way.

Though Asher's jaw was set, his breathing was shallow, and he was weak as hell. As the new Alpha of the West pack, it had been pride alone that kept him standing before his people. The West valued strength above all else, and even after a brutal battle, he could not afford to show weakness.

Only when they crossed the threshold of his home — where no outsider could witness his fall — did he finally allow himself to let go.

"On the bed," Nancy instructed.

Roman adjusted his grip, lowering him slowly. As soon as Asher's body hit the mattress, a deep groan tore from his throat. He could only lie on his side; his shoulder was ruined, half his flesh bitten clean through where Dominic's fangs had sunk deep.

The wound on his ribs was no better. Three claw marks slashed across his side, healing painfully slowly. Unlike a clean break or even a knife wound, wolf-inflicted injuries resisted their natural regeneration. Some said it was the venom laced in a wolf's saliva, others blamed the disruption of pack magic, but everyone knew that claw and bite wounds lingered longer than they should.

At least the bleeding had stopped. That was something. The raw, angry flesh gleamed but no fresh blood seeped. Asher exhaled through clenched teeth and tried to shift his position on the bed, but that move made the pain flare up and he groaned.

Roman leaned over him. "Don't worry. It'll be fine. Irene's already called for a healer. They should be here soon."

Asher gave a small nod, though his thoughts weren't on healers. Pain was nothing new; he could endure it. What he wanted and longed for was Violet. If she were here, it would be different. Her touch would soothe him and her voice would turn this pain into nothing more than background noise.

The door creaked, and Nancy reappeared with a basin of water and cloth. She set them down and knelt beside the bed, her sleeves already rolled up. Roman instinctively reached for the towel. "Let me."

Nancy froze him with a glare so sharp it stopped him cold. "Move away."

Roman held up his hands in surrender and stepped away for her to do her work.

Nancy then dipped the towel into the cool water, wrung it out, and began to wipe the dirt and blood from Asher's skin. Her touch was careful, and motherly.

When she noticed Roman's stare, she

murmured, her voice tight with emotion "If it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't have met Ezra. I wouldn't have this life. This is the least I can do."

Asher's eyes cracked open, his voice hoarse. "You don't need to."

"I need to," Nancy shot back stubbornly, pressing a little harder on the cloth. "I'm sure my daughter would have agreed, too. You're my son now, Asher. My responsibility is to take care of you."

Asher knew there was no point in arguing. Stubbornness was clearly a trait that run in the family.

On the bright side, Asher was wearing boxers. Modesty meant little among wolves — nudity was as natural as shifting — but Nancy was still adjusting. She cleaned him carefully, her face pinching with every hiss he made, and when she reached his shoulder she stopped, shaking her head at the savagery of the wound.

"Dominic is an animal," she muttered bitterly. "He meant to kill you."

Asher let out a low, humorless laugh. "Killing was the objective of the match, anyway?" Then he asked, "Where's your husband?"

"Handling your pack of hyenas," Nancy said, her tone dripping with disdain.

Asher chuckled, then winced from the pain. "Lucky them. Your husband is kind. Unlike me." His voice was edged with steel, a threat even from a sickbed.

Nancy nodded. "You're right. Ezra is kinder. But everyone has a violent side, Asher. Your sub-alphas would do well not to bring it out of him."

That earned a huff from Asher. Silence fell for a while, until he couldn't hold it in anymore, "Violet? Have you spoken to her?"

Nancy paused. "Not since last night. Today has been chaos. But I'll call her when I'm finished here. I'll tell her you miss her."

"Badly," Asher admitted without shame.

Nancy's eyes softened. "She misses you too. You'll see. Soon you'll be together, and bonded, no doubt."

Their gazes locked. Asher knew what she was hinting at. The goddess had already seen fit to tie Violet to the other cardinal alphas. His turn was inevitable, and the pack was watching, waiting for it to happen.

Before he could respond, the door opened. Irene entered briskly, her expression hard with worry, and behind her came an old woman with grey hair bound tight in a braid. She was the healer.

From the way she carried her kit, it was obvious she had no natural healing powers. Werewolves born with such gifts were exceedingly rare, hence Adele was one of a kind. Still, healers were well-versed in werewolf ailments, and with her training she could treat him efficiently.

The air in the room shifted as everyone instinctively gave her space.

Nancy rose at once. "He's stable enough for you to work."

The healer stepped forward, her eyes sweeping over Asher's wounds. "Wolf's bite," she muttered, touching the raw flesh. "We'll need poultices and a draught to purge the wolf's venom before the tissue can knit."

Asher grunted but didn't move. He was an Alpha; showing pain was weakness. Yet when her fingers pressed into his shoulder, a shudder of agony rippled through him.

Roman watched restlessly, while Jeremiah stayed near the door, guarding them.

The healer barked, "I need boiling water, comfrey, and Reemweed tincture. Move!"

No one objected and set to work quickly. Asher needed to be back on his feet, strong and ready for tonight's coronation.

The West pack await their new Alpha.