

Defy 631

Chapter 631: Not A Monster

As soon as the sisters were within the privacy of their room, Ziva began to rave. "He's going to search for her. I know how his mind works, he'll probably keep me in the dark until he needs my help. I need to know what's going on."

Lauren and Layla exchanged glances, both clearly uncomfortable. At this point, Ziva's antics were going to get them all in trouble.

Layla shrugged. "Well, whatever you do, leave me out of it. You won't drag me into whatever suicide plan you're plotting."

Ziva's eyes flashed dangerously. "What did you just say?"

"She's right," Lauren cut in before Layla could push further. "Your obsession with Violet is becoming a problem. No matter how much you hate it, Violet is still our powerful sister and Father will bring her in whether you like it or not."

Ziva froze, speechless for once.

Lauren pressed on. "And while you're at it, figure out Hannah's situation before Father finds out what you did."

That was the last straw. The twins clasped each other's hands and walked out together, not daring to look back. They were done with Ziva's schemes, her temper, and the mess that always followed her.

Back at Aster City....

Adele sat on the hospital bed while the doctor checked the chart, the machines beeping in the quiet of the room.

After a moment, the doctor finally said, "Your vitals are stable, heartbeat normal, blood pressure steady, and your healing rate is improving. Everything seems fine."

Adele nodded slowly, relief spreading across her face.

The doctor looked up, "Have you tried shifting ever since the incident?"

"Shifting?" She hesitated before answering, "I haven't exactly thought about it, and this isn't exactly the place."

The doctor smiled, scribbling something on her clipboard. "Understandable. But it's important we make sure your wolf is still responding. Do you still feel her presence?"

She nodded. "Yes. She's there."

Adele intentionally did not mention that her wolf was intentionally ignoring her and only roused at her mate's presence. She brought it on herself after all.

"That's good," the doctor said, her tone reassuring. "We've arranged a controlled environment. There's a space in the hospital reinforced for safe transformations. Once you're ready, we'll help you shift under supervision, and ensure there's no risk, and accident."

Adele exhaled, tension loosening from her shoulders. "Alright," she said. "I'll do it."

"Good," the doctor replied with a smile. "We'd arranged a time for that. Until now, have your rest and spend as much time with your mate as possible."

They must have summoned him straight out of thin air because Micah appeared right at that exact moment, and all the air left Adele's lungs in one dramatic swoop.

It was like one of those over-the-top romantic scenes in soap operas where the camera zooms in on the male lead, the wind blows at the perfect angle, and the soundtrack swells. Except she experienced it for real, and it wasn't a camera doing the work, it was her traitorous hormones.

Micah stood there in a simple long-sleeve cotton shirt and black pants, yet he might as well have stepped out of a fantasy painting. The shirt hugged his frame just right, highlighting the toned stretch of muscle beneath, and a few undone buttons offered a sinful peek at his chest. His skin was warm bronze, smooth like something sculpted by a god who clearly hated Adele's self-control.

And just like that, her wolf surged forward, front and center, tail wagging like an excited puppy.

MATE HIM! MATE HIM NOW!

"Not now," Adele hissed internally, clenching her jaw. But resisting the pull was like trying to fight gravity, especially when her mate just happened to be an impossibly handsome incubus.

The heavens must really hate her.

The silence in the room thickened, heavy with the kind of tension you could practically slice through. The doctor coughed, awkward and very aware of the lust humming in the air.

"Well... uh..." she stammered, adjusting her glasses. "Everything seems fine. I'll just... leave you two to it."

And before Adele could even blink, the doctor had made a swift exit, leaving her alone with the walking sin that was her mate.

An awkward silence hung in the air. Well, at least for Adele.

Ever since her stupid decision to take suppressors and nearly destroy her wolf, Micah hadn't left her side, not for a single day. That alone filled her with more guilt than she cared to admit. She was the one who had hurt him, and yet he never held it against her. He remained patient, and infuriatingly kind with her.

And that somehow made it worse.

They hadn't even talked about it. Not once. The guilt only tripled each time their eyes met.

Micah, however, was unaffected by the tension. He lifted a large nylon bag with a grin that made her stomach flip. "I got you chicken soup, some fruits, a few dried meats to chew on when you get bored — oh, and medical books to read in your free time."

Her wolf purred instantly, tail wagging in delight. Our mate is perfect.

Adele felt her cheeks heat up. "Thank you," she murmured, trying not to sound as flustered as she felt.

"You can have the chicken soup now while it's still warm," Micah said, his tone easy and calm as he unpacked the bag. "I'll arrange the others for later."

He poured the steaming soup into a bowl, setting it neatly in front of her before moving to the side table to organize the rest. Adele watched him quietly, her heart aching in the silence. He didn't have to do any of this, not after what she did, and yet, he did. And that somehow made her want to cry.

And she did cry.

After taking a mouthful of the chicken soup, the rich flavor burst on her tongue and that was all it took.

The tears welled up first, and then they fell, one after another, unable to help it anymore.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Micah," she murmured over and over again, her voice trembling through the words.

Adele had thought she was getting mated to a monster. But instead, she had hurt the kindest man she had ever met.

Chapter 632: Forgive Me

Michah practically froze at the sight of her tears.

"Why are you crying?" he asked, startled by her sudden reaction.

The whole thing caught him completely off guard. For a moment, he genuinely thought she'd burned her tongue or something. Or maybe the soup wasn't to her taste? But the tears didn't look like those of someone offended by flavor.

No, this was something else entirely.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Micah," She choked out, "I'm so sorry for hurting you."

Oh. It dawned on Micah at that moment what this was about. The conversation that he had carefully danced around in fear of rejection all over again.

"It's alright," he said with a casual shrug, forcing a smile. "I'm cool with it."

"No!" Adele shook her head quickly. "You shouldn't be cool with it. I was the one at fault here. I should never have done that, tried to erase the bond because I was scared of what the future with you might hold."

Micah said firmly, "And I understand. I already made peace with the fact that I'd never have a family because of what I am." He let out a humorless chuckle. "Honestly, it's an honor that the goddess even thought to bless me with a matebond. But I won't curse you with it. I won't bring that burden on you, or on the future of my unborn child."

The words cut her deep.

He had given up on himself.

The thought sawed through Adele's chest and her wolf whimpered painfully inside her. Mates were meant to complete each other, yet her own actions had only fed the very belief that haunted him: unwanted. tainted. outcast.

Anger — sharp and desperate — rushed through her veins. She set the food aside on the side table and stood abruptly.

"I was wrong about you!" she cried. "I didn't even give myself a chance to know you before judging you. I shouldn't have imagined what a terrible fate it'd be to be mated to a demon." She paused, eyes blazing. "Half-demon," she corrected, her voice shaking with conviction.

"I should have known that there was a man in there. A man capable of fighting his demons. A man willing to overcome the stereotype about him."

Adele stepped closer, her gaze locking onto his. "I know I hurt you that day. I didn't say the rejection out loud, but my actions might as well have. I still feel the ache..." she pressed a hand to her chest, voice breaking, "...right here. It should've been enough to drive you away, to make you hate me. And yet you stayed. What kind of mate does that to someone who still chooses to stay?"

She reached out, hesitant at first, guilt weighing on her hand, but the faint flicker of hope in his eyes gave her courage. Her fingers brushed his cheek gently, before she finally cupped his face and stroked tenderly.

"You're beautiful, Micah," she said in awe, her voice unsteady. "Both inside and out. I was the fool not to see that. But if you'd have me one more time, I promise I won't run away again. I'll be the mate you deserve. What's your problem will be my problem. You'll be mine and I, yours. I know our journey won't be easy, but I'm willing to stand by your side. So please... forgive me."

This time, Adele waited with bated breath, her heart twisting in fear. Micah could still reject her, and he'd be right to. He already saw himself as a burden, and rejecting her would seem like the kindest thing he could do. But unlike him — who could live with longing — she'd suffer twice as much with her wolf.

Seconds dragged by, her pulse thundered.

Then Micah finally said, "You'll never take those suppressor pills again?"

"Never!" Adele blurted, shaking her head rapidly. "It'll never happen again. I swear on my life."

A grin spread across his face. "Then you're forgiven, my mate."

Adele gasped. Overwhelming joy flooded her chest, and even her wolf yipped in celebration. Before she knew it, she leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to his lips.

She stepped back, waiting for his reaction.

Micah froze.

Adele blinked, nerves kicking in. Had she messed up? Was it too soon? She bit her lip, flustered. "You don't want that yet?"

Micah's brows furrowed. "Was that a kiss or a foretaste?"

"Huh?" Adele managed.

Before she could blink again, his hand slid behind her head and he crashed his lips into hers, kissing her so deeply it stole the air from her lungs.

His lips moved with such ferocity—as if he could swallow her whole—that her legs went weak, and she had to cling to him for support. Goddess help her, her mate was devastatingly good with his mouth.

He explored the roof of her mouth, his tongue tangling and teasing hers until Adele's thoughts dissolved into a haze of heat and dizzying sensation. Her knees wobbled, balance slipping, as she stumbled under the spell of his touch.

Micah caught her before she fell, his grip strong, possessive, and grounding. Without a word, he turned her and pinned her against the wall. The impact drew a small gasp from her throat that only seemed to spur him on.

Adele's fingers found his shoulders, having no choice but to cling onto him as if he were her lifeline. Micah's mouth was moving against hers like he was trying to memorize the taste of her. Every brush of his tongue sent shivers through her, her heart pounding so fast it hurt.

By the time they broke apart for air, Adele was shaking, her chest heaving, and her mind completely blank. That was also when she saw his eyes, completely black, and gleaming with something both dangerous and divine. Her heart stuttered out.

Adele had no idea how his demon side worked, and what this meant right now, but her wolf knew him, and she felt this confidence : he wouldn't hurt her.

So when his mouth found hers again, she surrendered.

Micah had been in control of the kiss from the start, not that she was complaining. His lips moved harder, deeper, tasting every inch of her mouth before trailing down her neck. When his lips brushed over the mate rune on her shoulder, Adele shuddered and gasped his name, her pulse quick and wild.

"Do it again," she whispered.

And he did.

Slowly, deliberately, he used the tip of his tongue to trace every curve of the mating rune, each stroke sensual enough to make her shiver.

Fuck her life.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders as her head fell back, a whimper escaping her lips. Her wolf was right at the surface now, pacing and growling with desire.

Her core throbbed painfully, and her panties were so soaked they could melt off at this point.

Chapter 633: NOT Right Now

Micah slowly swept his tongue over the rune once more and Adele moaned, her back arching as pleasure coursed through her veins. Her wolf howled in her mind, demanding more, marking him as hers just as fiercely as he did her.

He finally lifted his head, eyes dark and hungry, his lips glistening. "Careful, Adele," he whispered, his breath ghosting over her neck. "If I keep this up, I won't stop at your shoulder."

"Then don't," Adele begged him, her voice trembling with need. She was wound so tight she could barely breathe. She needed him.

Micah's eyes gleamed at her words, the inky blackness threatening to spill over entirely. When he licked his bottom lip, Adele didn't just shiver — she became painfully aware she was standing before a predator.

And when he murmured, "Is that what you want?" his grin spreading wide, dark and devilish, Adele second-guessed every ounce of her earlier courage.

But the temptation was stronger.

"Yes," she breathed shakily.

"As you wish, my mate."

Adele's heart hammered in her chest, realizing what she had just invited. The mating fever might have passed, but the pull between them still burned hot.

Micah's touch was deliberate when he cupped her face, his gaze locking with hers. "I want your eyes on me the whole time," he said.

"What?" Adele was confused, until she felt his hand slip beneath the edge of her hospital gown, his fingers gliding up the soft skin of her thigh. Then she understood.

Her breath hitched as Micah's hand glided higher and higher until his fingers brushed against her soaked panties. The faintest touch sent a jolt through her, a tingle that made her gasp, her eyes fluttering.

"Shhh." Micah caught her chin before she could look away. "Eyes on me," he warned softly.

So she obeyed, keeping her gaze on him even though her breathing had lost all rhythm. She felt his large fingers tug the thin fabric aside, sliding through her wetness with ease.

At once, Adele cursed under her breath, her back arching into him as she gripped Micah's arms for support. She never knew that maintaining eye contact while being pleasured could be such a herculean task; every instinct screamed to close her eyes and simply surrender to the sweet, consuming sensation.

Then he was rubbing against her clit and Adele cried out as heat shot through her.

"God, you're so soaked." Micah said, his nose burning with the scent of her desire.

"Please, go on," Adele pleaded, the words breaking from her lips before she could think.

Micah obliged, pleasuring her with his expertise finger that had her cursing and moaning at the same time.

Even while drowning in pleasure, just as he wanted, Adele never took her eyes off him. That was when she truly saw how devastatingly handsome Micah was, even if it was in a dark, unnerving way that sent her pulse racing and adrenaline through the roof.

His eyes, black and endless, bore into hers, and she could swear she saw him in there — behind those demon eyes — utterly in control, even if everything about his appearance suggested otherwise. And goddess was it intoxicating.

"Yes," she urged as his fingers worked her.

Then, as if rewarding her obedience, Micah thrust a finger inside her. Adele's eyes flew wide in startled delight, her mouth forming a soft 'O' as she felt him fill her — the sudden invasion stealing her breath and leaving her trembling.

"Yes, love," Micah said as if responding to her plea, moving faster and deeper inside her.

Adele couldn't stop staring at him. The moans slipped from her lips again and again, her body helplessly responding to every wicked stroke of his touch.

When he slid in a second finger, she knew she was done for. Her body went taut, pleasure snapping through her like lightning before she cried out.

Micah didn't stop, he worked her through it, guiding her as the waves rolled harder and higher until she was gasping through a second orgasm, and then a third.

By the time it was over, Adele was trembling, her legs barely holding her up. She collapsed back against the wall, lost in a haze of bliss.

Micah finally drew his fingers out, his hand glistening with her release.

Making sure she was watching, Micah brought his fingers to his lips and licked them clean slowly, a deep, satisfied groan rumbling from his throat.

Adele didn't know how to explain what she saw next. Something about him shifted, his skin glowing brighter, though his aura stayed heavy and dark like before. Then, to her utter disbelief, he let out a quiet belch, looking content.

It hit her.

He had just fed on her.

When his gaze returned to her, his eyes were hazel again, warm and beautiful, as if the darkness had never been there. Adele forced herself to breathe. She tried not to be rattled, but the truth was this was going to take some getting used to.

Micah took a step forward, his

movement seductive in a way that made Adele's heart trip in her chest. He leaned close, his breath brushing her ear.

"Do you still want to go all the way?" he whispered. "We're in a hospital."

The tease in his voice was clear. They both knew he was hinting that staying quiet wouldn't be easy.

But Adele wasn't backing down. She leaned in till their breaths mingled, her lips brushing his when she said, "This is a private room. We better make good use of it."

Micah's lips curved into a sinful smile, then crushed against hers. Their mouths met in an urgent kiss, filled with need and hunger, as if they couldn't wait to be skin to skin.

Adele fumbled with his zipper, fingers trembling with anticipation, while his hands tugged at the straps of her flimsy hospital gown.

And then, right at that perfect moment, the phone rang.

Micah ignored it, still kissing her like a man possessed. But his phone kept ringing, again and again, until with a frustrated growl, he broke the kiss.

Without even glancing at the screen, he snatched it up.

"Who the fuck is this?" he snapped.

A calm voice answered, "Is this the Oracle?"

Micah froze. The fury drained from his face instantly. He glanced down at the screen, it was an unknown number.

"Who is this?" he asked tightly.

"This is Irene Hale," the voice said. "And the kids are missing."

Chapter 634: Goodnight

Asher Nightshade was a fucking killjoy.

He'd kicked all of them out of the bathroom before Roman even had the chance to convince their mate that a "romantic shower together" was a brilliant idea.

Now Violet was bathing alone. How miserable was that?

How would she even reach her back?

Not to mention, Roman had recently picked up some massaging skills during his downtime in the West pack — and he'd been dying to put them to use.

He could already picture it: pressing out every knot from her shoulders while the others helped. Everyone would have their own role to play, but he would be the one in charge, directing who touched where. The thought of being captain of that glorious mission thrilled him to no end.

Unfortunately, that masterpiece of teamwork now existed only in his imagination.

But fear not, there would be plenty of time to make it happen later. They weren't leaving the Fae realm anytime soon, he guessed.

And then there was Asher, lecturing them all about "staying focused." He didn't trust the Fae or their intentions — as if Queen Seraphira would hurt her own daughter.

Well, scratch that. With each of them having had all sorts of parents and gone through quite the unimaginable — starting with Asher — it made sense he didn't give anyone the benefit of the doubt, no matter how "beautiful and dreamy" Queen Seraphira looked.

Roman Draven swore they were kindred spirits. His instincts trusted Queen Seraphira.

Yet, he would still follow Asher, the cheeky bastard whose eyes wandered to Violet the moment she stepped out of the bathroom, even after warning everyone else to "keep their heads in the game."

Roman pitied his friend though. He knew how angry and annoyingly jealous he had been when the goddess mated Griffin to Violet alone. So yeah, he understood. Their little spa moment would just have to wait until Asher got tattooed too.

But he hoped it wouldn't take too long. Violet was a living temptation, and he wouldn't survive his delicious meal being dangled in front of him for too long.

Since they couldn't get a little action with their mate, Roman made sure all four of them ended up in the shower together. A decision made, since everyone wanted to be the first to shower.

Roman could see the logic behind it — whoever bathed first would get a head start to spend time with their mate before the others finished and barged in.

Of course, it had been a full-on argument until the "group shower" idea came up which was suggested by none other than him. And there, in that ridiculously spacious Fae shower, Roman tried to put his new massage skills to use. Not that it went well.

Alaric zapped his ass — nearly got his chiseled pecker too — and almost electrocuted everyone in the process. The guy just didn't have a chill button.

As for Asher, his so-called bestie, he glared at him so hard that Roman didn't dare mention it again. When he tried sneaking up on him anyway, the slit-eyed bastard compelled him to punch himself in the face. That one hurt, and definitely broke the bro code.

Griffin was the only one who accepted his "service," but honestly, it wasn't the same. The guy was all muscle and bone, not soft, tempting flesh like Violet. And with the others threatening to finish first, Roman had to give up his little experiment.

Then it was bedtime.

Except there was one Violet and four Cardinal Alphas. Each of them wanted to be as close to her as possible.

Well, technically, not his problem.

Unlike the others, he hadn't bothered with pants for bed and simply shifted into his favorite animal form, the cute, adorable snake. Then he slithered toward the bed where Violet sat in the middle, watching and waiting for their decision.

His little mate was wearing a soft purple nightgown that looked like it had been spun out of clouds. He knew exactly how soft it was because he'd crept right over the fabric, curling his sleek, scaly body around her neck before resting his head between her cleavage where he had a very nice view of everything. If you knew what he meant.

"Fucking lucky bastard!" Alaric cursed when he saw that play out. Not that it was the first time, but it still got him every single time.

"Still three," Griffin said. "One person will have to sacrifice their position for tonight."

Asher smirked. "If you can turn into a giant beast, any chance you can turn into a tiny man? You know, save some space and finally match your ego size?"

"Funny," Griffin scoffed, giving him the middle finger.

Then Asher said, "You guys go ahead. Someone needs to stay awake in case we're not as safe as we think."

"You think her mom's going to hack our necks off in our sleep?" Griffin snorted. "We're her mates, dude. Stop being so paranoid."

"Well, I'm not, yet," Asher muttered. "I'd still prefer my head on my neck."

"My mother would not hack your neck," Violet said, rolling her eyes. Roman seemed to agree with a soft hiss.

"See? Even Roman knows it," she argued.

"You've only known her for one day," Asher shot back.

"No, I'll stay," Alaric said quietly.

Asher looked at him, surprised. "Really?"

"I've spent the most time with her lately, mating fever and all. Besides, that incident already put me to bed once. I'm not getting more sleep tonight anyway. You don't need to keep sacrificing yourself for everyone, Asher. If you want to activate the next bond, you need to spend time with Violet too."

Asher's throat tightened, but he pushed the emotion down. "Thank you," was all he said.

Alaric smiled.

Then Asher and Griffin climbed into bed, settling comfortably, both managing to sandwich Violet between them.

"Goodnight, Griffin," Violet said and kissed him on the cheek.

Then she turned to Asher and did the same. "Goodnight, Asher."

To Alaric, she said, "Don't listen to his nonsense. Come to bed soon."

Violet lay back with a content sigh only to yelp when a certain snake bit her on the breast. She knew what he wanted.

Violet sighed, patting his head. "Goodnight to you too, Roman Draven."

Chapter 635: Pet Snake

So much for keeping watch over them.

Roman Draven's slit pupils narrowed as he studied the picture-perfect scene before him.

Alaric was sprawled across the end of the bed, dead to the world. Of all the people to keep watch, it was Alaric who could sleep through an earthquake.

Griffin of course lay flat on his back, while

Asher, the mighty paranoid knight who'd sworn Queen Seraphira might "hack their necks" in their sleep was fast asleep too, arm slung possessively over Violet's waist like she was some plush toy.

Typical.

Roman hissed softly in disapproval.

"Brilliant job, everyone. Outstanding teamwork," he muttered to himself in his serpent tongue.

Fine. If no one else was awake, he'd take on the role of night watch. Not that he'd mind. He'd been itching to explore their new home anyway.

He slithered down Violet's body carefully, until he reached the floor. Then he stopped before the door that didn't possess a handle.

Right. The sentient door that apparently responded to "the needs of the occupant."

Roman tilted his head and waited for the door to open, but there was nothing.

He hissed at the door. Did it not count snakes as occupants?

With a sigh, he shifted into his human form, stretching until bones cracked and the familiar warmth of his skin returned.

Then he waited for the door to open. Still, nothing happened.

Roman frowned, scratching his head. "Open sesame?" he joked to himself.

When nothing happened, he shrugged and said louder, "Open magical door?"

And the door opened right before him.

Roman's lips curved. "Of course." He was fucking brilliant.

Shifting back into his smaller, snake form, he slid through the gap before the door could change its mind.

The hallway beyond was quiet, eerily so. Fae magic was so thick in the air even he could feel it, not to mention every corner he turned, was lined with one or two statues.

They were all beautiful statues of animals, but there was something off about them.

Their eyes followed him, or maybe that was his imagination. Either way, he decided against testing whether they could move.

It wasn't difficult at all to slip into the outer grounds. And if the inside of the palace was breathtaking, the outside was madness.

The air itself was light, fresh and free of pollutants that was common with their realm.

Roman couldn't help it, he was awed. The moonlight kissed the sheen of his scales, and fireflies danced around him like tiny fairies, lighting his path. The air was rich with perfume; some flowers glowed blue, others pink, while some were shaped so strangely he half-expected them to start talking.

He slid through the foliage, rustling past fern and bloom, and it wasn't long before something new reached him. Music.

At first, it was faint, drifting through the trees like wind. Then it grew clearer, a strange melody that tugged at the chest, threaded with laughter and the sound of dancing feet.

A fucking party in the middle of the night? That was his thing!

And just like that, curiosity—and maybe a bit of his usual recklessness—got the better of him. He slithered closer, weaving through grass slick with dew. Leaves brushed against his sides, and twigs snapped under his coils as he crept toward the glow pulsing in the distance.

Roman should've known better. Every instinct whispered that this was a terrible idea. Strange glowing lights in a magical forest at midnight? That was disaster waiting to happen.

But the music had him. It wasn't just sound; it was pulling him. The rhythm slid under his skin, curled around his mind, and tugged softly like an invisible thread.

Before he knew it, he was no longer slithering but gliding, drawn forward through the foliage like a moth chasing flame.

The glow ahead grew brighter, spilling color and movement. Roman slowed, curiosity sparking in his serpent eyes as he reached the edge of the clearing.

There, beneath the enormous tree, the Fae danced.

Or rather, a kind he hadn't seen before. They were tiny, barely the length of his palm, their bodies slender and luminous. Their wings shimmered under the moonlight, and they twirled and swooped with impossible grace, their laughter echoing through the glade.

Their skin gleamed like polished pearl, and their hair came in every color imaginable. One had flaming red curls that blazed like sunset, another wore locks of ocean blue, a third shimmered in forest green, and the blonde at their center glowed like bottled sunlight. Whenever they moved, their wings left trails of glittering dust that floated in the air before fading into faint sparks.

Music flowed from nowhere and everywhere, a melody so intoxicating it made his serpent heart throb to the rhythm.

It was the most beautiful — and dangerous — thing he had ever seen.

Roman knew he should turn back. Every instinct screamed at him to leave. No mortal, wolf, or snake had any business near such magic. But the melody coiled tighter around his mind, soft and sweet, promising warmth, laughter and belonging.

He didn't even notice when one of them stopped dancing.

The blonde one tilted her head, her bright eyes glinting with mischief. Then she smiled widely, and far too pleased.

"What have we here?"

Her voice was pure honey, and yet Roman felt something crawl down his spine.

She swooped down, wings slicing through the air, and her sisters followed — four of them total, tiny streaks of light descending upon him. Now that he looked closely, there weren't thousands, only four. But the music made it seem like an entire army was having fun.

"Hello there, little snake," the blue-haired one said, circling his head with curious fascination.

"Oh, he's adorable," the redhead crooned, her eyes wide with glee. "Look at those green scales. So shiny."

"Where did he come from?" asked the green-haired one, brushing her fingers through the air above his head. "I haven't seen him in the Queen's garden before. Look at his eyes, so beautiful."

"Can we keep him?" the blue-haired one giggled, clapping her tiny hands. "He'd make such a cute little pet."

Roman turned in circles, trying to keep up with their darting movements, his serpent eyes flicking from one to the other. Their laughter filled his ears, their wings fluttering so fast it felt like a storm of glitter around him.

"—a pet?" the blonde one finished, hovering right in front of his snout. Her smile was lovely but unsettling. "Oh, you'd make the perfect one."

The others tittered, flying circles around him until his head spun.

"Come, stranger," the blonde whispered, her voice soft as silk, "eat and drink with us. Dance with us... forever."

The last word rolled off her tongue like a curse.

Before Roman could even blink, their tiny hands — impossibly strong — landed on his scales. Together they lifted him, wings beating in unison as gold dust spiraled around them.

Roman hissed, twisting, but it was no use.

The pixies carried him toward the canopy above, laughing sweetly as the music swelled.

Up, up, into the branches, and into whatever madness awaited him in their glittering home.

Chapter 636: Fight To The Death

Violet was in paradise.

The air around her pulsed with layers of scent so exquisite they might as well have been music : deep notes of smoked cedar and dark spice, threaded with the sharp sweetness of rain-kissed earth and amber's warmth. Vanilla lingered softly beneath it all, tender as a lover's whisper. Then came the brighter tones: citrus and pine, sunlight caught in wood and wind, and finally a faint sweetness of pineapple and cream, a fragrance so delicate it felt like laughter suspended in the air.

She breathed it in until her lungs ached, until the beauty of it pressed against her chest. Every note was familiar, woven with memories of the scent of her mates, her home, and her peace.

It was incredibly soothing, and she wanted to lose herself in it forever.

With a soft sigh of contentment, Violet reached for the nearest body and leaned into him. He was warm, safe, and steady.

Then she felt fingers gently raking through her hair, massaging her scalp with such a tender rhythm that a purr escaped her lips before she could stop it.

Her eyes fluttered open instinctively and met those familiar, slitted gray eyes staring back at her.

Her breath caught.

Asher's eyes were the kind that could make the moon hide out of jealousy. They shone with a strange depth, as if layers of silver and smoke lived beneath the surface, constantly shifting with every flicker of light. And then there were his slitted pupils, cutting through that gray like dark silk drawn through liquid metal.

Up close, they were unreal. Dangerous in a way that didn't seem meant for the mortal world. But it wasn't just danger that lived in those eyes. There was beauty there too — cold, haunting beauty that seemed to see right through her skin and straight into her soul.

Violet's chest rose and fell, breathless, caught in the gravity of him and unable to look away even if she wanted to. There was something intimate in the way those eyes looked back at her — sharp and soft at once, dangerous yet tender. It was unfair, the way a single look could undo her so easily.

She couldn't move. Couldn't speak. All she could do was drown in the beauty of those eyes until the rest of the world simply ceased to exist.

Asher continued massaging her hair, his fingers slow and careful, the movement soothing in its tenderness. Violet's eyes instinctively fluttered closed, a soft sigh escaping her lips as she melted into the touch, relishing the heavenly sensation.

Neither of them spoke a word. The silence wasn't awkward, rather it was peaceful, and the kind of quiet that said more than words ever could.

They simply stayed like that, lost in the comfort of each other, until sleep came softly, wrapping her like a warm blanket. Her breathing steadied, and with one final exhale, Violet slipped under, lulled back into its embrace once more.

Asher watched her for a long time after that, his hand still gently massaging her scalp. He could go on forever if she wanted him to. The ache in his fingers was nothing compared to the pain of ever losing her.

He wasn't even sure Violet knew just how much she meant to him at this point. She was his life, the one thing keeping him sane.

If there ever came a day she disappeared from his world, then he would stop existing.

How long would she live? Fae lived hundreds of years. Surely, as half-Fae, she would have a long life span.

And how long would he? The strongest of his kind had lived up to three hundred years. But he would rather spend that entire lifetime with her than live a thousand without her.

Asher had never told anyone, but the day Violet died would be the day he died too.

They said mates gave up on life when their other half perished. But he didn't need a matebond to lose his mind — he already knew what it would do to him.

Violet was the reason he breathed, the reason he endured. Hence, he would protect her even if it meant losing everything, even his life.

"Sleep well, my purple queen," Asher whispered, his voice so quiet it almost wasn't there.

His thumb brushed over her cheek in a fleeting, reverent touch. Then he leaned in and pressed his lips against hers, lingering for a heartbeat before pulling away.

When Asher pulled back, his heart almost leaped out of his chest because Griffin was awake, staring straight at him.

The look in Griffin's eyes wasn't judgmental, just knowing, and that made it worse. The intensity in his gaze felt like it stripped Asher bare, exposing every part of him he tried to keep locked away.

Vulnerability had never sat well with him.

Griffin finally broke the silence.

"Your matebond will snap into place soon," he said confidently.

"When?" Asher shot back, his voice edged with impatience. "Years later?"

"You're scared," Griffin observed.

Asher gave a bitter chuckle. "The Goddess has never been fair to me."

"There's a reason for everything," Griffin replied calmly. "And a season too."

"Or maybe she just enjoys torturing me," Asher muttered. "My life's been a special brand of misery she surely gets drunk on."

Griffin's eyes narrowed. "You're not giving up on Violet, are you?"

"Of course not!" Asher's reply came fiercely, his eyes blazing. "Matebond or not, Violet's mine. Always been mine."

"I know," Griffin said. "The boys know too."

"Good," Asher growled, his tone darkening. "Because if the bond never comes, and one day any of you get ideas, then be rest assured, I'll fight you all to the death."

Their gazes locked, unflinching. Tension in the atmosphere.

Then Griffin relaxed, "The prophecy says four of us. You might not believe in fate, but I'll hold the faith for you. Asher Nightshade, your matebond is coming sooner than you know."

Asher said nothing. But deep inside, he prayed so.

Chapter 637: Where Is Roman

Violet woke up to piercing blue eyes.

She blinked in surprise.

She could've sworn it was a pair of slitted gray eyes she'd fallen asleep thinking about. Still, her face broke into a wide grin.

"Well, hello there, handsome," she teased.

Alaric looked ridiculously cute with his messy white bedhead, strands falling across his forehead. His cool, crystalline blue eyes were calm as a still lake, and when he smiled, it was gentle enough to melt anyone's heart.

"Hello to you too, beautiful," he murmured, leaning in to press a kiss on her lips.

Unfortunately, the kiss ended before Violet even had time to savor it, leaving her blinking up at him, lips still parted. She wanted more but Alaric was already slipping out of bed.

Nooo. She groaned in her head.

Alaric stretched, and Violet's gaze shamelessly followed the movement. For someone leaner than the rest of the cardinal alphas, he was still built. His pale skin gleamed softly under the morning light, his muscles rippling beneath it with every movement.

Violet's teeth caught her lower lip as she stared at those fine lines of his shoulders, the curve of his back tapering down to a narrow waist. Gods, it was unfair how someone could look that good just standing there.

"Good morning."

Griffin's deep voice snapped her back to reality and from the teasing smirk tugging at his lips, he knew exactly where her thoughts had been wandering.

He had a towel draped around his neck, a clear sign he'd just stepped out of the bathroom, fresh and steaming.

Then her gaze drifted lower, and her mind tumbled even deeper down the rabbit hole.

Fuck her life.

If Alaric had been a cute sin, then Griffin was a special kind of sin — gluttony itself.

The man was pure man-meat, and Violet meant that in the most sinful, yumilicious, sexy way possible.

She meant, look at him. Those muscles weren't just bulging; they were sculpted perfection, the kind that made even gym mirrors blush.

Her eyes traced the line of Griffin's broad chest, the faint dusting of hair there, those powerful abs that looked like they'd been carved out of marble, and then that deep, glorious V that pointed like a divine arrow toward a sweet spot hidden behind his pants.

Oh, Goddess.

All Violet could think about was Griffin hauling her off the bed, his huge palms gripping her ass while she climbed that body like a damn tree.

With those thoughts spinning through her head, no wonder she felt the rush of heat shoot straight between her legs, forcing her to press her thighs together.

What a life she had. Blessed and cursed all at once.

Then Asher stepped out and Violet knew she was a goner.

He, too, had just come from the shower, and as if the universe wanted her to suffer, he ran a hand through his wet hair, slicking it back before giving his head a shake. Water droplets sprayed across the air in slow motion, sliding down the hard lines of his neck and tracing a sinful path over his chiseled chest.

Not even the scars scattered across his skin dimmed his appeal; if anything, they made him look more dangerous, and more lethal.

Violet stopped breathing. Completely. Her chest refused to rise. Her pulse pounded hard enough to make her dizzy, and the heat that flooded through her body was nearly unbearable.

Goddess, he was beautiful. Like the rest.

At this point, her core throbbed with desperate awareness. Violet didn't even realize she was holding her breath until all three of them turned toward her at once—Alaric, Griffin, and Asher—each inhaling her scent.

Their eyes darkened instantly.

Yeah, they could smell the want on her.

"It seems our mate needs a little help. Any of you up for the task?" Griffin teased, his gaze flicking between Asher and Alaric with a knowing smirk.

"Never say never," Alaric said, maybe a little too eagerly, that mischievous glint lighting up his pale eyes.

But Asher wasn't the one for words.

He moved like a man on a mission. Before Violet could even process what was happening, he was in front of her, his hand sliding around her waist as he lifted her effortlessly from the bed.

The world tilted for a heartbeat, then she was perched on the edge of the mattress, and Asher was between her legs.

It happened so quickly that Violet could only gasp when Asher ripped her panties, then his mouth was on her.

Moon help her!

Violet cried out, throwing her head back as he feasted on her. She grabbed the sheet trying to brace herself against the torrent of sensation coursing through her, but it was useless, not when Asher devoured her like a man possessed.

"Asher...!" she gasped, her voice breaking as he pulled her closer, fingers sinking into her thighs hard enough to bruise.

And just when Violet thought it couldn't get hotter, Griffin was beside her. He tugged down the strap of her nightgown, exposing her breast before latching onto a nipple.

"Ahh!" Violet moaned, her core clenching as the sensation of Griffin's mouth on her nipple shot straight to her clit like a jolt of electricity.

Violet didn't know whether to make them stop or let them continue. Both men worked relentlessly to drive her out of her mind. The double sensation was overwhelming, almost too much for her to bear. She could only curse and scream, lost in a whirl of pleasure and frustration.

Then Alaric leaned in, silencing her before her mouth could spill any of that beautiful nonsense. He kissed her passionately, his mouth devouring hers, his tongue exploring hers, seeking the pleasure he desperately craved.

All of her men worked hard to ensure she couldn't think, her head swimming with pleasure instead. They were all she could feel, all she could breathe. Their hands, their lips, their touch, everywhere.

It was no wonder that when Griffin bit lightly on her nipple and Asher flicked his tongue in just the right spot, Violet detonated like a firework.

But they didn't stop.

Not until she came a second, a third, and a fourth time—her screams swallowed by Alaric's mouth—did they finally let her go.

Violet collapsed onto the bed, heaving. That had been one of a kind. And to think Roman hadn't even been part of it.

And then it hit her.

Where the hell was Roman?

Chapter 638: The Watchers

Violet Purple had assumed Roman was in the shower and would step out any second.

But even after her orgasm—yes, those screams, and thank you very much, her mates had done a damn good job cleaning her plate—she knew something was very, very wrong.

Roman would never miss an opportunity like this. Never.

This was Roman Draven they were talking about, for moon's sake—the same guy who could sense her hunger from miles away and show up grinning.

So where the hell was he?

Violet sat up at once, still panting as she asked, "Have you guys seen Roman this morning? Wasn't he in the bathroom with you?"

Asher's brows furrowed immediately. "Isn't he usually taking solace in your bosom?"

Instinctively, Violet looked down. Her breasts were already bare from the entire situation, but there was no sign of Roman anywhere.

Just to be sure, she stood up and stripped completely, scanning herself.

"He's not here, is he?" Violet said, spinning around slowly so they could confirm she wasn't hiding a certain sneaky reptile anywhere.

Alaric coughed, his face bright red. "No, he's not."

He wasn't the only one affected. There was also the dark, smoldering look in Asher and Griffin's eyes. For a second, no one breathed.

Then, as if realizing they were all thinking the same sinful thought, their gazes collided, and each of them instantly looked away, pretending to be unbothered while subtly adjusting their trousers.

This was so not the time. Roman, that little fucker seems to be missing, they needed to focus on that.

Violet reached for Roman through the bond and there he was, alive yet silent. Not to mention, content.

What did that even mean? How could he be content in God knows where he was?

Asher turned to Alaric. "You kept watch last night. What happened?"

Alaric ran a hand through his hair, "I have no idea. I think I fell asleep at one point. But as far as I know, no one came into this room."

Asher gave him a sharp look. "How can you be sure of that when you fell asleep?"

"That's if someone came in," Griffin interjected, "We all know Roman has a habit of exploring." He made air quotes for emphasis.

Violet sighed. "He's not wrong. And Lila mentioned that the house is sentient and responds to the needs of its occupants. It probably let him out."

"Said the same faeries who built this house in the first place," Asher muttered. His tone made it clear what he thought the house might be responsive to other visitors too.

"So let's assume they came in then," Alaric said. "Why take Roman? I mean, no offense, he's not the brightest of us nor the biggest threat. You are." He pointed at Asher.

Violet's voice darkened. "Threat or not, my mate went missing under my mother's roof on my first day here. Someone better have answers for me." Her eyes flashed dangerously.

Just like that, Violet strode ahead and not even the door wanted to incur her wrath, swinging open the moment she approached.

Her mates followed her, silent and tense, knowing someone was about to get it from their mate.

Asher argued, "Even if Roman has a habit of 'exploring'..." He mimicked Griffin's air quotes, "he should be back by now. There's no way that guy would miss the chance to get under your pants this early. How's the matebond?"

Violet said, annoyed. "He's safe and content, if I even understand what that feeling means."

"So he's not in danger, which is a relief," Asher nodded, though he didn't look entirely convinced. "We just need to figure out what kind of trouble he got himself into this time. This is the Fae realm, after all, uncharted territory."

"He came this way," Griffin said, crouching near the corner and sniffing like a bloodhound. "The scent's faint, but it's there."

"Yeah, I smell it too," Alaric agreed, straightening, his expression hopeful.

"So he wandered off on his own," Violet breathed, shakily. "That's not encouraging at all."

Like Asher said, this was uncharted territory and Roman was a walking trouble magnet. Goddess knows what he'd gotten himself into this time.

She only hoped they weren't too late.

"Good morning, Princess," a voice called.

They turned to see Lila — or Lilarin, whatever her full Fae name was — striding toward them. She wasn't alone. One of the guards from last night walked beside her, posture straight and her eyes assessing them.

Violet finally took a proper look at the Fae. For a female female, who were known for their willow-like grace, she was tall and broad-shouldered, with long green hair pulled into a single thick braid clasped by white pins. From the armor she wore and the way she moved, Violet didn't need anyone to tell her that this one was a warrior.

And just like Violet, she was sizing her up too.

Without hesitation, the Fae dropped to one knee. "Apologies, Princess, for not introducing myself last night. I'm Rhara, Captain of the Royal Guard, sworn to protect your mother, and now, you."

"And I'm her teacher," Lila added smoothly, her voice dripping with pride, as if waiting for someone to applaud her for producing such a capable protégé.

But Violet wasn't smiling. Her voice was cold. "Good. Because my mate is missing, and I want answers, now."

Both Lila and Rhara froze, their gazes flickering to each other in alarm.

"When did this happen?" Rhara asked quickly.

"Probably last night," Asher replied before Violet could. His tone was all business, his gray eyes locked on Rhara, assessing her. "Any chance the Fae realm has something like... I don't know, cameras we can use to track him?"

Lila frowned. "We don't have such damaging technology here. But the Watchers might have seen something."

"The what?" Violet echoed.

Before anyone could answer, a loud crack split the silence.

The marble statue of a winged stag beside them fractured down the middle, and Alaric who was the closest to it practically jumped out of his skin, stumbling back in alarm.

Before their stunned eyes, the once-lifeless sculpture began to move, the stone melting away into something impossibly alive.

Violet's eyes widened. She had never seen such a creature before — majestic, ethereal, and far too real to exist outside of myth. For a fleeting second, she doubted what she was seeing.

But that was only the beginning.

In a shimmer of light, the winged stag vanished, replaced by a tall Fae standing in its place. Antlers curved proudly from his head, and then, with a soft rustle, long, dark wings unfurled from his back.

He was completely naked.

For a moment, no one breathed.

Then Asher, Alaric, and Griffin simultaneously growled, fangs bared in a synchronized show of aggression.

Chapter 639: Get Roman Back

Shifters had an uncanny ability to recognize threats, and right now, they didn't want this unmated bird anywhere near their mate.

The male had long, dark hair that flowed down his shoulders — an attribute Griffin was exactly jealous of. It framed his sculpted face, his jawline so sharp it could cut.

He was built too, every line defined with predatory grace. The antlers that curled proudly from his head didn't diminish his looks one bit; if anything, they made him appear even darker, more mysterious, the kind of dangerous that drew your gaze before you could stop yourself.

Then there were the wings. Feathers as dark as midnight stretching wide behind him, layered thick and sharp, like obsidian blades meant to both mesmerize and maim.

They looked impossibly strong, capable of wrapping around someone and shutting out the world entirely. And the way they framed his muscled form made him look less like a creature and more like a fallen god sculpted in the likeness of sin itself.

It was safe to say that, until this moment, the cardinal alphas had never felt lacking.

And it didn't help that Lucen's aura reeked of dominance. Power rolled off him in waves, and that could only mean one thing.

He was an Alpha.

It was something primal that every shifter in the room could smell, a quiet challenge that scraped against their instincts and made their wolves stir restlessly beneath their skin.

It didn't help either that Violet was staring at him with wide fascination, like a child discovering her first shiny toy.

Ugly, wild jealousy rippled through Asher's chest, dark and consuming. A dangerous growl erupted from his throat, low and primal, before it was echoed by Alaric and Griffin, their voices merging into a collective rumble that made the air itself vibrate.

"Eyes away from my mate," Griffin snarled, his growl the loudest, practically a machine grinding in his chest.

But the male didn't flinch. Instead, he grinned, confident and unbothered. "It's your mate ogling me, beast."

That earned him a sharp glare from the men while Violet, mortified, turned bright red. She hadn't exactly been checking out the guy, but it wasn't his body that caught her interest. It was his wings.

Large, graceful, breathtaking wings just like her own.

For the first time, Violet saw another being like her. She had gone from believing she was one of a kind to realizing there was someone out there who might actually understand what she was.

A strange warmth bloomed in her chest, not attraction but kinship.

"Lucen," Lila's sharp voice broke through the tension, calling him to order.

The winged Fae's smile didn't fade, though his gaze lingered on Violet with quiet curiosity, just long enough to make the cardinal alphas bare their teeth again.

Rhara's sharp eyes caught on to what was happening between them.

Interesting, she thought.

Then Lucen lowered his eyes with deceptive politeness. "If you're looking for the little green snake, he passed through here."

At the mention of a green snake, Violet's attention snapped to him at once. "You saw Roman?"

Lucen inclined his head, his voice smooth as honey. "The little thing was creeping about late last night, so we kept a watchful eye on him, Princess." He said her title like a caress, his tone low and teasing.

At the mention of 'we', Violet's gaze swept around the hall and it hit her like a bolt. The statues. All of them. They weren't lifeless. Every single one of them were like him. No wonder she'd felt off about them yesterday.

She'd thought the palace was strangely unguarded but now she understood. There were guards everywhere. They were just hidden in plain sight.

Griffin, Alaric, and Asher exchanged a dark look, the same unspoken thought crossing their minds. They didn't like this winged bastard one bit. And the sooner he told them where Roman was, the sooner they could get rid of him.

"So where did he go?" Alaric demanded, irritation slipping into his voice.

Lucen's gaze slid to him, assessing, almost amused. "Why should I answer to you, beast? I answer to the Princess — and the Princess alone."

Violet stepped forward before her men could snap. "Then answer me," she commanded, her voice imbued with authority. "And you'll do well to address my mates with respect. Any disrespect to them is disrespect to me."

Lucen's lips curved slowly, dangerously. "You mean two of your mates."

Violet's eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

He lifted a finger toward Asher. "He's not mated to you yet. Hence, I'm not obligated to extend him the same courtesy."

"He will be soon," Violet said, her voice firm, and unwavering. "But until then, he's mine. And you will respect him. I demand it."

A beat passed, and instead of pushing further, Lucen lifted both hands in mock surrender. "Anything the Princess desires," he murmured, voice lilting and heavy with suggestion.

Asher's jaw clenched. He had always prided himself on control — that cold, unbreakable restraint that kept him from killing this bastard first and thinking later. But right now, it was slipping. His fingers curled into fists as he forced himself to breathe, slow and steady.

This male wanted to test him, and for Violet's sake, he wouldn't give him that satisfaction.

Not yet.

But the bastard was marked. He better watch his back.

Lucen said. "Your little green snake was captured by the pixies."

"Pixies?" Violet echoed, confusion flashing across her face.

Lila explained. "We call them the smaller Fae. They're mostly benign—childish even—but they can be quite mischievous toward outsiders and downright malevolent when not treated well."

Violet's jaw tightened. "I don't care what they are. I am more concerned why they have my Roman?"

That teasing undertone never left Lucen's voice. "Your mate Roman went wandering where he shouldn't have, Princess. He fell under their charm. Pixies have a way of luring those who don't belong."

Griffin stepped in, impatience written all over his face. "So how do we get him back?"

Lucen tilted his head, considering. "Well, about that....."

Chapter 640: Visit The Pixies

Violet groaned, "What? What is it now?"

She could already tell this was not going to end well.

Rhara was the one who answered, "As much as pixies are lesser Fae, they are still respected among our kind. And as the princess of the Free Fae, that makes them your subjects. Hence, you must learn how to negotiate with them."

Asher perked up at once, his expression darkening. "Negotiate?" His tone dripped with disbelief. From what little he knew about the Fae, negotiating with them was the fastest way to get tricked, cursed, or worse.

He growled low in his throat. "Violet is not doing any negotiating."

Lucen's gaze flicked toward him, saying pointedly, "There are rules to the Fae realm, beast. Bargaining with the pixies is the only way to get your snake brother back."

Lila, added, "He's right."

Asher's glare shifted to her. "You can't be serious."

"I am," Lila said smoothly. "But the pixies love something more than deals."

That got Violet's attention. "And what's that?"

Lila's lips curved. "They love shiny trinkets. Enchanted gifts."

Violet's excitement deflated instantly. "Oh, wonderful. And how in the world am I supposed to get shiny enchanted trinkets?"

Rhara chuckled lightly. "Princess Violet, this is your home. Surely your mother wouldn't refuse you access to her treasures."

Violet blinked. "Wait, you mean—"

"Yes," Lila said with a knowing grin. "Her jewelry chamber. You'll find more than enough to impress the little creatures."

Violet exhaled in relief. Maybe being a princess wasn't bad after all."

"Good," Lila said. "Now, wait a minute while Rhara and I prepare the gifts. We'll find the little rascals soon enough."

As soon as they left, the space seemed to shrink. Only Violet, her men, and the winged stag remained, and the tension was so thick, the temperature rose with it.

Violet's nose twitched. The air was stifling, heavy with her mate's scent. It was rich, potent, and everywhere that they were choking her without even realizing. The testosterone was practically dripping off them in nauseating waves. At this point, it was as if they were having a dick measuring competition

"You should be careful with this bargain," Asher said suddenly, stepping closer until his body shadowed hers completely. "I don't trust a word those creatures say."

And surely, it wasn't a coincidence that his broad frame blocked Lucen from view.

Violet noticed but said nothing. There was no point in feeding their jealousy.

"I know," she said, her tone touched with appreciation. "I'll be careful." She reached for his hand and squeezed gently. "Besides, I have you here with me. You won't let anything happen to me."

Something in Asher's chest loosened. The insecurity that had been clawing at him since they arrived seemed to fade under her words. Their gazes locked, the air charging with attraction once more.

Then Alaric's voice cut through it.

"Dude," he said dryly, "can't you get some clothes?"

Lucen arched a perfect brow, completely unbothered. "Why? Does it bother you? Can't keep your eyes off me?"

Griffin snarled before he could stop himself, his jaw flexing. He was one breath away from throttling the annoying Fae.

He took a good, deliberate look at Lucen — lean, tall, sculpted — and snorted. Sure, the guy was built, but not that built. Not like him. Griffin had raw strength, and he knew it. When it came down to a show of strength, Griffin was confident of winning.

Lucen tilted his head, that sly grin never faltering, clearly enjoying every spark of tension he was causing.

Violet's eyes narrowed. As fascinated as she was, she had to be careful around this one. Fae were tricksters after all.

Thankfully, Rhara and Lila finally arrived, and the tension lessened.

Lila carried a small, golden box in her hands and Violet's eyes locked on it immediately, curiosity sparking. "What's in there?"

"This," Lila said, holding it up, "is something very precious."

Then she opened the lid slowly, reverently, as though unveiling a relic of the gods. Inside, nestled on a bed of soft white silk, lay a pearl necklace, each orb shimmering with an inner light. The pearls weren't uniform; each seemed to carry its own hue, pale blues, faint golds, and deep whites that glowed as though alive.

"It was a gift," Lila explained. "From the merbeast. They said it was crafted from the tears of the sea-king's daughter when she suffered her first heartbreak. Each pearl is a tear crystalized by grief, purified by the sea's blessing. It's one of the finest things your mother ever owned."

Violet leaned closer, breath catching in awe. "It's beautiful," she whispered. The necklace seemed to pulse faintly, almost calling to her.

The longer she looked, the harder it became to look away. It radiated the urge to claim it, guard it, and to never let it leave her sight.

She tore her eyes from it reluctantly. "I feel bad giving away something so precious."

Lila scoffed, waving a hand. "What nonsense. The Queen has so many jewels she doesn't even remember half of them. Trust me, she won't miss this one."

Rhara gave a curt nod. "And if the princess hesitates any longer, the pixies will have their fun with her serpent forever. Lucen—"

She turned toward him. "Lead the way."

Lucen announced. "As you command," He gestured forward. "Follow after me."

The group set off together, stepping out of the hallway and into the open morning light. The Fae realm had transformed with the dawn. What had been eerie and still last night now brimmed with motion and life.

Dozens of creatures moved through the palace courtyard, short, long-limbed figures with wrinkled skin and wide glassy eyes, wearing patched tunics made of moss and petals. Some carried brooms taller than themselves, sweeping fallen leaves. Others lugged trays of flowers, rearranging them in symmetrical patterns that glowed faintly when touched.

Violet slowed, watching them in fascination. "What are those?"

"Brownies," Rhara explained, not missing a step. "They keep the palace clean and running. Efficient little beings, though they can be mischievous if ignored. Offer them cream once in a while, and they'll worship you for life."

Violet nodded, making a mental note. She had a lot to learn about this place.

They crossed through a garden where blossoms opened as they passed, their petals shimmering with dew. The air was fragrant, warm, and alive. Soon, the palace walls gave way to thick forest.

Lila took the lead, her steps confident. Every time her hand moved, the forest responded. Thorns drew back, flowers bowed, and tangled bushes parted neatly as if fearing her touch.

Violet stared in amazement. "How are you doing that?"

"Perks of being born Fae," Lila said with a grin. "Nature listens when you speak its language."

By the time they reached a clearing, the air had shifted again and there, in the middle of a flower-woven glade, was Roman.

Violet froze. Her jaw nearly hit the ground.

Roman lay sprawled across a couch made of blossoms, blissfully half-shifted — scales glittering faintly under the sunlight, hair braided with wildflowers. Dozens of tiny pixies surrounded him, their wings flickering like shards of glass. Some painted symbols across his chest with liquid gold, others fed him drops of nectar, and a few perched on his shoulders, braiding his short hair while humming tunes that sounded dangerously hypnotic.

Roman's eyes were glazed with that lazy, dream-drunk look she knew too well.

"Roman!" Violet shouted, storming forward.

The second her foot crossed the edge of the glade, she was flung backward as if struck by an invisible wall. She landed hard on her side, the breath knocking out of her lungs.

"Ah—gods!" she groaned, pushing herself up and wincing.

Lucen looked down at her, expression maddeningly calm. "Forgot to mention, Princess, you're supposed to knock."

Violet glared up at him. "You're joking."

Lucen tilted his head innocently. "Pixies are territorial. Barging in uninvited is considered rude. The barrier was generous, actually. It could've turned you into a toad."

"Wonderful," Violet muttered through clenched teeth, brushing dirt off her gown. "Just what I needed, fairy etiquette lessons."

Alaric helped her to while Griffin looked ready to rip the barrier apart with his bare hands, and Asher... well, Asher's death stare said enough.

Violet sighed, glaring at the lounging serpent and his tiny admirers. "Hang on, you glitter-covered idiot. I'm coming for you."

Lucen walked toward the invisible wall and without hesitation, raised his hand and knocked thrice.

The sound echoed, rippling through the air like a drop in still water. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, with a hum, the barrier shone before dissolving entirely.

Immediately, a chorus of high-pitched, chirpy voices filled the clearing.

"Come in, come in!" they sang, their tones overlapping like laughter. "Guests! Pretty guests!"

Lucen smirked and stepped forward first, brushing a strand of hair from his face arrogantly. "Men first, I guess." he said over his shoulder before striding inside.

Rhara and Lila followed almost immediately.

Violet stood at the edge, her stomach twisting with nerves. She took a deep breath, muttering under it, "Anything for my mate."

Then she stepped through the invisible threshold.