

## Defy 661

Chapter 661: Not Leaving

~Lunaris Academy~

This was becoming a habit. In just one term, Principal Meredith Jameson had lost count of how many press conferences she'd already given.

And here she was again, back in the ballroom, facing yet another one. Reporters lined the front rows, camera flashes firing relentlessly like tiny bursts of lightning.

Principal Jameson stood behind a podium, her hands clasped, and her posture flawless.

Behind her, the official seal of Lunaris Academy gleamed on a deep burgundy backdrop. The flags of the four packs framed it, with the United Dorminia emblem hanging dead center.

The camera flashes intensified, the energy in the room ravenous.

Jameson lifted her chin and began, "Thank you all for being in attendance today."

Her voice carried smoothly through the hall.

"Lunaris Academy does not take the recent events lightly. In fact, this situation has shaken the integrity of the institution we hold to the highest standard."

Some of the reporters who were not handling the cameras began typing on their keyboards.

"In the early afternoon of Tuesday, at exactly three fifty two PM, a student by the name of Daisy Fairchild was forcibly taken from the school hallway by three other students. Their names are Elsie Lancaster, Ginny Fan, and Mel Lian."

The click clack of keys now felt frantic with the reporters trying their best to keep up.

Jameson continued, her voice crisp.

"They escorted Miss Fairchild against her will to the indoor pool. There, they assaulted her. This incident nearly resulted in a drowning."

Jameson paused to let the weight settle over every person listening.

She continued with a steady voice.

"Upon further investigation, the students involved claimed this was not bullying, but rather a playful exchange between friends."

The murmurs began instantly.

One of the journalists in the room scoffed.

A playful exchange? Someone nearly drowned, but it was a playful exchange. Was the school kidding right now?

Several reporters shook their heads in disbelief.

No one in the room believed the excuses. The clip that circulated online may not have shown what happened inside the pool room, but it showed a limp Daisy being dragged out.

Jameson's expression hardened.

"Lunaris Academy conducted a mandatory bodied examination of Miss Fairchild. She has been deemed physically unharmed and medically cleared to continue her studies. But harm is not limited to bruises or broken bones. Trauma is not always something the eye can see. Regardless of intention, regardless of status, we will not tolerate this behavior in Lunaris Academy."

Jameson lifted a single folder from the podium. The cameras zoomed in instinctively.

"Elsie Lancaster has failed to embody the values Lunaris Academy upholds. Respect. Discipline. Leadership. These are qualities expected of the students. Hence, with full decision of the academy disciplinary board and the oversight of the United Dorminia Education Council, I hereby announce that Miss Elsie Lancaster is expelled from Lunaris Academy."

Gasps broke out. Expelled?

Expulsion almost never happened in Lunaris Academy, especially to a werewolf. Not to mention, Elsie was a final year student. The scandal was monumental.

Jameson waited for silence to return. It took several seconds.

"Ginny Fan and Mel Lian, as accomplices to the assault, are hereby suspended for two weeks. Their suspension will include community service and a formal apology to Daisy Fairchild."

"To Miss Daisy Fairchild," Jameson said, her gaze softening for the first time that evening, "the Academy extends its deepest regret that you were subjected to such an ordeal. We see you. We hear you. And we will protect your safety and dignity."

She placed a hand on the podium.

"Every student in Lunaris Academy is equal. Human. Werewolf. Or both."

Except everyone in the room knew that was only half true. Equality was a slogan here, not a reality. Werewolves ruled this academy. Humans adapted. End of story.

But politics required performance.

Jameson straightened her shoulders.

"With that said, I have an additional announcement."

The atmosphere thickened.

"After thoughtful reflection, I, Meredith Jameson, will be stepping down from my role as Principal of Lunaris Academy."

The effect was instant, the hall exploded louder than before. Gasps became shouts as reporters moved forward to the front.

Jameson continued above the commotion.

"This position has been my honor, and for seven years I have upheld the most prestigious, historic, and powerful academy in our nation. I am grateful to have served you. My photograph will be added to the Hall of Remembrance, and my work will continue through the systems I have built. I will remain acting principal until my successor is officially appointed. That concludes the press briefing. Thank you."

She stepped back.

A security guard guided her toward the side exit as reporters surged, shouting questions over one another with their microphone outstretched.

"Principal Jameson, is Elsie's expulsion connected to your resignation? Are you stepping down because of her?"

"Are you admitting mishandling of the bullying case?"

"Who is taking your position?"

"Where are the Cardinal Alphas and Violet? Why have they been silent these days? Rumors say they are not on campus? Where are they then?"

Jameson did not flinch at their questions, having braced herself for them. Security formed a barrier in front of the platform as the journalists' frenzy intensified. She slipped through the exit, the door closing behind her.

As soon as Jameson stepped out, it was to see the faces of the staff members she had worked with over the years. Of course, some had been here even before she became a teacher, like professor Alwen, the oldest staff in the school.

Some of them she had employed herself and now, they would watch her go.

Seven years.

Seven years of power and politics and carefully kept order.

Now it was done.

Jameson couldn't bear the pity in their eyes, so she turned and walked away, blinking back the tears burning in her vision. She had never planned to be principal forever, but not like this.

She had imagined leaving on her own terms. Maybe three more years.

A perfect decade. It would be legendary.

She would have stepped down with grace.

But now, every time her name was mentioned, it wouldn't be for her accomplishments and would be tied to Elsie Lancaster's scandal. Her legacy stained by someone else's disgrace.

Jameson hurried down the hallway, brushing past her secretary without a glance. The moment she reached her office, she slammed the door shut and collapsed into sobs.

"How could they discard me like this?" she choked. She pressed a trembling hand over her mouth as the tears streamed freely. "I gave everything to this academy."

She broke down like a child. She didn't want to leave.

At least she wasn't gone yet.

Then, suddenly, a thought hit her.

No. She wasn't leaving. Not if she could help it.

She could still turn this around. She could convince President Roy and Alpha King Elijah that she was the only person suited to run Lunaris Academy. She wasn't a werewolf, but no one loved Lunaris the way she did. She would sacrifice everything for it.

She just had to prove it.

And until then, she prayed no replacement was found.

#### Chapter 662: The First Horsemen

Their apartment stunk. It was the smell of stale beer and fried onions, the kind that crawled into the walls and stayed there because no one cared enough to wash it out.

Noah moved through the cramped kitchen, setting two mismatched plates on the wobbly table. Then he scooped instant noodles into one, and reheated yesterday's stew for the other.

The boy wiped the rim of his father's plate with the corner of his shirt, not out of affection, but because if it looked messy, Anthony would complain.

For a moment, Noah just stared at the food.

This was dinner for his father and nothing for himself. His stomach growled, but he ignored it. He had a shift soon. The diner didn't allow staff to eat on the clock.

So he set the spoon down and walked to the living room, where Anthony sat in his sagging recliner, eyes glued to a sports rerun. Beer cans formed a castle around him, a sight that made Noah's nose crumple in disgust.

Ever since his father lost his job, and then his wife, the man had become a couch potato. He did nothing but sit down drinking, watching TV and complaining about pretty much everything all day long.

"Dinner's ready," Noah announced.

Anthony grunted, not taking his eyes off the screen.

Noah placed the plate on the small folding table beside him, then reached for his jacket near the front door. It still smelled faintly of grease and dish soap from last night's shift. But there was nothing he could do about it

He was just slipping on the jacket when the TV suddenly switched from sports to the news.

BREAKING — LUNARIS ACADEMY PRESS CONFERENCE.

The volume blasted through the apartment.

A reporter appeared on-screen, with Principal Jameson speaking in a split-screen behind her.

Noah paused mid-step, his eyes glued to the screen.

Lunaris Academy was the oldest and most prestigious werewolf academy in the nation. No one ever ignored a scandal from that place.

"What the hell is that?" Anthony muttered, snatching the remote and turning up the volume even more.

"...assaulted a human student, Daisy Fairchild nearly resulted in a drowning incident..."

Noah's breath hitched. He had seen that clip. It had gone viral and was practically all everyone could talk about.

Anthony suddenly slammed his beer can on the table, startling him. "Unbelievable. One of those mutts nearly kills a human, and she walks away with an expulsion?"

He scoffed harshly. "Total bullshit."

His father drained what was left of his beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Back in the day," Anthony grumbled, "those damn werewolves knew their place. They hid in forests living off scraps. But now, they're on the news, living like celebrities."

Noah knew exactly why he hated them so much. His mother had left their family for a werewolf. Anthony never recovered from the humiliation.

He jabbed a finger at the screen, the glare caught in his bloodshot eyes.

"You know why she gets away with it?" he snarled. "Because she's one of them." His voice had gone flat with hate. "They've wormed their way into everything — positions, power, fancy schools. They're multiplying, corrupting, and changing people. Mark my words, at this rate there won't be a truly human soul left. Everyone will carry a scrap of their blood."

Noah swallowed hard, staring at the floor. He understood his father's anger but a small part of him wondered what it would be like to have even a fraction of werewolf blood. To be strong, fast, and untouchable. Maybe then he wouldn't feel so weak. So pathetic.

Anthony's rant escalated, fueled by bitterness and cheap alcohol.

"Your mother used to say they were 'misunderstood.' That's what she called them." He spat the word like poison. "Misunderstood? Fucking bullshit. In the end she didn't give a damn about family - the bitch only wanted to suck werewolf dick."

Noah mentally winced at his father's crude words. He didn't need that image in his head, she was still his mother, after all.

Anthony stood, swaying slightly, and walked toward him. He placed a heavy hand on Noah's shoulder.

"Listen to me, son."

Noah looked him in the eye.

"Even if you lose in life," Anthony said, breath thick with alcohol, "don't lose to a fucking werewolf. That would be the worst thing you could ever be."

His father's eyes were hollow and Noah bet he must be going over his life choices. Or so he thought until the man belched and the repugnant smell nearly made him gag.

"That felt good." Anthony said, relieved. Then he staggered back toward the couch, collapsing into the cushions with a groan.

The man grumbled, "If only someone would wipe those vermin off the surface of the earth."

Noah didn't respond. There was no point. Instead, he cleared his throat and said, "I'm leaving for work."

Anthony didn't acknowledge him. No glance. No nod. Not even a grunt of goodbye.

Noah exhaled through his nose and shook his head. What had he been expecting anyway?

He opened the apartment door and stepped into the hallway, leaving the stale beer and a waste of a father behind him.

"Fuck." Noah cursed under his breath when he checked his watch. At this rate, he was going to be late. If he had the money, he would have grabbed a cab, but he didn't, so he stood at the bus stop and prayed the bus showed up fast.

There was no such luck.

By the time he burst through the diner's back entrance, he was already five minutes late. The warm, heavy smell of frying oil and burnt coffee wrapped around him like a greasy blanket.

No one greeted him, or even looked up. It was rush hour after all and orders were flying, cooks were shouting, with waitresses weaving between the tables like their lives depended on it.

Noah clocked in, tied an apron around his waist, and grabbed a tray. He was just about to start serving when a voice called from behind the counter.

"Noah."

He turned. Kelly stood there, wiping down the espresso machine with the kind of tired focus that said she'd already lived through a morning disaster. Her eyes never lifted to meet his.

"Manager wants you in the office."

Noah froze. "Now?"

Kelly nodded without looking at him.

That was when the dread kicked in, sitting right in his chest like a stone. He could tell

something was wrong.

"Okay," Noah murmured, forcing the word past his dry throat.

He wiped his palms on his apron and headed toward the manager's cramped office.

Chapter 663: The First Horsemen - 2

Noah knocked lightly on the office door.

"Come in," the manager answered from the inside.

He stepped in.

The office was barely big enough for the metal desk shoved against one wall. Papers were stacked everywhere and the manager

sat slumped forward, glasses low on his nose, rubbing at his temples.

"Hey, Noah. Close the door and sit." He motioned to the single folding chair.

Noah's stomach dropped. People never get called into the office unless something bad has happened. Nonetheless, he closed the door, and sat down nervously.

The manager sighed like he was already exhausted by the conversation. He didn't look at Noah at first, instead, he picked up a yellow folder, flipped it open, and then shut it again.

The anxiety Noah was feeling only spiked.

Finally, the manager spoke.

"I'm just going to say it."

Noah tensed.

"We're cutting back," he said. "It's a new month. Slow season. And headquarters wants labor costs reduced."

Okay. That sounded normal. Business stuff and all. He waited.

"So we're reducing staff," the manager added.

Noah's breath hitched in his throat.

"You're reducing my hours?"

The man cleared his throat.

"We're taking you off the schedule completely."

He had seen this coming. Had felt it the moment he was called into this office. He guessed all he needed was just confirmation.

Finally, he found his voice — even though it sounded embarrassingly small.

"N-no, you can't f-fire me."

The manager leaned back, avoiding eye contact. "Look, kid. You're a hard worker, but I can't cut the full-timers. We're operating on skeleton shifts until things pick up."

Noah was panicking inside. Right now, he was the breadwinner of the family hence he needed this job as much as he needed air.

"You don't understand, sir. I-I need this job. My dad—"

The man's expression tightened, and for a moment Noah thought he saw pity. Except

Pity hurt worse.

"I understand your situation, Noah, I'm sorry. But there's nothing I can do. If anything, I believe this is time for your father to step up and do something."

Noah opened his mouth to say something, but no words could come out. His father step up? His mother had pleaded with him, but there had been no result until she got tired and dumped his lazy ass. Except the workload was dumped on him instead.

A wave of helplessness washed over Noah. What was he going to do? There was rent, food and electricity to take care of.

"So that's it? I just don't come back?" He asked, frustration creeping into his tone.

The manager slid a small envelope across the desk.

"That's your final paycheck. You'll get the rest by Friday. Turn in your apron before you leave."

Noah's world seemed to fall apart as he stared at the envelope. He had been a hard worker, and yet in the end, he was disposable.

"Okay," Noah whispered, rising to his feet. There was nothing he could do. They can survive on the money for a week if he managed it well — and curbed his father's drinking. Hopefully. He would then use the time to find another job, perhaps, skip school completely and work full time.

"No hard feelings?" Mr. Rudd asked, his voice too light for what he'd just done.

Noah nodded his head and left.

He hung his apron on the hook in the break area and was about to leave when he ran into Kelly. She looked him over, a frown forming on her face.

"What's up? Why are you not—" She stopped, realization hitting. "He cut you off?"

Noah nodded with a forced smile.

Kelly's expression darkened. "So he cuts you and Bob, but keeps Ken?"

Noah froze. "What?"

Ken was another part-timer at the diner. Except Ken was a werewolf hired only recently.

Anger shot through Noah's veins. "You have got to be shitting me," he snapped, rushing back out to confirm.

And there he was: Ken, smiling and delivering plates to tables like he owned the place. Of course the customers loved him. Why wouldn't they? He had the perfect physique, tall, handsome and confident. The jerk thought Noah didn't notice, but he saw the ladies scribbling their numbers on napkins and Ken accepting them without shame multiple times.

That wasn't work etiquette.

Yet no one seemed to care. Especially not the manager. Not when Ken kept the customers coming back for more. Who wouldn't want to be served by a hot werewolf? Nearly every human had the hots for them.

And so the one who needed the money was laid off, while the one who probably treated this as a pastime got to stay. Fury like no other built inside Noah.

His father was right. Werewolves were nothing but vermin — reaping where they didn't sow. They deserved to be chased back to wherever they'd crawled out from.

"Noah, are you okay?" Kelly asked when she saw how fast he was breathing. She reached out to touch him, but Noah spun around and began striding toward the manager's office.

Oh no.

"Noah?" she called after him. He ignored her.

"Noah! Don't!" Kelly warned, but the boy was beyond reasoning.

Noah kicked open the manager's door, roaring, "You kept the werewolf and fired me?"

The manager, who was in the middle of a phone call, had no choice but to set the telephone down.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Answer me!" Noah roared, veins bulging in his neck and face. "I came here before the werewolf! I worked the hardest, and yet you fire me and keep him?"

The manager spoke in a carefully measured tone. "Listen, Noah, I understand you're emotional right now, which is why I'm giving you the chance to leave my office before I call the cops."

But the words only provoked him further.

"Call the cops on me?" Noah let out a humorless laugh. "Sure, go ahead. Call the fucking cops. Let's see who the real crook is here."

Noah snapped.

He swept the papers off the manager's desk in one aggressive swipe, causing the manager to stumble back, startled.

"You ignore your own kind and worship that monster out there!" Noah shouted, grabbing anything within reach and knocking it over.

#### Chapter 664: The First Horsemen - 3

Noah was completely out of control now, thrashing the manager's office. The noise drew the attention of the staff, who gathered in the hallway, stunned.

They all knew Noah as the quiet, polite kid, so seeing him explode like this didn't make sense. It was shocking.

Among the staff who gathered was Ken.

"What's going on?"

He had stepped into the back of the working area to pick up customer orders, only to find everyone off their stations and peeping at the office.

One of the servers answered under their breath, "The kid's lost it. Completely."

Curious, Ken pushed his way through the small crowd until he reached the front and that was when Noah's gaze snapped to him.

"Speak of the devil," Noah sneered, his face twisting with rage. "You must be happy, huh?"

Ken was taken aback. "Excuse me?"

He glanced between the furious Noah and the scandalized manager, clearly confused.

Noah got in his face, his voice dripping with poison. "I lose everything even though I work the hardest, and you get rewarded just for having fur and a pretty face. Must be nice being a goddamn werewolf in a world that worships you."

"Alright, back off." Ken shoved him, the guy was being aggressive and too close for his liking.

But that single defensive push was all Noah needed to snap. He had been waiting for an excuse. So he pulled back his fist and punched Ken square in the face.

The staff gasped, startled by the sudden violence.

Ken's head snapped to the side from the impact. A low growl rumbled in his chest, and his eyes flashed gold. It was quite unfortunate werewolves were notorious for their temper, and Noah had just pissed one off.

"No, wait!" Kelly shouted, but it was already too late.

It was just one punch from Ken, but Noah swore he saw his life flash before his eyes. The world spun, and everything went dark.

An hour later, Noah sat on the cold metal bench at the bus stop, nursing a blooming black eye. His head throbbed badly, but it was nothing compared to the humiliation that clung to him like a second skin.

He wished this day had never happened.

He had lost everything — his job, his last bit of dignity — and worst of all, everyone at the diner would remember him as the loser who snapped and got knocked out by a single punch. Ken had dropped him without even trying. It was a brutal reminder of the monumental gap between a human and a werewolf.

The only reason the manager hadn't pressed charges was because it had been a fight and legal disputes between humans and werewolves were always a nightmare. Long, public, and explosive. No diner wanted that kind of heat.

Besides, Noah had been the aggressor, and even if he wanted to press charges, he didn't have the money or the strength to fight a system that would likely favor the wolf.

As soon as the bus screeched to a halt, Noah forced himself up from the bench and joined the small crowd shuffling inside. He swiped his transit card, not even remembering how he got it out of his pocket, and stumbled toward an empty seat near the back.

The moment he sat down, he slumped against the cold window, cheek pressed to the glass. He was so tired he couldn't wait to get home so he could disappear into his mattress — and never wake up.

That sounded like a plan.

A few minutes passed before a prickle on the back of his neck made him lift his head. Across the aisle, a girl about his age was watching him. She looked stunned and Noah realized why. Dried blood streaked from his brow, while his left eye was swollen so badly the skin ballooned into deep purple, and his lip was cracked and split.

He looked like a mess.

His cheek flushed with embarrassment. Without a word, he yanked his jacket off his lap and dragged the hood over his face, shielding himself from the girl's pity, or disgust.

Perfect.

Just what he needed, to be gawked at like a freak.

Then another thought hit him like a punch.

What the hell was he going to tell his father?

Fuck.

He could already imagine the insults, the yelling, and accusations about being weak and useless.

On the bright side, the man would already be passed out drunk. In that case, he'd deal with him tomorrow. One problem at a time.

It wasn't long before the bus reached his stop. Noah stepped down and trekked the rest of the way to his apartment. He didn't expect to see a package waiting at their door.

It had his name on it — clearly addressed to him — but there was no information about the sender. No return label and no note.

Perhaps it was his mother?

She probably didn't want his father tracking her down and causing a scene. They both knew exactly how Anthony could get. The same way he had been today.

Maybe he was his father's son after all.

For once, the universe seemed to be on his side because the old man was passed out on the couch, snoring, beer still clutched in his hand. Noah quietly slipped into his room before Anthony could wake up and ruin the moment.

He headed straight for the bathroom and washed up, wincing every time his fingers brushed the swollen bruise around his eye.

When Noah came back into the room, his gaze fell on the package resting on the bed. He should have ignored it until the morning, but curiosity won.

Noah tore the package open with anticipation. Except of all the things his mother could have sent him, he had not expected a small container filled with a milky-white substance and a syringe.

Noah wasn't stupid. This was a drug.

His mother would never send him drugs, and this one in particular came with a folded product information leaflet. Across the front, in bold black letters, was a single word:

IGNIS.

Chapter 665: The First Horsemen - 4

It was strange. Noah had never seen a drug like this.

Inside the pamphlet, a line was printed in italics:

Want a taste of power? Try IGNIS.

Further down, there was a small drawing of a clock, the hand fixed at the 30-minute mark.

Thirty minutes for what?

None of it made sense. It felt like gibberish, and his head was pounding too much to decode whatever this was supposed to mean.

Noah had just begun to set everything aside when his bedroom door suddenly swung open.

He jerked, nearly jumping out of his skin.

Lo and behold, Anthony stood in the doorway.

Fuck his life.

"Dad?" Noah called nervously, rubbing his palm against his shirt.

Anthony squinted at him — still obviously drunk — first staring at Noah as if he wasn't sure he was real, then glancing toward the clock on the far wall.

"You're an hour early," he muttered.

Noah lied smoothly. "I wasn't feeling well. A coworker covered my shift."

Then something seemed to click in Anthony's fogged brain. He stumbled farther into the room and grabbed Noah's chin roughly, turning his face toward the light.

"What the fuck happened to you?!" he snarled.

Noah swallowed hard. "I slipped and fell."

Anthony's grip tightened. "Do you think I'm a fool, boy? Who did this to you?"

Noah hesitated, then exhaled. "It was Ken. A coworker. He's a werewolf."

He should have lied. But the sudden concern in Anthony's expression made him say the truth. Maybe some tiny part of him hoped his father would finally fight for him.

Noah continued with a low voice, heavy with the humiliation of the day.

"I got fired. The manager chose him over me. I snapped and threw the first punch. And then I got this."

Except, he should have known better.

Anthony's face hardened, that moment of concern evaporating. His jaw clenched, and his eyes went cold.

"So..." his father started slowly, voice dripping with contempt, "not only did you get fired, you let a werewolf beat you to a pulp?"

"No, it was just one punch..."

The words slipped out before he could stop them and instantly made everything worse.

Anthony barked out a humorless laugh. "I've got a fucking dimwit for a son."

Noah froze.

Anthony stared at him, gaze narrowing, something cold and mean twisting in his expression. "Are you even sure you're my son?"

"What?" Noah's blood turned to ice.

His father could have punched him, kicked him, screamed at him and Noah wouldn't have flinched. But hearing the man who raised him doubt whether he belonged to him at all? That cut deeper than any blow ever could.

Anthony said callously, "I mean, for all we know, your whore of a mother never loved me. She could've dropped some bastard kid on me just to punish me."

And with that, Anthony didn't just twist the knife, no, he drove it straight through his heart.

"No son of mine would be pathetic and weak like you," Anthony sneered. "So you lost your job. What now? You expect me to go out there and work for the both of us?"

Noah didn't answer. He just stood there, his shoulders stiff, letting the words wash over him.

Anthony jabbed a finger into his chest.

"I raised you for eighteen years. I put a roof over your head. The least you could do is take care of me now."

His father wasn't done.

"I told you earlier the last thing you should ever do is lose to a werewolf." Anthony's lip curled with disgust. "And what do you do? You pick a fight with one and get knocked out in front of everyone."

He shook his head, laughing bitterly.

"What was I expecting anyway? So pathetic."

And with that, Anthony turned and shut the door with a bang. Even outside, Noah could hear him cursing his existence.

After Anthony shattered him with those words, there was simply no will left in Noah.

His father was right.

He was weak. He was pathetic.

His eyes drifted to the syringe, and whatever hesitation he'd had evaporated.

What did it matter anymore? He had already lost everything. He might as well get high.

With numb fingers, Noah picked up the syringe and drew the milky liquid from the vial. He hesitated only once, the needle hovering over his arm...

Then he made up his mind.

He jabbed the needle into his vein and pushed the plunger.

Instantly he gasped. Noah's eyes widened, his breath hitching as the drug shot through his bloodstream like lightning. Heat exploded under his skin, rushing toward his skull.

Then came the flames.

Noah hit the floor writhing, fists clenching, and back arching as fire streamed through every nerve. His veins felt like molten metal. A strangled sound escaped him, half scream, half breathless helplessness.

Then the pain stopped.

A wave of euphoria washed over him, warm and intoxicating. The fire that had been burning him alive turned into power. Energy. Ecstasy.

For the first time in his life, Noah didn't feel weak. He felt unstoppable. Powerful. Like he could do anything and get away with it. It was a strange yet thrilling sensation.

Then he walked over to the door. He grabbed the handle to pull it open, and instead ripped the entire door off its hinges.

Noah froze.

"Holy shit."

He stared at the door in his hands, then down at his fingers, flexing them like he couldn't believe they belonged to him. A wild laugh burst out of him. No way!

But suddenly, he choked. Something was loose in his mouth. He spat it into his palm, and found it was a tooth.

Noah didn't think about it. It didn't matter. Not compared to the rush of adrenaline ripping through him.

He strode back to the bed and snatched the pamphlet, eyes racing over the bold italicized line:

Want a taste of power? Try IGNIS.

"So that's what you meant," Noah muttered, exhilaration buzzing through his veins.

With power like this, he could do anything.

He pictured Ken, that smug werewolf, looking down on him. Well, not anymore.

Not when he could finally fight back, and

win.

The possibilities spiraled in his head, intoxicating and limitless.

Then a thought hit him like a jolt of ice.

Wait.

This was only one dose.

Noah scanned the pamphlet until he found fine print at the bottom corner.

For additional supply, contact...

#### Chapter 666: Find The Remaining Horsemen

It was the witching hour, but not everyone slept. Beneath an abandoned warehouse, The Turners were wide awake manufacturing chaos.

From the outside, the building was nothing more than a rotting warehouse on the pier, with the windows cracked, roof sagging, and a rusted sign clinging to the wall by one bolt. Anyone who passed by would assume it was condemned.

Because that was the point.

Beneath the warehouse, hidden behind a false panel in the floor and accessed by a freight elevator, was the real operation:

The Turner's underground lab.

Rows of stainless-steel tables stretched across the concrete bunker, cluttered with trays of syringes, vials filled with milky liquid, and bags of chemical compounds. The Industrial ventilation fans hummed overhead, struggling against the sting of chemicals in the air.

A voice called her attention. "The boy has taken the bait, madam. He just placed an order for another supply."

At once, Vera's red lips curved into a slow, pleased smile. Not that she hadn't seen it coming, but it was exciting knowing her plan was taking shape.

"So my first horseman has been activated," She tapped her short fingers against the woman's working table. "How many more doses before the drug kills him?"

"One..." the worker replied without hesitation. "Two, if he's extremely lucky. He should already be feeling the side effects."

Vera hummed thoughtfully. "He won't stop. Not now. He's already hooked. The drug fills the void in him and gives him a purpose. He'd crawl through hell to get it again."

They walked toward another workstation where multiple monitors showed live feeds inside Noah and Anthony's small apartment from all angles.

Yes. They were watching.

What Noah and dear Anthony don't know was that Vera Turner had specifically picked them. Then she secretly installed cameras inside their homes. Not that either of them would have noticed, the father was always drunk, while the boy was too busy trying to meet up with life.

On-screen, Noah was curled in his bed, shivering violently. His face was pale and damp with sweat, his hands gripping the sheets tightly. The crash after IGNIS was brutal, more than double the withdrawal of ordinary drugs. But it was the pain that kept users crawling back for more.

"He's a first-time user?" Vera asked to be sure.

"According to our files, yes. Average student. Poor. Isolated. Lives with an alcoholic father who hates werewolves." The woman asked her, "Why choose the boy? Why not the father? His hatred is worse."

Vera chuckled.

"Because men like the father are all bark and no teeth. Cowards with loud voices. But the boy—" she leaned down, studying Noah's shaking form on the monitor"—he's naive, lonely, and desperate. Vulnerable. People like him don't just break, they shatter. He's perfect for the role."

She straightened, eyes gleaming. "Although, I hope he overcomes the withdrawal enough to fulfill his purpose."

A brilliant thought hit her.

"For his next supply," she said, "don't just deliver it. Demand a demonstration. Push him toward the direction we want, if you know what I mean."

The worker nodded with assurance. "Understood, ma'am."

"Good," Vera said, walking deeper into the underground lair. Then she spotted her brother Joseph lounging nearby, his feet up on a crate, sipping his beer while their resident hacker worked beside him.

Vera approached them excited.

"Brother," she purred, "tell me you have our next horsemen."

Joseph flashed her a lazy smile. "Oh, we have a few. Jordan, show her."

Jordan, wiry and sharp-eyed, spun in his chair and turned the monitor toward her.

"We filtered targets based on one requirement," he explained, tapping the screen. "Documented hostility toward werewolves."

And on the screen, a digital board of faces and profiles appeared, each with their photos and a short summary.

"There's Mason and Maddy." Jordan introduced, "Age, thirty four and thirty two. Brother and sister with a track record of breaking into a werewolf-owned grocery. They have strong anti-wolf sentiment."

He went on. "Next is Calvin. He's Twenty-seven. A former security guard who was fired for hitting a beta wolf outside a nightclub. He is a strong racist and has anger issues."

"Next." Vera said, bored.

"Jane Rivers. Age twenty, she's an influencer and publicly spreads conspiracy theories that wolves are 'infecting human bloodlines' . She has a massive online reach."

Vera rolled her eyes. She was not impressed.

Jordan scratched his head yet moved to his next victim.

"Thomas Hattie. Age thirty-nine. He's a taxi driver with multiple complaints on record for refusing wolf passengers. One of the incidents turned violent."

Jordan studied her expression and when there was not an ounce of excitement, he hurriedly moved to the next, "These are couples with criminal records tied to anti-wolf harassment. We could slip them Ignis, and they'd be strong enough to take down a werewolf couple easily."

"No. No. No!" Vera threw her hands up. "This is not what I want. That won't give the effect I want. People will sympathize with the werewolves. A husband and wife attacking another couple?" She scoffed. "It's just like every other news out there."

She took a step back and spoke theatrically.

"I want drama. I want something that fractures public sentiment. A story where humans finally get to be the victims people root for."

Joseph raised an eyebrow. "You always need everything to be extra," he muttered.

That comment triggered her. Vera slammed her hand against the metal table and the men jerked back.

"Extra is how wars start," she hissed.

Her eyes burned with conviction as she gestured broadly, pacing the area.

"Picture it. An unpopular teenager girl desperately falls in love with the handsome quarterback who turns out to be her childhood friend. But she can't have him because he's wrapped around a prettier, meaner half-breed who torments her daily."

Her smile turned vicious.

"Give that girl Ignis. Give her such power and she'd flip the script."

Vera suddenly leaned in, her voice dropping to a whisper dripping with satisfaction, "It's going to be a bloody provocation."

Chapter 667: United Family

Joseph groaned under his breath. "Drama queen."

"I said—" Vera snapped at him, jabbing a finger at the screen,—"find me the mean werewolves. The bullies. The ones no one will sympathize with. The wolves who abuse their human spouses. Because for the first time there won't be a shield protecting them."

She breathed, "I need my horsemen to start the apocalypse. They're going to help me burn this world to the ground!"

From the look Jordan and Joseph shared, it was obvious they thought she had lost her mind.

Then, as if she had not lost it, Vera composed herself, smoothing her expression into a pleasant smile.

"Chop chop, we're working against a clock. I want results while I go check on our brother." She turned away, muttering under her breath, "Hopefully he's not wasted this time."

Except when Vera pushed open the door to Patrick's quarters without knocking, it was the stench of alcohol that hit her instantly.

Empty bottles were everywhere. On the floor and on the mattress while Patrick lay sprawled across the bed, his face slack with drunken sleep.

You have got to be kidding her!

Vera's lip curled in disgust.

This was her brother? Once the brain of this whole revolution was now a drunk rotting in his own mess.

Annoyed, Vera kicked the mattress hard. But Patrick didn't wake.

Her jaw tightened and she kicked him again, viciously enough that one of the bottles rolled onto the floor, shattering.

And that woke Patrick.

He groaned, swatting at the air like she was a mosquito. "Ugh, go away."

Vera folded her arms, voice ice-cold. "Really Elias? Is this how it's going to be?"

Patrick forced himself to sit up, his eyes bloodshot. "What the hell do you want?"

Vera stepped closer, her shadow looming over him.

"Are you seriously asking me that right now?" Vera shouted at him, eyes flashing. "We are finally doing something that will make our ancestors proud, and you're drowning yourself in cheap liquor."

Patrick let out a humorless laugh.

"Our ancestors would definitely be proud of you," he said with biting sarcasm as he lay back down.

"Are you kidding me, Elias?" Vera yelled, her voice rising with frustration.

That made him snap. He sat up and glared at her.

"What do you want from me, Vera? You're already spearheading the operation I started, while I'm tossed aside like I don't matter. So tell me, what else could you possibly want?"

Vera blinked.

Oh.

So that was it.

Her baby brother wasn't lazy. He was only being resentful.

Her voice softened, losing its bite for the first time. "You still matter, Elias. You're the one who extended the drug's active phase from five minutes to thirty. That breakthrough was yours. I could never take the glory for that."

But Patrick scoffed. "Yeah, I'm only needed when there's a modification to Ignis. After that I'm useless and left in this god-forsaken room." He gestured around the shabby quarters.

They'd lost connections and resources with the authorities on their trail. This was their last shot. If the plan failed, all the sacrifices he'd made over the years would be for nothing.

Vera purred, "Aww, Elias, I'm so sorry if I made you feel that way. Sure, I took over, but it was never my intention to make you feel... useless."

Patrick gave her a look that said he didn't believe a word of it.

Vera winced as if admitting it hurt. "Okay, maybe I looked down on you in the past—"

"Since we were little," Patrick interjected.

"Okay, since you were little," Vera admitted with a casual shrug. "But can't you see? I took over because this is my forte. Strategy, politics, and public manipulation, that's me. Improving the chemistry and lengthening Ignis's effect is yours. I would never take that from you even if I wanted to. We fight the war together while you build the weapons." She tilted her head, letting the last part hang in the air like an offer.

"Fine." Patrick gave in with a reluctant voice.

Vera smiled. Of course, Elias behaved like a child most of the time, and she knew exactly which buttons to press.

She pressed. "Think of Cynthia. What would she say if she saw you like this?"

At the mention of Cynthia, Patrick's expression shifted. Guilt and shame flashed across his face. His girlfriend would be disappointed. She'd push him to be better.

He straightened, suddenly energized. "Okay. We'll do this. But I want something else."

Vera arched a brow, waiting.

"Violet," he said.

Vera's smile died. She cursed under her breath, very loudly.

Patrick continued, calm and pragmatic. "I can't extend IGNIS's effect any further. If you've noticed, subjects on the first batch are stronger than those on later products because longer duration means diluted power. But Violet, she's different. You saw the video. She's a powerhouse. If I can get my hands on her, it could change everything."

There was a certain light in Patrick's eyes now, as if he finally knew exactly what he was talking about. Vera stayed quiet, studying him, weighing the potential complication in his idea.

After a long moment, she nodded once.

"Fine."

Patrick released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"It's not a promise," Vera added, always careful to maintain control, "but we'll keep an eye out for the girl. And if an opportunity presents itself and if she's within our reach, you'll have your subject."

For the first time in a long while, Patrick replied, "Thank you sister."

Vera lifted her chin, pleased. Problem averted.

With Elias back on her side, there would be no more disruptions to her plans. She hated admitting it, even in her own head, but Elias had wicked ideas and she needed that.

She shifted into strategy mode.

"So," she said casually, "I'm picking my horsemen of the apocalypse. Unfortunately, our dear brother Joseph has been doing a terrible job at it. Perhaps you wouldn't mind combing through our list and making a selection?"

At that, Patrick's entire posture changed. His chest puffed slightly with pride. He glanced down at his wrinkled clothes and caught the stench of alcohol on himself.

"Uh... just give me—"

"Take your time, Elias." Vera turned to leave, smiling like a queen who just secured another pawn.

Mission accomplished.

Now where was her lovely mother?

It was time this family worked in unity again.

Chapter 668: It's Her BirthRight

Had anyone told Asher Nightshade that a day would come when he and the other Cardinal Alphas would sit together discussing the affairs of their mate, he would have laughed them out of the room.

Sharing one mate?

That was a far stretched fantasy.

In the past, Asher had always assumed he would one day choose a wife — someone he could control, and would not bother him — after he claimed the Alpha King's throne. That throne had been his purpose, his obsession. The fight for it had fractured his bond with the other Cardinals, but it gave him something to live for.

But now?

Now they weren't just brothers. They were family. And only when he truly felt that unity did he finally understand how powerful they were together and why Elijah had wanted them divided all along.

He should have known.

The boys had all taken up different corners of the room, and though they all had a shared purpose of gathering here, they couldn't help but stare at each other in an awkward manner.

Alaric was the first to break the silence, his piercing blue gaze fixed on Roman. "How did we even get to this point? Because I knew I always hated your ass."

Roman smirked. "Yeah, well, same here, you smug bastard. Always acting like your bloodline was better than ours, when in reality you all are..." He stopped himself before the words slipped too far. Even for him, that was crossing a line.

Alaric knew exactly what Roman had been about to say. His jaw tightened, but he didn't bite back. There was truth in Roman's unfinished insult and, strangely, he didn't feel the urge to fight his mate-in-law. Not this time. Roman hadn't meant it as an attack.

"Yeah," Griffin said. "I'd say we've come too far, considering I'd rather die than be caught with a Nightshade."

He didn't mean it as an insult, though it sounded like one.

The message was clear. The East Pack treated their women like goddesses, while the West treated theirs like property. With such opposing values, Asher and Griffin should have never gotten along.

"Yeah," Asher said in his husky tone, a strange heaviness rising in his chest. "I never thought I'd tolerate you guys." He paused, clearing his throat. "Or that you'd tolerate me."

Roman made a face. "Well, you have your charming days."

Alaric snorted, half-laughing.

Griffin leaned back. "We all know it's because of one person. Someone we have to protect by all means."

All three of them nodded in agreement.

Asher asked, slipping into business mode, "What do we know about the Fae realm so far?"

"Nothing much," Alaric replied. "Aside from a few fables scattered through human texts, I doubt the legitimacy of most of them."

"One thing's for sure, they hate iron. It's as poisonous to them as silver is to us," Griffin said.

"So we dip our claws in iron?" Roman suggested.

Alaric shook his head, expression flat. "We're in an unknown realm. Where exactly do you expect us to find iron?"

"The guards carry it," Asher pointed out. "Their swords are iron. I noticed it yesterday. Though they keep them carefully sheathed."

The other three looked at him astonished. They'd barely settled, and he already had a contingency plan.

"So with all their magical prowess, they still need swords?" Alaric muttered, unimpressed.

"Magic can be incapacitated," Roman said.

"I know that. Just saying." Alaric smirked. "But that's the smartest thing you've said in a while."

Roman rolled his eyes. "Wow. Thanks, smarty panty-ass."

"Alright, enough," Griffin cut in, stepping between them before the bickering escalated. In his mind, they were two children in grown bodies. "It's time to focus."

With everyone settled, Asher stepped into the center and said, "We have a lot on our plate. First, Violet can't control her powers, yet she's expected to participate in a trial to claim her throne. Second, there's her stepfather, Baron. I'd bet my ass he's already plotting her death. And lastly, we have no idea how long we're expected to stay here, nor do we have a way out of here."

Roman raised his hand like a student in class.

Asher arched a brow. "What is it, Roman?"

"You forgot the annoying bird, Lucen," Roman reminded him.

At the mention of that name, Griffin and Alaric's faces twisted in disgust, a low growl rumbling from their throats, saying all that needed to be said about their feelings toward him.

"He's not a threat. Yet." Asher's eyes narrowed. "I trust you can handle him."

For the first time, Asher assigned Roman a task, one he knew the wolf would take great pleasure in.

A wicked glint flashed in Roman's eyes. "You can trust me with that," he said, intertwining his fingers, grinning.

Alaric shook his head. He wasn't so sure handing Roman that responsibility was wise. Well, he'd keep an eye on him, after all, the reckless snake had a talent for turning small missions into full-blown disasters.

"With everything that's happened," Asher said, "I'm confident Violet doesn't want this responsibility on her shoulders."

"I beg to differ," Griffin countered. "It's her birthright, whether she wants it or not. And we both know Violet, the tougher the challenge, the more determined she becomes. Give her a day or two. She'll bounce back."

"Griffin's right," Roman added. "Our mate's stubborn. No matter how brutal the trial is, she wouldn't want to be remembered as the princess who ran away."

"You're scared," Alaric said suddenly, his eyes fixed on Asher.

"What?" Asher tensed, almost defensive.

"You're scared she'll choose to stay in the Fae realm. And you're not sure how that would play out for you. For us. Because we can't live here. This isn't our home."

Alaric's words cut deep because they were true. Griffin and Roman's gazes drifted toward Asher, then away, each of them silently acknowledging the same fear.

A heavy tension settled between them, the dread tightening like a noose around their neck.

Griffin finally broke the silence. "We'll cross that bridge when we get there. For now, our priority's helping Violet win this trial and taking down that good-for-nothing Baron."

#### Chapter 669: A Little Act Of Service

"So how do we take down the big bad guy, Baron?" Roman asked, making exaggerated air quotes.

Alaric replied flatly, "We can't. His life's magically tied to the Queen or something like that."

"No wonder he walks around with a swagger," Griffin muttered. "He's got a free pass to commit crimes without fear of punishment from the crown."

"Well, he's a king, duh. What did you expect?" Roman said with a shrug.

"He's the Queen's consort," Asher corrected him. "Same thing we'd be once Violet takes the Alpha King position."

Roman's grin widened. "Fine by me. She can consort me all night long."

Alaric groaned and dragged a hand down his face. "We're trying to have a serious conversation here, man."

"And I'm saying," Roman went on, "if their lives are tied together, isn't there some way she can, I don't know, magically take his life for herself — whatever bibidi-babidi-boo stuff they do — and dump the bastard for real?"

At that, the other Cardinal Alphas froze.

That wasn't a bad idea.

"What?" Roman asked when they all stared at him like he'd just performed a miracle.

Alaric shook his head in disbelief. "Sometimes you're a stupid genius."

"I am?" Roman's expression brightened instantly.

"Don't let it get to your head," Alaric muttered, already regretting saying it.

Griffin asked Asher. "Would that even work?"

"I don't know," Asher admitted. "It sounds workable in theory. And I refuse to believe the Queen hasn't thought of it unless she's got some morbid attachment to the bastard. Being bound to someone, even your enemy, can be thrilling. Or maybe the procedure itself is too risky."

Asher exhaled, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "The point is, we're working blind. We don't know how things operate in this realm: the laws, the Queen's true capacity, or how far Baron is willing to go. I believe if I can combine brains with Queen Seraphira—"

"We," Roman interrupted.

Asher blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"You heard me." Roman said casually, "You're smart, yeah—but so's Alaric. And I just discovered I am too—"

"Oh, Goddess," Alaric muttered, dragging a hand down his face.

"—and Griffin's not bad either," Roman finished. "Together, we can come up with something. Everything's not all about you, Ash-baby." He winked at him.

Asher made a low growl in his throat before conceding, "Fine. If we can reason with Queen Seraphira, we might find a solution. The Fae have their own ways of thinking, but we come from another world with different perspectives and maybe that's what they need. But it'll only work if the Queen is willing to cooperate."

"You're right," Griffin said. "The Fae are as evasive as they are cunning. So far, they seem wary of us."

Before anyone could add more, the door swung open.

Violet stood there, her presence commanding the room. "Then I'll make her listen."

At once, four pairs of eyes locked on her.

Asher's voice rose. "Aren't you supposed to be resting right now?"

"Oh please," Violet rolled her eyes. "Like I'd stay in bed while you guys hold a meeting about me and expect me to stay quiet."

Roman stepped forward. "But your health—"

"I'm fine," Violet cut in, her voice firm.

Griffin, however, wasn't having it. "You had a real crisis out there, Violet. You might be strong, but even you need rest."

For the first time, all four of her mates were united against her. And though she wanted to argue, she could read the stubborn concern in their faces.

"Fine," Violet relented, sighing. "I'll rest. But after this. So hear me out."

From the look they gave her, she could tell they were seconds away from hauling her back to bed by force, but her pleading expression made them pause.

Violet began, "I know I scared you all back there, but I'm sorry—"

"You don't need to apologize, love," Alaric said softly. "None of that was your fault."

"I know," she murmured, "but I still can't help it. I dragged you all into this mess. None of you signed up for this."

"That's fucking bullshit, and you know it," Griffin cut in. "Your problem became ours long before you became our mate."

Alaric added, "You fought for me too, even before the bond clicked. So why would I ever let you face this alone?"

Roman said sheepishly. "I'm the one who put you in trouble on day one. If anyone should be apologizing, it's me. And though I can't promise I won't fall into another trap—definitely not pixie-made—but I'll try."

Then, as if they were taking turns, Asher finally spoke. "If this is about taking your place as the Fae princess, then I won't stop you. I just want to keep you safe. And I apologize for stepping out of line with your mother. I was only worried about your well-being."

"You're right," Violet admitted. "I don't know if I'm ready to take my mother's place. There's so much happening — not just in my life, but in ours — that I barely have time to breathe, let alone rule a realm. But..." she drew a deep breath, "I want to prove myself to the Fae. I finally got to see the other world I belong to, and I'm not ready to let go. I won't leave here with my tails between my legs, I'll shake this place hard enough they'll never forget Violet, their hybrid princess."

Roman and Griffin exchanged a look at that, identical smirks tugging at their lips. Even Asher and Alaric couldn't hide their reluctant smiles.

"Alright," Roman said, lifting his hand, "that's the Violet I know. Fine, we'll stay and win this 'Trial of Ascension,' or whatever ridiculous contest they throw your way. Who's in on this with me?"

Asher started, "Your mother—"

"Will listen to me," Violet cut in, determination hardening her tone. "I'll demand it of her. And if she refuses, I'll leave the realm with you all. I can't risk your lives. Not again."

That earned her four approving nods.

"Seems fair enough," Roman said, taking it upon himself to speak for everyone. "Now, if that's all, it's time for you to get back to bed, princess."

Before Violet could argue, he added with a mischievous grin, "Of course, if you're having trouble sleeping, I can offer a few err... alternative methods. I heard some interesting news about what you've been up to in my absence early this morning." His eyes darkened, a playful glint flashing through them. "So, what do you say to that, princess?"

## Chapter 670: Hungry Bond

Violet slept through most of the day. She should have known that would happen after letting Roman "help" her fall asleep.

Goddess knew he took far too much pride in pleasing her. Since they couldn't "do" it yet out of respect for Asher, Roman had found other, inventive ways to leave her satisfied. It was no wonder he'd earned the title God of Pleasure.

Not that she was complaining.

When Violet finally stirred, the bedroom was as silent as a graveyard. For a moment, panic ran through her until she realized her mates had probably left her to rest.

Sure enough, there was a note on the bedside table:

Sleep well, darling. We're taking the chance to explore the palace and will wake you when it's time for dinner with the Queen.

Xoxo, Asher. Roman. Alaric. Griffin.

Beneath it, another line was scrawled in a different hand: And Roman again.

Violet couldn't help the small snort of laughter that escaped her. Roman was as delightful as a child.

Well, since she was up, she might as well start preparing for dinner.

Violet slipped out of her clothes and walked naked to the bathroom. The Fae orbs glowed to life on their own, bathing the room in a soft, golden light. Since everything in the suite had been designed with human comfort in mind, it wasn't hard to run her bath.

There had to be something magical about the water here because the moment Violet settled into the tub, warmth enveloped her. The soothing sensation seeped deep into her bones, and she could have drifted there forever, untroubled.

The soap she used was a delightful mix of lavender and vanilla, the scents blending into a calm, sweet fragrance that filled the air. It was a luxury that made her forget, just for a moment, that she was in a foreign realm.

Violet murmured under her breath, "If only there was music, then the mood would be perfect."

No sooner had the words left her lips than a soft melody began to fill the room. A woman's voice rose in harmony with the swell of unseen instruments.

"What in the Fae..." Violet whispered, sitting up slightly.

Her gaze moved around the room, searching for the source, but there were no speakers, no orchestra, and no trace of magic she could pinpoint. The sound seemed to come from the walls themselves.

The realization made Violet laugh. The house's sentient, alright. That would take some getting used to.

The music was hauntingly beautiful, reminding her of the classical symphonies from earth realm, yet the lyrics were sung in the lilting, melodic language of the Fae.

That alone gave it an otherworldly pull, the voice seeming to reach right into her chest, tugging gently at her soul. So Violet closed her eyes, and let the music wash over her.

Violet had no idea how long she'd been soaking since the water never turned cold, probably enchanted to stay warm always.

She'd long since lost herself to the lull of the music when the sudden knock on the door broke her trance. She looked up, startled to see her sudden visitor.

Griffin stood there, leaning casually against the doors frame, his arms folded over his chest.

He gestured toward the door. "It was open. I took that as an invitation. Hope you don't mind."

Violet straightened instinctively, the frothy suds clinging just high enough to preserve her modesty. "Come in, then," she said.

Griffin pushed off the frame, stepping closer and as if the room itself had been waiting for that cue, the door swung shut on its own.

The golden glow of the Fae orbs deepened into a sultry red, and the gentle classical tune shifted seamlessly into a slow seductive tune. A deep voice joined the melody, and this time, the lyrics were unmistakably human and explicit.

"...you will drink from her breast forever..."

Violet was stunned at the swift changes.

Of course the house would choose that moment to get creative.

Not that Violet didn't want it, God, she did. But she didn't trust herself around her mates, alone. The bond had been pulling at her since her arrival but she couldn't give in.

And from the dark, smoldering look in Griffin's brown eyes, she knew he was fighting it too.

Griffin came to kneel beside the tub, his gaze softening as it met hers. Steam curled between them, carrying the scent of lavender and vanilla from the bath.

"Do you want help with your hair?" he asked, and waited anxiously.

Violet's throat tightened. She knew this was dangerous but she couldn't bring herself to say no. She only managed a small nod.

Griffin shifted behind her, his knees brushing the cool tile as he gathered her wet hair in his hands. His fingers combed through the tangles slowly, massaging her scalp in gentle circles.

A shiver ran down Violet's spine. Yes, his touch was amazing, even drawing out a soft, unguarded moan from her lips before she could stop it. But it also stirred desire inside of her.

Her nipples had beaded and the air between them thickened with tension. Violet closed her eyes, trying to steady her heartbeat, but it was useless. And when Griffin's hand left her hair and trailed down to clasp her breast, the breath left her lungs.

"Griffin..." Violet gasped, her chest rising and falling in uneven rhythm. The air was hot enough to make her skin tingle.

Just when she thought he might give in to the pull between them, Griffin froze. The stillness made her pulse trip.

He leaned close, his breath brushing her ear. "It's time to meet the Queen, princess."

Violet blinked, caught between disbelief and frustration. She saw right through his trick — he'd gotten her all hot and bothered on purpose.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

Griffin was already standing, the smirk on his face unmistakable as he turned toward the door.

"You!" she snapped, splashing water in his direction.

He only chuckled, clearly pleased with himself.

"Bastard!" Violet shouted after him.

The door swung open for him, then abruptly slammed shut, catching him in the face before creaking open again, unapologetically.

"Damn house," Griffin muttered, rubbing his nose as he left.

That, at least, gave Violet a spark of satisfaction. She rinsed off quickly, the smile tugging at her lips refusing to fade.

When she stepped out of the bath, she patted the smooth wall. "Good work," she murmured.

The structure gave a low, contented hum in reply, like a living creature pleased with her praise.

As soon as Violet stepped into the room, every gaze shifted to her. All four of her mates were there, and for a heartbeat, she froze.

Perhaps it was a good thing Griffin had stopped earlier, otherwise, she'd have a lot of explaining to do right now.

Roman was the first to move. His eyes darkened with unmistakable hunger as he closed the distance between them. The air seemed to pulse between their bodies. He brushed a slow kiss against her neck, right where Griffin's mate mark was etched against her skin.

Griffin stiffened instantly, jaw locking. He didn't need to see it; he could feel it through the bond, like an aftershock.

"Roman," he warned, his voice taut with control.

But Roman lingered, his breath brushing her skin as an animalistic groan escaped him, the kind that made Violet's pulse stumble. Every nerve in her body felt tuned to his presence. Without meaning to, her hand found his neck, fingers tightening as if drawn by instinct.

The space between them seemed to dissolve.

For a heartbeat, Violet forgot where she was. The mate bond thrummed through her, fierce and demanding, whispering that she didn't have to resist.

Across the room, Alaric and Asher exchanged a look. They knew exactly what was happening. You couldn't keep bonded mates in the same room and expect restraint. The pull between them was relentless, a living thread that tugged at their instincts and clouded their reasoning.

Roman let out a greedy sound, his fingers brushing the edge of Violet's robe, the intent clear in his eyes, until Alaric crossed the room in a flash and wrenched him back by the shoulder.

"Enough!" Alaric snapped.

Roman growled, chest heaving, while his eyes turned gold as if the wolf in him refused to stand down. For a tense heartbeat, the air pulsed with danger, the two alphas on the verge of clashing.

Then Alaric's words cut through the haze. "We have to meet the Queen. Remember?"

It was enough to break the spell. The fire in Roman's gaze dimmed, confusion and guilt flickering in its place. He exhaled roughly, stepping back.

Violet stood frozen, her heart pounding. Shame washed over her as she met Asher's gaze. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't know what —"

"It's okay," Asher said, his tone even but heavy with meaning. "Get dressed. The Queen's waiting for us."

Violet nodded, unable to speak. She turned away, grabbed her gown from the wardrobe and disappeared into the other room.