

Defy 671

Chapter 671: A Talk With The Queen

"Enough shame. You've done nothing wrong. It's your right to desire our mate and to claim each other without restraint," Thalia murmured in Violet's mind — bold, brazen, and entirely unhelpful.

Violet clenched her jaw and ignored her. The wolf's raw, unfiltered need had almost cost her control moments ago.

Thalia huffed. "You forget I'm a beast, Violet. I have needs."

Of course she did. Violet exhaled sharply.

She always forgot that her wolf wasn't some refined, reasonable creature. Thalia was primal and passionate, always pushing her straight toward mating — never pausing to consider the delicate group dynamic of having one unmated Alpha in their harem, the one they were all holding back out of courtesy.

"You know I can hear every single thought you're having," Thalia reminded her dryly.

Violet could practically feel the wolf roll her eyes.

"Just let me breathe, Thalia," she muttered inwardly.

Of course, silence answered her.

Then, with the same petulant attitude as a cat turning its back, Thalia retreated into the depths of her mind, giving Violet space, even if reluctantly.

Violet exhaled a hard breath, loud enough that Alaric's head snapped toward her.

"Are you okay?" he asked out of concern. Her jaw was clenched hard and he could sense the anger coming from her.

"Never been better," Violet gritted out as she strode toward the dining hall, her steps clipped with irritation. She was pissed. Beyond pissed.

She could forgive her mother for the years of absence, and for the secrets, but making it impossible for Asher to have sex with her without dying? That was insanity on a whole different level.

The one person she wanted the most, and she couldn't have him without putting his life at risk. They had to wait for the matebond to finally snap into place. Wait for a connection that, so far, showed no sign of forming.

So yeah, she was one spark away from exploding.

It must have been something in Violet's gaze, because Alaric didn't push further. The group was tense enough already. Even though Asher had said it was fine, a heavy pressure still hung in the air.

Roman was silent. Roman. Silent.

That alone told Violet how messed up everything was. He hadn't done anything wrong by wanting her, yet he was burdened with guilt he never asked for. Everything felt wrong and unfair.

Queen Seraphira's head snapped up the moment they entered the hall.

She was already seated at the head of the long table, glowing with power and poise. But the second her eyes landed on them, they narrowed instantly sensing the negative energy surrounding the group.

"Daughter," Seraphira said warmly, extending her hands.

Violet placed hers in the Queen's touch, and Seraphira pulled her into an embrace, but the hug was stiff, lacking the bright excitement of yesterday.

"Your Majesty," the cardinal alphas greeted one after the other, each bowing his head in respect.

"You are all welcome. Sit."

They obeyed, taking their places around the table. With Queen Seraphira at the head seat overlooking everyone, Violet sat at her right side, close enough for conversation.

Alaric sat beside Violet, his posture subtly protective, while across from her sat Asher, whose gaze never strayed from her. Then beside Asher was Griffin, and finally Roman, who claimed the last seat.

"The sleep did you well," Queen Seraphira's voice rippled through the hall, shattering the heavy silence almost instantly. "Your complexion is glowing now."

"Certainly not more than yours."

Violet meant it as a compliment, but the anger simmering inside her made the words come out more forcefully than she intended.

No matter the hour, the Queen was never anything short of flawless, her skin always luminous. She looked fresher than a newborn. Normally Violet would have admired it, but right now that glow only irritated her.

Seraphira noticed the edge in her tone but chose not to address it. "Well, thank you, princess."

The title hit differently today. Yesterday, Violet might have brushed past it. Even blushed, perhaps. But after their clash over her claiming the throne, she heard the message loud and clear. It was a push toward a role she hadn't asked for.

Asher cleared his throat, drawing her attention. "Your Majesty, we sent a message earlier requesting to speak with you."

"Yes," Queen Seraphira replied smoothly. "I received it. And it seems we have developed a habit of holding important discussions over meals."

The Queen clapped her hands, and on cue, the servants glided in, each carrying trays of food.

They set down vibrant yet strange Fae dishes. There were glowing fruit slices, leafy salads that released a soft floral scent, and bowls of broth that steamed with a blue hue. Alongside them came the heartier plates clearly meant for the werewolves, spiced boar ribs dripping in glossy sauce, and thick cuts of seasoned meat still sizzling from the fire.

No matter how furious she was, Violet's stomach betrayed her with a loud growl at the sight of so much mouthwatering abundance.

The servants moved quickly and efficiently, placing plates and filling their goblets with sparkling wine. Then, just as swiftly and quietly as they had entered, they left as if they had never been there at all.

"The meal be blessed. Let's dig in, shall we?" the Queen said, already lifting her utensils and taking the first bite.

Everyone followed silently, choosing their dishes. Violet watched as Alaric reached for the meat only to pause mid-movement, his gaze drifting to a strange Fae dish beside it. It looked harmless enough: a single green leaf, baked until crisp and dusted with a sparkling white powder that resembled crystallized sugar.

Violet understood the hesitation. Fae meals looked beautiful but strange, and werewolves were naturally drawn to meat, not magical salads.

Still, Alaric stabbed the leaf with his fork, lifted it, and took a tentative bite.

He chewed slowly. Then stopped.

The table froze with him.

Even though they had been spelled to safely eat Fae food, suspicion was in their bones. So when Alaric paused like that, every cardinal alpha—and Violet—went still, ready to abandon their plates if needed.

Then Alaric's eyes widened. A beat later, a look of pure bliss crossed his face, and he shoved the rest of the leaf into his mouth with zero dignity.

"Goddess above, it's fucking delicious," he declared, already reaching for another.

Violet nearly snorted. Of course. She forgot Alaric had a sweet tooth the size of Aster City.

Chapter 672: How You Hurt Me

That small action from Alaric brought a bit of warmth and activity into the room. Of course, Roman immediately reached for the dish, shoved the leaf into his mouth, and let out a moan while nodding in fierce approval.

Griffin, a foodie through and through, couldn't help himself. He took a bite and his eyes widened the moment the flavor melted across his tongue.

He said, "It's as if I'm eating caramelized honey combs blended with vanilla citrus," he said in awe. "Like the fancy holiday desserts in the human realm only this blows them all out of the water."

Violet didn't even realize she was smiling. There was something warm—almost proud—about watching her mates enjoy something from the Fae realm. Her realm.

Her gaze shifted to Asher, who finally, reluctantly, took a bite as if only to verify his brothers weren't exaggerating. Unlike the others, whose reactions were loudly expressive, Asher's face remained a perfect blank slate. Violet stared, waiting. And waited. And waited.

"So?" she demanded at last.

"So?" Asher echoed, straight-faced, as if he truly had no idea what she meant.

Violet narrowed her eyes. "The food? What do you think of it?"

Asher took a sip of water, completely unfazed. "Too sugary. Not a fan."

Violet nearly groaned. Was Asher born allergic to sweetness, or had Henry beaten the joy of sugar out of him? How was she supposed to fix that?

Before she could contemplate rehabilitating his taste buds, she caught Roman in the corner of her eye greedily stuffing more of the crystallized leaf salad into his mouth.

"Roman, enough," she scolded. "We just detoxed you from Fae sugar, remember?"

"Aww, man..." Roman slumped, looking genuinely heartbroken.

It was for his own good. Or so she thought until she saw him discreetly pocketing several more leaves.

"Roman!"

Roman winked, absolutely unbothered. "Relax. I'll have them in my shifted form. Raccoons don't get diarrhea, do they?"

Goddess help her. She was so done with him!

Alaric burst into loud, unrestrained laughter at Roman's raccoon comment. But halfway through it, the leaf he was chewing slipped the wrong way and his laughter cut off abruptly.

Then came the choking.

Alaric lurched forward, hand flying to his throat as violent coughs tore out of him. His pale skin flushed an alarming red, climbing fast from his neck to his ears.

Griffin shot up from his seat. "Goddess, he's choking!"

Chairs scraped loudly as everyone — except Queen Seraphira, who watched calmly — jumped to their feet.

"Give him water!" Asher barked, already circling the table.

Violet's hands moved before her mind did. She grabbed the nearest glass, filled it in a flash from the pitcher, and pressed it to Alaric's lips.

Alaric didn't just sip, he practically devoured the water, gulping frantically until the glass was empty.

"Another," he rasped, his voice raw.

Violet refilled immediately and shoved the next glass into his hands. He drained it too, his chest heaving, and breaths coming in harsh, desperate pulls. His hand pressed hard over his sternum, and rubbed it as if he was trying to force air back into his lungs.

"Alaric..." Violet leaned closer, worry tightening her features.

He coughed once more, then managed a strained, "I'm good now."

It was only then Alaric realized he wasn't in a chair at all. He had dropped to his knees beside the table during the choking incident.

Roman let out a low whistle. "That was a close one, brother."

Griffin cut him a look sharp enough to decapitate. "Not another word, Roman."

The warning was wrapped in pure Alpha authority and for good reason. There was a chaotic energy that clung to Roman like a curse and that had a way of dragging everyone else straight into trouble.

Roman wisely shut his mouth.

Violet finally exhaled, her shoulders slumping in relief. One by one, the room settled again, each of them returning to their seats with the kind of tense, rattled silence that followed a near-disaster.

Then Violet felt the weight of her mother's gaze pinning her from across the table.

She turned. "What?"

Queen Seraphira studied her with an expression caught between curiosity and astonishment.

"I have witnessed countless mate bonds among my people," the queen said slowly, "yet I have never seen one as chaotic and still as profoundly united as yours. It is as though the goddess could not decide whom to gift you to, so she simply gave you all of them and hoped you would sort yourselves out."

Then Violet blurted, "Is that why you didn't want us together? Is that why you created me to kill them?"

The words hit the table like a crack of lightning.

Queen Seraphira's throat bobbed. And for the first time since Violet arrived in the realm, she saw real, raw guilt crack beneath her mother's regal composure.

"Violet, listen—"

"No, you listen," Violet cut her off. "For once, just listen to how your decisions affected me."

She looked toward Asher, voice trembling. "Do you know the first time we had sex, I nearly killed him?"

Queen Seraphira opened her mouth to defend herself. "I didn't—"

"Do you know what it feels like to almost kill the man you love?" Violet's voice rose, fierce and breaking at the edges. "He had a brain aneurysm because I was born—created—for the sole purpose of killing him. Killing all of them. I would have killed them too if we weren't mated!"

Queen Seraphira's lips pressed together. This time, she said nothing and let Violet's hurt fall where it may.

"And even now..." Violet's voice cracked. "I can't even have him without the matebond."

The next words came out in a whisper.

"What if the matebond never comes...?" Then the prophecy rang in her mind and she corrected herself with a tremor, "What if it takes tears to form? How long do you expect him to wait?"

Emotion thickened her voice.

"Do you know how hard it is for him? Being the only unmated one in our harem? Do you know how much Asher has sacrificed for me?"

She shook her head, a tear slipping free.

"And I can't even be with him the way I want to. The way he deserves."

Violet's voice broke fully.

"That's how much you hurt me, Mother."

Chapter 673: About The Trial Of Ascension

There was silence in the hall now, the alphas caught in the charged tension between mother and daughter. Even their food lay untouched now, well, except Roman's.

He tried to set his spoon down gently, only for it to slip and clatter against the floor.

Every head snapped toward him.

Roman froze, then gave a sheepish laugh. "Uh—excuse me."

He bent to retrieve it, his chair scraping loudly across the floor.

The noise was so painfully out of place that even he winced. When he straightened, a Fae servant had already materialized beside him like a ghost, nearly making him jump.

The servant took the fallen spoon and placed a clean one in front of him before gliding away.

Roman looked around, his cheeks slightly pink. "Please—go on. Don't stop because of me."

Alaric shook his head in disbelief while Griffin blew out a slow breath, and Asher had his signature perpetual scowl on his face.

But the tension had eased just enough.

Violet hurriedly wiped her tears. She wasn't usually this emotional, and Roman's clumsy interruption had given her a moment to breathe.

Then, so softly it was easy to miss, the Queen whispered, "I'm sorry."

She turned to her mother, and the Fae Queen's amethyst eyes glimmered with a pain so deep it nearly stole Violet's breath.

"I'm sorry," Seraphira whispered. "I'm sorry that all I can offer you is an apology."

Violet's throat tightened, but no words came.

The queen pressed on.

"I was a naïve princess and perhaps I still am. I believed in the goodness of everyone. Your father knew that, and he manipulated me."

Her gaze shifted towards the Cardinal Alphas, regret shadowing her face.

"I never imagined you'd be mated to them. When I begged the goddess for a child, it was because your father wanted an heir powerful enough to rival the Cardinal Alphas. I demanded you be born strong enough to tip the scales."

Seraphira drew in a slow, trembling breath.

"But the gods and goddesses play cruel games. We are their entertainment. Their pieces on a board. Perhaps, deep down, I did not care if you destroyed the Alphas as long as it pleased my mate. And the goddess answered exactly that."

Violet's face contorted with hurt, a bitter realization creeping in.

"So in the end, you didn't want me. I was created only for a purpose, to be a weapon."

"Of course not!" Queen Seraphira burst out, her voice rising quickly, as if terrified the wrong idea might cement itself in Violet's mind. "Yes, you were conceived with purpose but we loved you. With everything in us."

Violet let out a bitter scoff. "You expect me to believe Angus loved me?"

"He did." Seraphira replied fiercely, her eyes locked onto Violet's. "Even with all his twisted ambition, he loved you."

Her tone suddenly softened, her expression almost wistful. "Blood of my blood, you were his heir. His little princess. His everything."

Conflicted emotions shone across Violet's face. The idea that the man she'd come to know as a monster—her father—might have truly loved her... it shook something loose in her chest.

No!

No, she would not let that soften her hatred. Not after everything he had done.

"What's the point of telling me this?" Violet demanded.

Seraphira leaned in, reaching across the table. Before Violet could pull away, the Queen clasped her hand firmly.

"Violet," she said with unmistakable conviction, "the point is that you are not a mistake. Maybe you were born for the wrong reasons, shaped by ambitions that were never yours to carry, but you were loved."

Her thumb brushed the back of Violet's knuckles, almost reverently.

"You were cherished from the moment you drew breath. You are my one and only beloved daughter, Violet."

But Violet leaned in as well, fixing her mother with a blazing stare.

"Then show it."

"What?"

"Show it." Violet pulled her hand free, but only to grip her mother's instead, squeezing hard, her voice carved from fury and resolve. "Stop keeping secrets from me. Stop treating me like some fragile child you can tuck behind your throne whenever things get messy."

"I have survived things you can't begin to imagine," Violet said, her gaze sliding proudly toward her mates. "We have survived things that should have broken us. And we came out stronger. Together, we're a force your entire court should fear."

Her eyes snapped back to the Queen, fierce as wildfire. "So don't mistake us for weak. Don't mistake me for weak. If I'm your daughter, then treat me like one. Tell me what this Trial of Ascension really is. I might not feel ready to rule, but I am no cowardly princess. So tell me everything I need to prove to the Fae that I am one of them."

Unlike the Queen, who sat momentarily stunned, the cardinal alphas were impressed as hell.

Yes, this was the Violet they knew. Fierce and unapologetic. Their purple queen.

"Fine," Queen Seraphira finally breathed. "No more secrets. I will tell you everything you need to know."

Violet exhaled a tight breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. Finally, she'd broken through the wall.

Asher subtly straightened in his seat, every sense sharpening, ready to absorb the answers he'd been chasing from the moment he heard about the trial.

"Among our people, the Trial is invoked during times of dispute — when heirs fight over a family title, or when an alleged successor must prove their claim to a throne in your case. It is a safeguard against impostors and illegitimate contenders.

"But you, Violet, you are not an illegitimate heir. Your father and I were properly mated and legally bound. Your birth was blessed, not hidden.

"However" her voice lowered, "because you were born outside the Fae realm, the Court demands that you prove your right to stand among us. They require that you undergo the Trial to confirm your royal birthright. If you are truly destined for the throne, you will survive it. If you are not, you will fall, and the remaining contenders will claim your place as the realm's princess."

"What?!"

Chapter 674: You Will Die

At once, the room exploded with overlapping voices, not just Violet's, but the cardinal alphas' as well.

"What?!"

"What do you mean by other contenders?"

"Contenders? Isn't Violet your only daughter?"

"Quiet."

The Queen's command cut through the air like a blade, and the hall fell instantly silent.

The Queen continued calmly, "A contention for the throne is far greater than the petty power shuffles of noble houses. Our crown is not passed down by bloodline alone. The throne belongs to whoever earns the people's favor and the blessing of the heavens. That is — and has always been — our law."

Her gaze slid to Violet.

"This time, you will not simply be proving your birthright. You will be competing against distant relatives and powerful fae who believe the era of my bloodline has ended. They think the heavens will choose them instead."

She drew in a slow breath.

"So yes, if you fall in the Trial, the victor will ascend the throne in your place."

"Seriously?" Violet threw her hands up. "You knew about this and you're just telling me now? How the hell am I supposed to compete with powerful faeries who have centuries of training and experience?"

"Exactly!" Roman chimed in with a nod — and the fact that Roman of all people agreed only proved how insane this was.

Queen Seraphira stayed composed. "The Trial is not won by brute power alone. It tests wit, courage, instinct, and favor. The goddess gave you to me for a reason, and deep inside, I know you were destined for this throne no matter what others say or do."

"Then forgive me," Asher cut in, "if I don't share your reckless faith." His slitted eyes glinted with anger. "Your daughter is dangerously unprepared for a trial that could kill her, and you're talking to me about luck?"

Griffin added instantly, "I'm a man of faith, Your Majesty, but this?" He gestured toward Violet. "Even I can't pretend this makes sense. Violet is not prepared. Simple as that."

Alaric followed immediately, his voice cold. "Don't use faith as a shield for your failure to prepare your daughter. That is irresponsible and it puts her life in danger."

Queen Seraphira hissed, offended. "I am not foolish enough to throw my daughter into death's door without preparation. Which is exactly why her training begins tomorrow."

"I will evaluate how many abilities she currently holds, and try to draw out others that may lay dormant. Then I will assign multiple tutors to hone every Fae skill she possesses. Meanwhile, I will work on buying more time for her."

"Violet is a hybrid," Asher said firmly. "You can't focus solely on her Fae half and ignore the other. Her wolf might be the very advantage that tips the scales in this trial. So we will be contributing to her training."

Asher met the Queen's gaze head-on, refusing to budge. It was a silent dare that said, 'tell me no, and see what happens'.

After a beat, Queen Seraphira replied. "Fine. Train her as you see fit. Nothing is too small."

Her tone made it painfully obvious she didn't believe their training would make much difference, but the cardinal alphas let it slide. Tonight already held enough conflict.

"Princess Violet," Roman teased her, "I'd say your days ahead are about to be intense.

Hopefully, you're ready for some aggressive training."

Violet managed a small smile, but the breath she released was heavy. She'd hoped that finally speaking with her mother would lift the weight she'd been carrying yet somehow, it felt like even more had been added to her shoulders.

Alaric suddenly asked. "Tell me, Your Majesty, what exactly does this trial look like? Is it a single fight-to-the-death duel, or does it come in stages?"

Griffin followed immediately, his eyes narrowing with tactical concern.

"And how transparent is this competition? Who oversees it? If one of the contenders tries something dirty like sabotage, poisoning, or an illegal spell? How would we know? How would Violet be protected?"

Asher asked precisely, "More importantly, how do we ensure your husband doesn't use the trial as an excuse to eliminate Violet?"

He went on to say, "Baron already has a history of trying to harm Violet, forgive me if I'm not comfortable with a trial where anything can go wrong."

Roman chimed in, rapid-fire as always.

"And can someone drop out?"

Violet said to him, "I'm not dropping out."

But Roman gestured vaguely. "I know. Just saying, what if one of the contestants suddenly decides they don't want to be, you know, murdered for the throne?"

"All of your questions are valid," Queen Seraphira smiled, "And it fills my heart with the utmost joy to know my daughter has four protectors who care so fiercely for her."

Then she turned to Alaric.

"As for your question, the Trial of Ascension is conducted in three stages. The first stage is fixed, unchanged for centuries. Every heir, every contender begins there. But the second and third stages..." she exhaled, "...are determined by the Free Fae Council. They deliberate, argue, and ultimately choose the remaining trials without interference from the crown. This is to prevent favoritism, corruption, or any attempt to manipulate the outcome."

Her eyes found Violet this time, "It ensures no ruler, not even I, can shape the challenges to benefit my heir. The trials are meant to reveal destiny, not manufacture it."

"Then what's the first stage?" Violet asked.

Queen Seraphira answered.

"The Ascension of Death."

A cold stillness swept through the table. The cardinal alphas exchanged looks, and for once, none of them had words to say. The name alone was too ominous.

Seraphira continued, "It is considered the simplest stage, yet paradoxically the most dangerous. Contenders undergo a spiritual passage, a direct encounter with Death itself."

Asher's entire body tensed. "Death?" He didn't like this. "Explain."

"Contestants are sent into the realm of the dead. They would walk among the spirits of our ancestors and speak to them. And from those ancestors, they must receive a blessing — a recognition of worthiness — to participate in the trial."

Roman let out a strained laugh. "You're joking, right?"

But the Queen didn't so much as blink.

Violet swallowed. "And if I don't get their blessing?"

Seraphira's answer was calm and merciless.

"Then you will not return. You will die."

Chapter 675: Get A Blessing From An Ancestor

The news was not taken well by the cardinal alphas, but Asher was the one most affected.

"This is fucking bullshit!" he exploded, slamming his hand against the table so hard the plates rattled.

He shot to his feet, eyes dark and wild.

"No. Absolutely not," he growled, his voice thick with rising panic. "I will not allow it. You're not going anywhere."

On a battlefield, he could reach her. Protect her and tear apart anything that threatens her. But the Land of the Dead? How was he supposed to get to her there? What could he possibly do if something went wrong in a realm he couldn't even step into?

The helplessness — even the mere idea of it — wrapped around his throat like a chokehold.

Griffin said, worry etched across his face.

"Asher. Breathe."

Asher stared down at his hands. His entire arm trembled violently, his chest rising and falling in ragged, uneven pulls of air.

"Fuck," he muttered, turning away quickly as humiliation burned through him.

Losing control like this in front of the Queen... in front of Violet... in front of his brothers... This wasn't him. This wasn't the Alpha he'd spent years forging himself into.

But he couldn't stop it. The tremor wouldn't ease because the truth was brutal and unforgiving:

This was what fear looked like on him.

The fear of losing Violet.

The fear that no strength, no strategy, and no power he possessed could protect her from this.

The fear that he might not get her back.

It was suffocating and dragged him into a dark, spiraling abyss.

He couldn't lose Violet.

He couldn't.

She was the reason he breathed, the reason he clawed through every day of his life, the only light that had ever cut through the shadows he'd lived in since childhood. She was the only person who had ever truly seen him.

If she died in some realm he could not reach, it wouldn't just break him.

It would end him.

There would be no coming back from that.

And he would never forgive himself for agreeing to this insanity. For letting her step into danger he couldn't fight beside her in.

The thought alone hollowed him out.

Then a hand clasped gently around his face and like a faint light cutting through the abyss, there she was.

Violet. Shining. His anchor.

"Shh," she whispered softly. "I'm not going anywhere, Asher. I'm Violet, remember?"

She gave him a small, reassuring smile before pulling him into her arms.

At first, his hold on her was loose, and then, he crushed her against him, arms tightening with desperate strength. Violet gasped at the pressure, but she didn't complain and held him just as tightly.

He buried his face in her neck, inhaling her scent like oxygen. She smelled like home.

Like clean linen fresh from sunlight, still carrying that warmth that felt like hope.

They stayed like that for a long moment, and when he eventually drew back, the tremors had stopped. His breathing had steadied, and his mind felt clearer.

But gods, the embarrassment hit him hard.

Asher had always acted like the strongest one among them, and yet a single moment of fear had brought him crashing down.

But then Violet took Asher's hand, and Griffin, reading the situation instantly, nudged Roman with an elbow. Roman slid over to the next chair, allowing Griffin to shift into his seat and open a space beside Asher.

Violet immediately filled it, settling next to him with their fingers intertwined.

Across from them, Alaric now sat alone, but he didn't complain. If anything, he was relieved that everything was under control.

Seated between the West and East Alpha, Violet also reached for Griffin's hand. Holding both of them gave her a courage she didn't even realize she'd needed.

"How am I supposed to have the upper hand in this round?" Violet asked. "I don't even know these ancestors you're talking about."

Queen Seraphira told her, "Your tutors will educate you thoroughly on our lineage and customs. They will teach you how to present yourself before the ancestors, how to speak to them, and how to appeal to their judgment."

"Does she really have to do all this?" Roman asked, incredulous. "They're her ancestors. Shouldn't they be her biggest supporters? It's already insane that the victim has to die if they don't get approval."

"The ancestors are ancient, Alpha Roman." Queen Seraphira told him directly, "They are not swayed by blood alone. Power does not impress them. They value courage, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and clarity of purpose. If a descendant stands before them with nothing but truth and conviction, they will not turn away."

"Some of them ruled long before I was born. They had their own beliefs, their own standards, and they hold tightly to them. That is why Violet must appeal to them. They are wise but also stubborn."

Roman frowned. "Still doesn't explain the whole dying part."

"It does," the Queen said. "The ancestors dwell in eternal rest. Summoning them for the trial is already a grave disruption. If you face them unprepared and waste their time, then yes, the penalty is death. It is their law. The punishment is non-negotiable."

"And are these ancestors partial to a hybrid?" Alaric asked, his tone edged with challenge. "We took the chance to look around before coming here. Your walls have ears—and mouths. We heard plenty about how the free Fae aren't exactly welcoming to outsiders. So how do you think Violet will fare before ancient fae whose minds might be even more rigid?"

Asher muttered under his breath, barely containing his frustration. "Told you I don't like this."

Violet stroked his palm, slow and soothing. She had already made up her mind; nothing they said would change that.

Queen Seraphira replied, "Violet only needs the blessing of one ancestor. I refuse to believe every single one of them would be prejudiced against her."

Alaric arched a brow, unimpressed. "Says the Queen who lived in the human realm and fell in love with a werewolf. Have you forgotten some of your people haven't stepped foot outside this realm? Many of them died with the same beliefs they were born with. And the ancestors you speak of are thousands of years older. If the living Fae can be biased, wouldn't the dead ones be worse?"

Chapter 676: Baron Won't Touch Her

"Guys," Violet said firmly, cutting through the tension gathering in the room again. "Arguing about this all night won't take us anywhere. I've already decided, I'm doing this."

All four cardinal alphas immediately broke into heated protest.

But Violet held up a hand. "I know you're worried. Truly, I do. But other heirs before me survived this Trial, so why can't I? It's not an impossible task."

Their outrage dropped to grumbling. They were still unhappy, sure, sure, but not close enough to flip the table.

Violet lifted her chin, stubborn confidence settling into her spine. "Besides, have you forgotten who raised me? Nancy could talk the stripes off a zebra. There was no way in hell I couldn't talk at least one ancestor into giving me their blessing. No one survives an argument with me."

This time, the cardinal alphas had no more arguments left. Their mate's mind was set, and any further protests would fall on deaf ears. And truthfully, beneath all the fear and frustration, they wanted her to win this. To claim what was hers.

All they could do now was stand beside her and fight for her every step of the way.

"Fine, do it. It's not like we can stop you anyway," Roman grumbled.

Violet gave him a grateful smile.

Then she turned to Alaric, whose chin was set stubbornly, waiting for his response.

"If any stubborn ancestor stands in your way, tell them you have a mate who'll zap their ass if anything happens to you."

Violet burst into laughter, and she didn't have to wait long for Griffin to add his own brand of devotion.

"You heard Alaric," he said. "Even the land of the dead won't be safe from us if any ancestor dares to call you unworthy. Because we see what they clearly don't, Violet, you're too damn good for that throne."

"No," Asher corrected, his voice turning frost-cold, every syllable edged with lethal promise. "It's the Fae realm that won't be safe if anything happens to her."

This time his gaze fixed on the Queen. "You'd better have everything under control because your kingdom will regret the day it has me as an enemy."

Silence slammed into the hall.

Yes, Asher had just threatened the Queen of the Free Fae, and the reaction was instant.

Violet could feel the sudden vibration in the air, as the magic thickened, and responded to the Queen's fury.

But she was not the only one with powers.

At the same moment the Queen's magic surged, static lifted in the air subtly at first, then began a loud hum that vibrated against the walls. Alaric didn't move from his seat, yet the atmosphere shifted around him like the world was tilting toward a storm.

His eyes changed. A pulse of lightning flickered inside them and strobed once, twice, warning the Queen that he would come to his brother's aid if it came down to them.

"Enough!" Violet shouted.

At once, the magic in the room faltered as Alaric's lightning dimmed and the Queen's power stilled mid-air.

"No more fighting," Violet said, her gaze sweeping across all of them. "We came here for a purpose, not to destroy each other before the Trial even begins."

Queen Seraphira's amethyst eyes shifted to Asher. "You," she said calmly, though her magic still rippled under her skin, "do well to mind your tone, Alpha. You forget whose realm you stand in."

Asher's jaw tightened, a sharp retort already shaping on his tongue.

"But..." the Queen continued, her tone softening ever so slightly, "you speak with the desperation of a man who loves deeply. I cannot fault you for that."

Asher blinked, taken aback.

"However," Seraphira's voice sharpened once more, "threaten my realm again, and you will see just how fiercely I defend it."

Asher swallowed whatever insult he was about to unleash. Then he lowered his gaze, choosing peace for once.

The Queen exhaled and then turned to Griffin.

"As for your concerns," she said, "participants are sworn by ancient oath not to harm one another unless the stage of the competition demands it. Any attempt at sabotage outside those bounds is forbidden.

"In your world, you have televised broadcasts. We have our own methods. Every moment of the Trial is observed. If a contender is even suspected of attempting to harm another unjustly, they will be expelled immediately and sentenced to death."

A hush fell again.

"To a degree," the Queen finished, her eyes finding Violet's, "you are protected, daughter. From contenders who might have ideas."

Violet nodded. That was relieving to a point.

Asher asked, "And your husband? Baron."

"Baron is another problem altogether," she admitted. "As you already know, our lives are intertwined. If I move against him too harshly, I suffer the same consequences."

"So you'd let your daughter get hurt because of that excuse?" Asher snapped.

Queen Seraphira's eyes flashed with annoyance. "I have assigned guards around Violet who would sooner die than allow my husband to lay a single finger on her."

She added. "And it may interest you to know that Baron will not openly harm Violet for now. Not when he knows I am gathering evidence to bring him before the High Court. The slightest misstep on his part, and I will have lawful grounds to strip him of his power."

Asher didn't look convinced.

The Queen continued, "His greatest hope now is that Violet fails the Trial and dies. That is the only victory left for him. And that," she said with startling certainty, "is not going to happen."

Griffin raised a brow. "You sound awfully sure about that."

Queen Seraphira smiled. "I know the child the goddess gave me. Violet is not destined to die like this."

Violet flushed, her heart giving a small, startled flutter. Her mother's faith in her was unexpectedly warm and terrifying. She only hoped she could live up to it.

"Now, there is another matter."

Everyone straightened.

"On the day you five arrived..." The Queen said, "you were not the only ones who crossed into my realm."

"What?"

Chapter 677: Your Wish Came True

Hannah was dead asleep in her cell when a bucket of ice-cold water was splashed over her.

"Fuck!" She jerked upright with a strangled gasp, the shock ripping through her so hard she slapped her palms against the floor to keep from sliding.

Water dripped from her lashes as she snapped her head up—and oh, well, there he was.

The lion shifter stood outside her cell, staring at her with all the emotion of a broken toaster, an empty bucket dangling from his hand.

That bargain-bin Mufasa!

"Are you fucking insane?!" Hannah spat, hair plastered to her face and breath puffing out in furious shivers. "What the hell is wrong with you?!"

Her fists clenched until her knuckles whitened, her glare sharp enough to skin him alive even as the cold gnawed through her soaked clothes and made her whole body tremble.

But Taryn wasn't moved by her anger. He calmly set the bucket down and asked with a voice cold as steel, "Are you ready to talk now, human? Why are you here?"

Hannah looked up at him, amused. Then she pushed herself to her feet and walked to the front of the cell.

"I told you," she drawled, "I'm not saying a word until you get me Violet. She's the only one I'll speak to."

She leaned her elbows against the bars, tilting her head, staring at him with unbothered arrogance.

Hannah knew her attitude infuriated him. She saw it in the subtle flare of his nostrils. He was good at keeping his face blank, but she had trained herself to read people. And right now, he was at his wits' end with her.

Since they captured her, they'd been trying to get her to talk. And honestly, Hannah considered it a miracle they hadn't tried physical torture yet — maybe even creatures like them had laws about hitting a child. Not that she was exactly a child. Well, whatever.

Or maybe because she hadn't actually harmed anyone, their options were limited. Earlier today they'd even dragged in someone with magic to dig into her mind, but Hannah resisted with everything in her and they left frustrated.

But staring into Taryn's icy blue eyes now, something told her he wouldn't hesitate to hurt her if the need came.

"Also," Hannah continued, "if you wanted to get me naked, all you had to do was say the word. You didn't need to start with water foreplay." She winked at him.

To be honest, Hannah had no idea what the hell had come over her. She did not usually flirt with men who locked her up — not that she had many chances to flirt with boys back in Duskmoon Village — but annoying Taryn brought her a weird sort of satisfaction.

At first, it looked like he didn't understand what she meant. Then his gaze dragged over her soaked clothes clinging to her body, and instead of desire, his eyes darkened with pure rage.

"You insolent human," he hissed.

Before she could blink, he was at the bars, his hand shooting through the gap to clamp around her jaw. The grip was so tight her eyes watered, but Hannah didn't flinch. She stared straight back at him, fierce and unyielding.

"The only reason you can still run that mouth," he said through clenched teeth, "is because the Queen hasn't given her orders yet. You think you're tough? I haven't even begun with you."

His grip tightened, the anger in his eyes turning lethal. "Moreover, I'm not interested in children."

"A year and two months," Hannah blurted.

Taryn's brows snapped together. "What?"

"Then I won't be a child anymore," she shot back, lifting her chin. "Would you be interested then?"

Why in the world had she said that?

Hannah had no idea. Something had to be wrong with her head. Maybe because she had zero experience with men, here she was flirting with the first one she found attractive — even if he was probably a hundred years older than her, and couldn't wait to hurt her.

Yeah, the Angus bloodline had to be cursed to desire something like this. There was no running from it.

Taryn was dumbfounded. His mouth opened as if he wanted to say something only to shut it again. And even though his grip was tight on her jaw, Hannah felt the tiny movement of his thumb as it brushed over her throat once.

He froze as the first was a mistake. Then when she didn't flinch, he did it again.

A slow, deliberate drag of his thumb over her pulse.

Hannah swallowed hard. Oh, she was so, so screwed.

Her heart hammered violently, heat rushing up her neck. He was so stupidly handsome she could stare at his face for hours. Tall, dangerous, and infuriatingly gorgeous— he was exactly the kind of man she would fall for if she lived long enough to date anyone. And Goddess, he smelled good. Like insanely good it made her stomach flutter.

Then suddenly, as if waking from a trance, Taryn jerked back like he'd been burned.

And in the next second, he snarled, a deep feral sound ripping from his chest as his features shifted, feline and terrifying.

Hannah yelped, stumbling back. "Geez, what is wrong with you?!"

"Touch me again and I'll snap your neck," he growled, eyes gleaming with a predator's warning.

"Technically, you were the one touching me, asshole!" she shot back.

He bared his teeth at her again, though the anger wasn't as intense as before, more like confusion mixed with frustration.

So Hannah—being Hannah—snarled back. Granted, she didn't have fangs, just human teeth, but she still showed them anyway.

A pathetic display, actually, considering she technically counted as human. Not all Half-breeds manifested a wolf, and if they did, it wasn't until eighteen.

So at sixteen-and-a-half, Hannah had nothing but her attitude and a slightly above-average strength thanks to her diluted werewolf gene. Thank you father. Which was exactly why everyone back home thought she was easy to handle.

Suddenly, another guard rushed in and leaned close to Taryn, whispering something into his ear. Not that Taryn's gaze ever left her.

Hannah had no idea what she'd done to make this man hate her with the fire of a thousand suns—she'd been here barely a day, for crying out loud.

Taryn's jaw tightened as he listened, his expression changing for the briefest second before settling back into that cold, carved-from-stone glare. Then he straightened, dismissing the other guard with a flick of his hand.

He looked right at her, his eyes gleaming with an emotion she couldn't name.

"Well," he said, lips curving into a wry, almost cruel smile, "lucky you. It seems your wish came true after all."

Chapter 678: One Happy Family

A dozen scenarios flashed through Violet's mind at once.

Who could have followed them here? If even Lila couldn't identify the girl, then this had to be someone completely unfamiliar.

And suddenly, it clicked in her head. Those moments back in the North when she had felt those strange, prickling sensations, like eyes were on her. She had dismissed them then, too caught up in the problems surrounding her to dwell on them.

But now, it all slammed together in her mind with chilling clarity. She had been followed. Violet just hadn't realized it until this exact moment.

They followed the Queen through the halls of the palace, the entire place an epitome of refinement and ethereal grace. But the beauty didn't last long because the deeper they walked, suddenly the air grew colder, heavier and darker.

The once luminous walls now dulled into rough, shadowed brick. Even the magic here felt harsher, as if whatever lived in these depths didn't deserve the palace's warmth.

At the end of the corridor stood a single guard. He straightened upon sighting them and bowed his head.

"Your Majesty."

His gaze moved to Violet.

"My Princess."

Violet acknowledged him with a small tilt of her head, nothing more. Her stomach was already too tight to manage words.

The guard stepped aside, and the massive iron door behind him groaned open on its own as the magic controlling the mechanism pulled it apart.

Queen Seraphira walked in without hesitation.

The dungeon reacted to her presence.

One by one, orbs embedded in the walls flared to life, illuminating row after row of empty cells.

"For a place this huge you lack prisoners," Roman pointed out.

"The Free Fae believe in peace, not violence," the Queen explained. "So we settle most disputes through mediation, and when matters are severe enough to require judgment, the accused is sworn before our gods. If they are guilty, the gods strike immediately. That is why we have no prisoners, Alpha. The guilty don't live long enough to fill them."

That confession drew everyone's attention. That was not what they had been expecting

Alaric said, "Avoiding violence isn't always wise. Violence has its place. It exposes truth faster than any diplomacy. It keeps tyrants cautious, cowards in line, and reminds a kingdom that consequences still exist."

He glanced at the empty cells.

"A ruler needs mercy, yes, but also the power to enforce their will. Without that balance, a realm becomes predictable, and predictable kingdoms are the easiest to exploit."

The Queen halted mid-step and turned to Roman.

"You may not know this, but the average Fae can bear only one child in their lifetime. If the gods are generous, perhaps two."

Violet froze. Even the alphas stilled.

"Everything demands balance, and you cannot have powerful Faeries overwhelming the realm unchecked," the Queen continued. "Childbearing is difficult, and rare. Unlike humans, who multiply freely, our numbers are fragile. Hence every life lost sets us back generations."

She gestured to the empty cells.

"So imagine what happens if we embrace violence as freely as your kind does. We would not merely suffer casualties, we might as well edge ourselves into extinction."

"Well, thank the gods I'm a hybrid," Violet breathed out, visibly relieved. She—who planned to birth an entire community—couldn't even begin to imagine popping out just one child in her entire lifetime. Nah, that was not happening.

"Then perhaps," Asher said dryly, his gaze sliding to her with pointed emphasis, "you should consider cohabiting with species who can help grow your population."

"Don't worry, Alpha Asher," the Queen said calmly, unfazed by the barb. "There will come a day when the Free Fae will gladly welcome strangers into our fold. You'd see it."

Then the Queen turned and continued walking before the West Pack Alpha could open his mouth again. She'd already learned Asher had a natural gift of speaking the kind of blunt truth designed to grate on one's nerves.

They passed dozens of deserted cells until finally, the Queen stopped.

Before them stood the only occupied cell.

A very handsome Fae stood in front of it, straight-backed and alert. The moment he saw the Queen, he bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty."

"Rise Taryn."

He straightened, eyes falling on Violet.

"Princess."

Violet bowed slightly, acknowledging him.

Then Taryn gestured, "She's the one."

Violet inhaled, steadying herself. It was time to see who followed her into the Fae realm.

Taryn stepped aside granting Violet an unobstructed view of the cell. At first, she saw nothing but the silhouette of the prisoner since the inside was dark. However, she could make out the girl.

Violet took a single step forward.

The girl too moved into the spill of the light and they met for the first time. She had raven-black hair, sharp cheekbones, and beautiful dark brown eyes. There was something about her that felt familiar but Violet couldn't exactly place her fingers around it.

"Hello, Violet," the girl said casually, as if greeting an old friend at brunch rather than speaking to her through iron bars. "Nice to finally meet you."

Violet frowned immediately. "Who are you?"

The girl tilted her head in amusement, the corner of her mouth lifting in a knowing smirk. "Honestly, I thought the face would give it away. But then again..." She shrugged lightly. "Since you want to know—"

Her fingers curled around the bars, her gaze fixed on Violet with unnerving certainty.

"I'm Hannah..." She paused, "I'm your sister."

The words hit Violet like a physical blow.

Her breath stuttered. Her feet moved back on instinct, her heartbeat slamming against her ribs. Sister? No—no, Angus sent her after her?!

Behind her, the cardinal alphas tensed instantly, inhales echoing through the dungeon. But it was Queen Seraphira who reacted most violently.

The Queen's hand flew to her mouth, eyes wide with shock and horror.

"No..." Seraphira whispered under her breath, barely audible. "Angus had other children?" She had always believed Violet was his only beloved child—blood of his blood and all.

But Hannah only smiled wider, her eyes glinting like a secret finally set free.

"Surprised?" she asked sweetly. "Well, I'm so excited to finally meet my sister!"

Chapter 679: Sent To Kill Her

As soon as the shock wore off, anger surged through Violet like fire.

"You!" Violet jabbed a finger at the girl. "She's Angus' daughter! She was sent to kill me."

Violet didn't just say it, she announced it.

Immediately, the cardinal alphas' posture went taut. Their eyes hardened like steel, and the temperature in the dungeon dropped with how lethal they suddenly felt.

If looks carried physical power, Hannah would've been six feet under already.

"What?" Hannah blanched. "No! I—"

But Violet let out a humorless chuckle. "Please. Do you think I don't know about the army of children Angus manufactured? What did you expect? That I'd welcome you with open arms just because we share DNA? So you can stab me in the back later? News flash, I saw that one coming before you even opened your mouth."

"No, no, you don't understand," Hannah said quickly, desperation bleeding into her voice. "I wasn't sent here to kill you. Sure, Ziva sent me to keep an eye on you—"

"Ziva," Violet hissed, the name tasting like poison on her tongue. She had never even met this sister of hers face-to-face, yet

hatred spiked in her chest.

Hannah swallowed hard at the murderous look in Violet's eyes. This was not going how she planned.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Taryn smirking, clearly enjoying her misery way too much.

Her jaw tightened. "The point is..." she managed through gritted teeth, "I followed you here on purpose to talk, and tell I'm on your side."

Taryn chimed in. "It sure didn't look that way when you were sneaking around like some sewer rat trying not to be seen."

Hannah closed her eyes and dragged in a long, suffering breath. That fucking bargain-bin Mufasa was beginning to get on her nerves.

"I don't mean any harm!" Hannah blurted.

"I'll be the judge of that," Asher said, stepping forward, a menacing energy around him.

It was instinct the way Hannah retreated deeper into her cell quickly. She already knew what Asher was capable of, and didn't like him one damn bit.

Asher's gaze followed the motion like a predator noting prey. "You wouldn't be afraid if you had nothing to lose."

Hannah hissed back, lowering her gaze from Asher, "Sorry if I don't trust you enough not to compel me into killing myself. I know exactly what you are, puppet master."

Asher didn't even flinch at the insult. He replied unbothered, "Perhaps, you should."

"Fine," Violet said. "I'll vouch for you. Asher won't harm you, and only ask the necessary questions."

Hannah stiffened, unsure.

Alaric picked up on it immediately. "It's the only way we'll trust you."

"Yes, Violet's little sister," Roman chimed in, stepping behind Asher and placing two large hands on his shoulders as if warming up a fighter before a match. "We can do this the peaceful way, which is honestly easier for you." His thumbs pressed into Asher's tense muscles. "Or Asher..." he squeezed pointedly, "...will still break your will and get what he wants."

Roman ended with a bright, unhelpful grin.

Hannah's eyes flicked between all four alphas, panic and calculation warring in her expression. Finally, her gaze landed on Violet, the only lifeline in the room.

"You'd really not allow him to hurt me?" she asked, cautiously hopeful.

"If you're afraid of him ending your life," Violet said simply, "then you're safe."

Hannah swallowed hard.

Because she understood what Violet was saying : She - Violet - would keep her alive. But "alive" did not mean "unhurt."

With the four alphas, she had absolutely no leverage. And she knew it.

All Hannah could do was nod slowly, resigned. She was painfully aware that she was very much at their mercy.

"Fine. Let's do this." Hannah said, stepping out with a brave face she absolutely did not feel. Honestly, what more could they do to her that her siblings hadn't already perfected? Pain was practically a family tradition.

"Your Majesty," Taryn called, drawing the Queen's attention.

Seraphira blinked out of whatever thoughts had dragged her away. "Excuse me?" she murmured, clearly not having heard him. She looked shaken but Taryn, ever disciplined, didn't remark on it.

Violet and the cardinal alphas exchanged glances. They said nothing, but it was obvious that discovering her mate had fathered other children—children she knew nothing about—definitely shook the queen.

So much for lecturing Violet earlier about "Angus" fatherly love.

Taryn clarified, "Permission to release the prisoner for questioning by the West Pack Alpha."

A heavy silence followed long enough for Violet and the alphas to tense. For a moment, it genuinely looked like the Queen might deny it.

Then, finally, Seraphira nodded once. "Release her for questioning."

The dungeon mechanisms responded instantly as metal groaned, gears clicked, and the lock disengaged. The iron bars slid apart with a slow, ominous scrape.

Hannah hesitated only a heartbeat before taking a few steps that officially put her outside the cage and fully inside the lion's den.

All her bravado vanished the moment she stood face to face with the Queen, the annoyingly handsome Mufasa, Violet Purple, and her men. It was seven against one.

Her pulse raced, her palms turned clammy, and for a split second Hannah was genuinely tempted to bolt. But common sense reminded her that running would only make things worse, so she might as well face her enemies now.

She lifted her chin and showed no fear. "Well, let's get the party started."

Asher smirked, amused by the girl's fake bravado.

He stepped in front of her. "Stare into my eyes and leave your mind open. It'll make things easier for both of us."

Hannah took a deep breath and met his gaze as requested. She couldn't help but admit—his eyes were strange, and hauntingly beautiful. It was the kind of sight that carved itself into the mind and never left.

Except the longer she stared into those slitted eyes, the more the edges of her thoughts blurred until her will slipped right out of her hands.

Just like that, Hannah was compelled.

Then Asher began, "Who the fucking hell are you?"

Chapter 680: Spill Everything

Although Violet had seen this scene play out countless times, it still stunned her every single time Asher compelled someone. It was a window straight into who he was at his core. No wonder he craved control. Control was powerful — and dangerously sexy.

The idea that someone's mind, their choices, their very life sat in the palm of your hand and all it took to end it was a simple command? That was an intoxicating power.

And it was no surprise Asher reveled in it.

"Who the fucking hell are you?" Asher asked.

"My name is Hannah," she answered flatly. "I don't know who my birth mother is, whether she's dead or alive. Angus ripped me from her hands the moment she delivered me. He thought I'd become something powerful, but in the end, I'm just like every weak half-breed out there."

Violet's jaw tightened. She was still deeply suspicious of this girl but hearing that, something in her chest twisted anyway.

Growing up with their monster of a father, she could only imagine the kind of hell that must have been.

"How long have you been following Violet?"

"Why are you? What is your motive?" Asher interrogated her in that tone of his that meant business.

Hannah's pupils dilated, her body going slack as the compulsion dragged her deeper. And she spoke without hesitation.

"I... I started following her a few days after she and Alaric arrived at the North Pack," Hannah said mechanically. "Ziva sent me after her. She wants me to keep her informed about Violet's every movement."

A deep frown marred Violet's face. To think the girl followed her for this long and she didn't notice. She had to be more aware of her surroundings from now on.

"Why?" Asher demanded.

Hannah continued, her voice hollow under the influence. "Ziva is jealous of Violet, not that she admits it. She hates that Violet is Father's most powerful daughter. I don't know exactly what she wants, but it's probably not good. However...."

Then her breathing hitched as if her body fought the truth that her mouth was forced to spill.

"Go on," Asher ordered, his tone forceful.

"Ziva doesn't know I have plans of my own. If Violet is really that powerful then maybe, I can use her to get my freedom."

Immediately Hannah gasped, slapping her palm over her mouth as if trying to shove the confession back inside.

Her eyes widened in pure horror. She would never have confessed that.

But Asher wasn't finished.

His slitted eyes focused on her once more, and this time he had a dark smile on his face "And how exactly did you intend to achieve that? Use Violet to get your freedom?"

Hannah answered right away. "I'll lure them both and then have Violet kill Ziva. Ziva is a cruel bitch and the perfect tool my father uses to keep all the witches in our village in line. She loves the control, and grvels before our father. Once she's gone, I can escape and go live my life in a place no one could ever find me."

Hannah gasped as soon as she came aback. She stared into Violet's cold face.

"You could have come to me," Violet said coldly, "I would've helped you without hesitation instead of being part of some plan where you use me."

Shame flashed across Hannah's features. "I didn't fully trust you."

"Good," Violet shot back. "Because I don't trust you either."

Before Hannah could respond, a quiet voice cut through the air.

"Ask her."

Everyone turned, startled.

The Queen had spoken, her amethyst eyes stormy, and unreadable.

"Your Majesty?" Taryn asked carefully.

But Seraphira ignored them all, her gaze fixed on Asher.

"Ask her how many children Angus has."

Asher's brow arched, but he didn't question her. He simply turned back to Hannah.

Hannah lifted her hands defensively. "I can answer that without you getting into my head."

Getting compelled was not the greatest feeling. It felt like nothing at first until the whole process ended and left one with a

hangover feeling as the mind knew instinctively that it had been invaded.

Asher smirked wickedly.

"Apologies, Angus' little spy but I don't trust you."

Hannah tried, at the very last second, to slam her mental walls shut but Asher was faster.

And worse, he already had the key to her mind from earlier, giving his power a brutal advantage. Her eyes glazed instantly, and she was his again.

"How many exactly are you?"

Hannah's answer spilled out at once, hollow and stripped of emotion.

"There are eight of us but one died. Well she was killed, to be exact. Our sister tried escaping with her lover but Ziva reported her. Father doesn't tolerate betrayal. He believes he owns all of us. We're his property. His investments. Hence escaping the village equals death."

Silence rippled through the dungeon.

The cardinal alphas exchanged dark, grim looks. Whatever they had expected, it wasn't this. This wasn't some petty sibling rivalry, no, this was a full-blown nightmare factory Angus had been running behind the scenes.

Asher didn't pause. "Did any of your siblings follow you here?"

"No. This was a secret mission. Father doesn't want Ziva getting too close to Violet for reasons best known to him. If another one of us followed me, he'd know something was wrong. And Ziva hates when Father gets mad at her. She's in love with father and loves pleasing him"

Violet was speechless. Their sister loved their father. God, no. She wished she could unlearn this.

Griffin muttered, "Fucking hell..."

Asher ignored the comments around him, asking. "So how do you communicate? You and Ziva?"

"A mirror," Hannah answered. "Its a special one that lets us talk through reflections. But the moment I entered the Fae realm, it stopped working."

That made Asher's eyes narrow.

"And why is that?"

Hannah stuttered. "I—I don't know. It just died."

Roman breathed, "Well, the Fae realm does one thing right for once."

Asher released his hold on her mind, and Hannah staggered slightly, breathing like someone pulled from a deep ocean.

She had just spilled everything.