

Chapter 8 The Villain I Chose to Be

James's POV

I walked out of Arya's room with my chest split wide open.

The door shut behind me, and the sound of her crying followed me down the corridor, stuck to me like smoke. .

Her scent was still on my hands. It made me want to turn around. But I kept walking.

Jasper, my wolf, surged the second I took three steps down the corridor, fur bristling inside me, anger snapping against my ribs.

You'd kill our pup. .

I clenched my jaw and kept walking.

You'd let them tear her open, Jasper snarled. For a deal. For Marcel.

"Shut up," I muttered under my breath, voice low enough that no one passing would hear.

Jasper didn't calm.

Why would you go that far? Why would you destroy what's ours?

Because the world didn't care about mates or vows. It cared about land and gold and weakness. And I'd heard the rumours myself, packs circling, waiting for one bad week so they could tear us apart and call it justice.

We'd survived on stubbornness and luck. And luck always runs out.

I couldn't keep risking the lives of everyone under my command.

Especially Arya.

Especially the woman I couldn't breathe without.

Jasper's fury tightened.

You're breaking her.

"I know," I breathed.

My throat burned.

I could still see her face, tear-soaked, stunned, like she'd looked at me and finally realised I was capable of hurting her.

I hated myself for it.

But I was more afraid of losing her.

If we stayed exposed, the attacks would keep coming until one finally landed right.

And then Arya would die.

Or worse, she'd live long enough to watch our people slaughtered.

I couldn't... I couldn't live without her.

And Jasper knew it.

His voice went lower, bitter.

So you'll be the villain.

"Then I'll wear it," I said. "If it keeps her alive."

I kept walking, heading for my office, shoulders tight, fists clenched.

If I could get the Union, I could keep the pack alive.

I could keep Arya alive.

Even if she never forgave me.

Even if she hated me for the rest of her life.

At least she'd be breathing.

At least she'd be here.

I reached my office and shut the door behind me. I didn't even make it to the chair before I heard the second set of footsteps.

The door opened.

Leah Rainhorn walked in like she'd already been given the keys.

She looked smug. Pretty. Satisfied.

That look on her face made something vicious rise in my chest.

"Wipe that smug look off your face," I said flatly.

Her smile widened instead of fading. "Touchy."

I stared at her. "When is your mother leaving?"

Leah's gaze sharpened. "When you make good on your promise."

My jaw clenched. "Stay away from Arya."

Leah scoffed. "Your rogue wife?"

"She is my wife," I said, voice dropping. "My mate. My Luna."

"...and if you go near her again," I said quietly, "I'll stop pretending you're a guest."

"You'll do what?" Leah snapped, stepping forward. "Bite me? Growl at me? Don't make me laugh." Her eyes glittered with disdain. "I won't settle for scraps, James. Either you play your part," she snapped, "or the deal dies."

I leaned back slowly, studying her like she was something I could snap in half if I wanted.

"Besides," Leah added, lips curling, "you're beneath me."

I laughed.

Not amused.

Just cold.

Leah frowned. "What's funny?"

I lifted my eyes to hers, letting every inch of contempt show.

“Tell me,” I said calmly, “how many men did you let touch you before you realised you couldn’t even name one as the father?”

Her face drained.

I stepped closer, voice low. “And you want to stand in my home and talk about pedigree?”

The room went sharp with silence.

Leah’s hand closed around an apple on the side table like she needed something to throw.

Her eyes burned.

Then she hurled it at my head.

I caught it without flinching.

Leah’s chest rose and fell hard. “My father will destroy you.”

I took one bite of the apple, slow.

Crunch.

Then I smiled.

“Will he?” I asked, chewing. “I wonder what daddy dearest will say when he finds out I’m not the father of the child you’re carrying.”

Leah’s face twisted. “You wouldn’t dare.”

I stepped closer, lowering my voice.

“I’ve already lost her smile,” I said softly. “Don’t make me lose my restraint too.”

Her breath hitched.

For the first time since I’d met her, she looked afraid.

“You’re a monster,” she whispered.

I grinned, took another bite, and kept my eyes on hers.

“Good,” I said. “So behave.”

I stepped past her, voice low. “And stay away from Arya.”