

Mafia God 352

Chapter 352: I Don't Want This

"I don't want this," Veronica continued. "I don't want this to happen. I mean," she said, exhaling, "if you are going to die, I'd rather you got hit by a bus." Veronica lifted one shoulder helplessly. "I'm being honest. I don't want to tell my kids the story of your death someday," she said, "and say, 'Oh, and your uncle died because he almost killed your father.'" She shook her head. "It's a terrible story."

"There is nothing else to know about me," Julian said.

"I want to understand why you did what you did, before I drop to my knees and beg Luca to help you out of this mess."

Julian's eyes lifted to hers more sharply at that. The overhead light threw hard shadows across the angles of his face, hollowing his cheeks, deepening the tiredness under his eyes. He looked worn down to the bone now, stripped of all the polish and poison he usually carried so easily. Still dangerous, perhaps. Still bitter. But also cornered.

"We both know," she continued, "I didn't do any of those things you accused me of, so I am merely going to skip that part. I refuse to dwell on it."

Julian said nothing.

"I want to understand," she said again, "why you think your brother is your enemy."

Julian let out a laugh. "Luca may do anything for you, but our father doesn't really give a shit about you. He put me in here, not Luca. He sentenced me to death not Luca."

"You should know by now, that if Luca wants to move heaven, he will."

Julian's mouth twisted. "It's nice to see," he said mockingly, "you are one of those who idolise him."

"Oh, I do," she said brightly. "But I really cannot help myself. I love the man. And," Veronica added, "I think I understand you, really."

"Do you now?"

"Yes, yes, I do, actually. I get it," she said. "You're the older brother, and yet somehow you still seem to be the invisible one."

Julian's face went still. Veronica kept going, because she had seen the flicker there and knew she had found something real.

"You're trapped behind Luca's shadow," she said.

Julian looked away first. He wanted to dismiss her. She had hit too close. Veronica watched his jaw tighten, watched the muscles in his face shift, physically resisting the urge to react. For all his cruelty, for all his pride, she could see it now—that old, festering wound of being almost important. Almost chosen. Almost enough.

And maybe that was the cruelest thing of all. Not that Luca had more. That Julian had spent his whole life watching it happen.

"You hate him," she said quietly, "because no matter what you do, the room still turns toward Luca."

"Nice," Julian said at last. "Luca gave you my psych details. Bravo."

Veronica waved a hand dismissively. "Please. Luca sucks at that kind of thing, believe me. You Genovese men just... phew..." She blew out a breath and made a slicing motion through the air. "Go for the jugular instantly without thinking anything through."

That drew the faintest lift of Julian's brow.

"That's never been a bad thing."

Veronica gave him a look that could only be described as deeply unimpressed. "Of course you wouldn't see it. Perfection is required of you both. Demanded, even. Every move, every word, every decision. That kind of pressure can rot a person from the inside."

"It can be hard to keep up," Veronica continued. "And you found it hard to keep up because you saw things differently."

"Yeah," Julian said. "Look where it got me." His tone was flat, but the bitterness underneath it was old. Old enough to have settled into the bones. It was the exhaustion of a man who had spent too long being punished for not fitting a shape that had been carved for someone else.

"You could have managed the famiglia differently and effectively."

That made him actually look at her with interest. Veronica noticed and kept going.

"I mean, look at what you did in a few days."

Now she had him. Julian's expression changed in small ways that mattered. The mocking tilt of his mouth disappeared. He was listening now. Really listening.

"You rallied the famiglia in a matter of hours after the failed raid. Even after the losses. Even after your father was declared missing. You sucked it up," she went on, ticking the points off with her fingers, "you negotiated a temporary ceasefire, and you kept people from tearing each other apart long enough to stabilize the situation."

She tilted her head. "That is leadership."

Julian let out a short breath through his nose. "Temporary leadership."

"Still leadership."

He looked away again with a reluctant awareness of being seen in a way he probably never had been.

"You managed effectively. Just differently."

Julian was still for so long that Veronica wondered if she had pushed too far, stepped too close to some cracked-open place he was about to slam shut. "Don't ever think I could get anything done," Julian muttered.

The bitterness in his voice was quieter now. Veronica stayed still, careful not to break the fragile thread she had finally managed to get hold of.

"He has always been that way, hasn't he?" she asked softly.

"Yeah..." he whispered.

"He never gave you a real chance."

"Never."

"Everything was always Luca this, Luca that," she said, shaking her head like she'd seen the shape of it from miles away and was only now stepping into the details.

"The smug bastard didn't stop rubbing it in my face either."

Veronica nearly smiled at that, because yes, Luca could be unbearable when he wanted to be, and he usually wanted to be. But she kept her face composed. This was not the moment to defend her fiancé's deeply punchable confidence. "So what if you wanted to prove yourself," she said.

Julian's eyes snapped back to her. "Of course I wanted to prove myself!" His voice rose at once, the old anger flaring back to life. The chains at his ankles clinked when he shifted on the bed. "What was I supposed to do? Smile politely while he handed everything to Luca? Pretend I didn't see it?"