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Chapter 8

The ride was quiet, the kind of silence that pressed against the ears. Jace drove with steady precision, eyes on the road, but the tension radiating from the back seat was impossible to ignore. Julian hadn't spoken a word since the hotel doors closed behind them.

Finally, Jace cleared his throat. "She's agreed to a blood test in three weeks. I'll send the pack doctor, ensure the result comes back negative for pregnancy—which there's a good chance it will."

Julian didn't answer. He sat motionless, gaze fixed on the glass, the town blurring past in streaks of gray and gold.

"I also made the suggestion of her going on suppressants," Jace went on carefully. "If she plans on staying in that town, she could trigger another wolf's rut if she goes into heat again."

The sound that broke the air was sudden, primal—a growl ripped from Julian's chest, deep and violent enough to make the leather seats tremble.

Jace's hands tightened on the wheel, startled. For a split second, he risked a glance in the rearview mirror, eyes wide. He had known Julian for years, through blood and war, through triumph and defeat. He had never once heard him lose control like that.

**The growl tore out of him, low and vicious, before Julian clamped it

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down. The sound hung in the car, heavy, making Jace's shoulders tense.**

Julian adjusted the collar of his jacket with meticulous care, his voice cool when it came. "I don't want to hear about her again."

Jace flicked him a cautious glance in the rearview.

Julian's gaze was fixed out the window, expression unreadable. "Two things, Jace. That's all. Whether she's pregnant, and whether my mark fades. Everything else—her past, her exile, her being wolfless—irrelevant. I don't care."

The words were sharp, final, like steel snapping shut.

Jace swallowed, nodding once. "Understood, Alpha."

Silence reclaimed the car, but the wolf beneath Julian's skin still prowled, restless, unsatisfied.

**The silence in the car was broken by the sharp buzz of Julian's phone. The screen lit up with a name Jace didn't have to read to recognize: Elara. **

Julian's jaw ticked once before he accepted the call, bringing the phone to his ear.

"Julian?" Her voice was sharp, frayed with frustration. "I just heard the ceremony's been delayed. Again. Do you have any idea how this makes me look?"

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He leaned his head against the leather seat, gaze still fixed out the window. His tone was even, detached. "It's temporary. There are... complications with the summit."

"I don't care about the summit." Elara's voice cracked, anger barely masking insecurity. "I haven't seen you in weeks. You promised—"

"I'm still away," Julian cut in smoothly, lying without hesitation. " Business. Negotiations take time."

There was silence on the other end, brittle and heavy. Then, quietly, " You're always busy."

Julian said nothing.

"Fine." The line clicked dead.

The long drive ended as the sprawling estate of Blackthorn Pack came into view, stone and timber rising from the forest like a fortress. The wrought-iron gates swung open on command, guards bowing their heads as the black sedan passed through.

Julian stepped out first when they reached the main house, the crisp mountain air biting at his skin. Pack members lingered nearby, their eyes following their Alpha with reverence and wariness both. They felt it—the shift in his aura, the edge sharpened by three days he'd never explain.

He gave them nothing in return. No smile. No nod. Only the weight of his presence, cold and unyielding.

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"See that the luggage is taken up," Jace ordered quietly to the waiting attendants, taking his cues from Julian's silence.

Inside, the mansion hummed with restrained energy. The pack knew their Alpha had returned, and with him, questions he'd never tolerate being voiced aloud.

Julian mounted the staircase without pause, each step measured, controlled. Behind him, Jace fell into stride, but neither spoke.

At the top of the stairs, movement caught his eye. His mother stepped from a side corridor, elegant even in something as simple as a wool wrap.

"Julian," she greeted softly, warmth flickering in her eyes as she crossed the hall. She lifted a hand as if to embrace him—then stilled, her nostrils flaring.

Her brows rose ever so slightly. She didn't speak, but something in her eyes said she had noticed the unfamiliar scent that had clung to him.

Julian's jaw clenched. "Not now, Mother."

Her hand lowered, though her gaze lingered, cutting in its quiet knowing. "I wasn't going to say anything," she said at last, voice calm, almost careless. "You're not a mated wolf... yet. Do as you please."

**The soft rustle of her wrap faded as she moved down the hall. To anyone else, it might have seemed nothing. But Julian knew her well

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enough to hear what went unsaid.**

She had never cared for Elara. Had never hidden her belief that the woman was spoiled, entitled—a choice forced by his father's politics, never by his will.

Julian closed the door to his chambers with a muted click, shutting out the eyes and expectations that followed him everywhere.

For the first time since leaving her, he was alone.

He stripped off his jacket and tossed it onto the chair, movements clipped, controlled. His boots followed, the thud against the floor echoing louder than he liked in the silence.

His wolf prowled just beneath the surface, restless, pacing, demanding. Julian ignored it.

Damn that woman.

He pressed the heel of his hand to his brow, exhaling slow and hard, as though he could push her from his mind by force. The scent that lingered on his skin said otherwise.

Finally, with a low curse, he sank onto the edge of his bed. For the first time in days, there was no one to command, no mask to hold. His body was heavy, aching with exhaustion, yet his mind refused to settle.

**He lay back, staring at the ceiling, eyes unblinking in the dark. Rest.

Chapter 8

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That's what he needed. What he deserved.**

But rest didn't come.

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