

Chapter 9

The boardroom at Blackthorn was all polished wood and steel, its walls lined with windows that framed the dense forest beyond. Julian sat at the head of the long table, shoulders squared, every line of him composed.

The screen at the far end flickered with faces—Alphas and Betas from the summit, patched in for follow-up. Jace sat to his right, silent, a steady presence as always.

“Alpha Julian,” one Alpha drawled, leaning back in his chair on the feed, a crooked grin tugging at his mouth. “Good to see you again. Your Beta said you had to rush off for an emergency.”

Another chuckled, shaking his head. “You didn’t have to play ill, if you had to leave, you had to leave. Happens to the best of us.”

Laughter rippled through the call, easy and unguarded.

Julian didn’t smile. He leaned forward, clasping his hands on the table, his gaze cutting through the screen with cool precision. “Blackthorn doesn’t play ill,” he said flatly. “We take care of business. Which is why I’m here.”

The laughter died, replaced by a hush of respect.

He launched straight into land negotiations, his tone terse and authoritative, steering the conversation like nothing at all had happened.

**The call dragged on, all numbers and projections—parcels of land, tax advantages, the highway development that had half the Alphas salivating.

Julian gave clipped, precise answers, his disposition never wavering.**

Then one of the older Betas spoke, tone smug. "The humans want charm. Sweetness. A good face for negotiations. Sometimes a softer touch works better than power."

Sweetness. A softer touch.

The words lodged like a blade. Against his will, Julian's mind slipped. Her legs locked around his waist, her nails raking his back as she cried out beneath him. The wet heat of her tight pussy milking his knot, the tremor that tore through her as he nibbled on her nipples. The way she whispered "no" even as her hips lifted, begging for more.

A throat cleared sharply beside him. Jace.

Julian blinked, eyes snapping back to the screen. Half a dozen faces stared back expectantly at a question he hadn't answered.

"Alpha Julian?" One prompted.

For the first time in memory, Julian found himself a step behind. He straightened slowly, forcing his expression into carved stone. "Repeat the question," he said, his voice stern.

But Jace saw it. The fracture. The Alpha who was never distracted, never sidelined—sidelined now by something he dare not speak.

**Julian forced his focus back where it belonged, answering the rest of the call with cold efficiency. Every decision was final, every directive absolute. By the time the meeting ended, no one dared question him

further.**

**He rose, sliding his chair back, the wheels against wood loud in the sudden silence. Jace was already watching him, arms braced on the table.*
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“What?” Julian asked with a bite in his tone.

Jace hesitated, then spoke carefully. “You know you’re like a brother to me, and I want you to know it’s not weakness if you’re... unsettled. It’s only been a week and a rut isn’t just instinct. It’s personal. And your first—”

Julian cut him off, sharp and unyielding. “I said I’m fine. Just a lot of work that stacked up... haven’t slept. That’s all.”

He didn’t give Jace a chance to argue. Turning on his heel, he strode for the door, each step measured, final.

But the truth pressed in all the same. His first rut. At twenty-eight. Late, especially for an Alpha. A rite meant to be sacred—shared only with his mate. Not with some woman he should never have touched.

The door had barely closed behind him when his phone buzzed.

Julian answered, his voice flat. “What is it, Elara?”

“Well, hello to you too.”

“I’m in the middle of something,” he said.

“It’s been weeks, Julian. I miss you. I need you—I need your touch.” Her tone was soft, coaxing.