

Chapter 159 Don't You Dare

Third person

Scarlet paced her study, feeling a buzz like electricity in her veins, a state of constant panic that over the past few days had come to feel like home.

Donovan had known that she didn't have much time. That once the trial was over, she would no longer be available for their trade. Tomorrow morning, that would happen. She would be found guilty and she would be...

She preferred not to even let her thoughts go there.

The sky began to change as the sun slipped down toward the horizon, darkening into the vibrant orange and pink hues of sunset. Scarlet had shoved the curtains all the way open and was looking out the window while she paced, no longer even trying to stop herself from clenching her jaw. She balled and unballled her fists compulsively, feeling her sharp fingernails pressing into the flesh of her palms, using the pain to keep herself awake. She hadn't slept in days.

As the evening sky dampened to deep blue, hope stirred in Scarlet's racing heart. If this was going to happen at all, it was going to happen tonight.

Donovan had kept her waiting until the very, very last minute. And why wouldn't he? Scarlet laughed aloud, thinking about this. Her vampire acquaintance was a sadist. Of course he'd make her wait as long possible. She'd been stupid to expect anything less.

Finally, the sky deepened to black, and at long last, Scarlet received the message she'd been waiting on for weeks.

She'd been clutching her phone in her hand, thinking he would call or text.

But no. He summoned her. Called her from within her own mind, saying, first, only her name in his distinctive drawl.

A chill ran up Scarlet's spine, making her skin tighten and go goose-fleshed all over.

She hadn't been expecting the vampire to summon her with magic. The fact that he did so meant that he was physically close, very close to her already.

"Meet me in half an hour," continued the deep, disembodied voice. "I will be waiting..."

Scarlet was the one who had initiated this contact; she reminded herself of this fact, hoping it would bring her some comfort. She was the one who reached out to Donovan, begged him for a deal, offered information to start a new war... Because she had no other way out. No other tricks left to pull. It was this or prison or a dungeon or worse.

But the reality of it happening felt different than she'd been expecting.

It was the summoning. The sudden announcement, after so long a wait, that not only had the vampires already breached the borders, but were here—within about a mile, she figured, in order for Donovan to be able to reach her with his little hypnosis trick—it just choked her with fear.

At least she was ready. She finally had a few secrets she could offer for the trade.

With a sudden rush of manic energy, the Luna Queen swallowed down her rising terror and decisively replaced it with irritation.

The least Donovan could do, she thought angrily, was tell her where exactly to meet him, instead of teasing her with a riddle. He could have just texted her an address. But no, he had to play these spooky nonsense mind games instead...

Donovan's chuckle echoed in her mind. The breathless laugh that she hated.

Then, finally, he told her where to go.

She had a bag packed and ready. She grabbed it and hurried to a wall of bookshelves beside the fireplace, where she stood on tip-toe to reach a book on a high shelf, tilting it from the top down slowly. Then she stepped back to let the bookcase swivel around, and touched it lightly to stop it when there was enough of a gap for her to slip through into the dark passageway behind.

Scarlet clicked on her flashlight. Slid her body slideways through the opening. And rocked the bookcase back into a closed position from the other side.

She was hardly out of the palace grounds, emerging from her secret passageway onto a service road just a block beyond the security gates, when Scarlet heard an unsettling sound.

It was coming from the woods, and coming closer... an unnatural rush of air was blasting through the trees, making the leaves chatter like teeth.

And then Donovan was standing right in front of her, about ten yards away. Right in the middle of the street. Looking wholly unafraid to show his pale, dead face here in the werewolf world, hardly even a quarter mile from the Alpha King's palace.

His dark lips curled up into a smile. "Hello, Scarlet."

He casually adjusted his necktie and jacket, which had been set just slightly off-kilter from his little sprint through the woods, and brushed some dust from his shoulders.

"You can't be here," she hissed, resisting the urge to flinch as the vampire crept closer, his strides few and long.

"And yet, here I am."

"You know what I mean. It's not safe. How could you dare to come so close to the palace grounds?! We'll be seen—"

Suddenly Donovan was an inch away; he'd closed the distance between them and now was looking down at Scarlet menacingly with his sharp white fangs bared. She went silent.

"I'm tired of your attitude," he growled. "I'm well aware of the risk I took in coming here. But you are the one who invited me, remember?"

Shit, Scarlet thought; she'd met his eyes. And now she couldn't look away.

Slowly, every word razor-sharp with anger, he said, "Don't you dare speak another disrespectful word to me again."

"I'm sorry," she breathed compulsively.

"That's more like it." He lowered a hand to her face and stroked it with a finger colder than ice, as lightly as a lover would. When his gaze slipped away from her eyes, gliding down to linger on her red lips, the trance was broken. "Now. You say I shouldn't be here, hmm?"

Scarlet trembled.

"Let's get out of here, then," he whispered, pressing his cold lips to her ear.

He grabbed hold of Scarlet's thin body, and with a sudden WHOOSH of that unnatural wind, they were gone. Leaving behind only a low cloud of swirling dust in the place where they had been standing one second prior.

Fiona

"Ugh!" I woke up with an involuntary grunt and a shock of pain in my stomach. "Oh, fuck," I grumbled, clutching my belly.

Alexander turned on his bedside lamp and clamored to my side. "What's wrong?"

I hissed through my teeth, trying not to curse or groan again, now that I could see the severe worry that lined my husband's face.

"Fiona."

I breathed out heavily. "I'm okay. I think."

"Are you going into labor? Was that a contraction?"

"I don't know." Whatever it was, it was passing, and now I just felt shaky and tired. I leaned my head back against the pillow, realizing as I did so that I was covered in sweat. "If it was, there will be more. Will you get me a glass of water, please? And a hand towel?"

He scrambled to do this quickly while I rolled onto my side, focused on breathing. The pain was subsiding more each second, and by the time Alexander was circling back to my side of the bed and taking a seat on the edge of it, I was able to sit up.

"Are you okay?" He laid a gentle hand on my belly.

I patted my face and neck with the towel, mopping up a film of sweat. "I think so, yes. I'm sorry if I alarmed you."

He gave me a wide-eyed "are you crazy?" look. "Fiona. Don't apologize."

I took another long, slow inhale and exhale, then sipped my water. I was feeling better.

"Thank you," I said, suddenly overwhelmed with sleepiness. "I guess maybe we should wait a minute. See if there is more."

"Or I can call the doctor right now. I'd really like to do that, Fi. Okay?"

I nodded. "Okay."

The doctor looked a little unkempt when she arrived, clearly having been roused from sleep by Alexander's call. But she was wide awake and all business. And fortunately, within a few minutes, she deemed that I was fine.

The prognosis was false labor, something that could happen near the end, she said. She also instructed us to call again if it happened any more. "I'd rather be here and have it be nothing, than have it be something and arrive too late, understand?"

Once she was gone, I used the restroom and then crept back into bed, where Alexander was waiting for me.

"Sure you're okay?" he asked as I tugged off my bedside lamp.

"Yes. Thank you." I rolled into his arms, terribly drowsy.

"Are you sure you're up for going to court today? Maybe you should stay home and rest. My alarm will go off in just an hour."

"I am fine, Alex. Sleepy now, but I can get up in an hour. I should be there with you."

He sighed. I sensed that he wanted to insist on keeping me home today, but either he gave up, or I fell asleep before I could hear him saying anything else.