

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 111: Mr. Possessive (M) -

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FIA

Author's Note, Trigger Warning

This Chapter includes explicit blood play tied to werewolf mating and heightened emotional states. The scene features biting that breaks skin, visible blood, and the exchange of blood between partners within a consensual sexual encounter. If blood in intimate contexts is uncomfortable or triggering, please proceed with caution or consider skipping this Chapter. But your sick ass will probably enjoy this anyway

His mouth left mine suddenly. The loss of contact felt sharp and immediate. Cold air rushed in where his warmth had been.

He stepped back. His chest heaved with ragged breaths that matched my own. His eyes were wild and dark and conflicted.

"I shouldn't be having these thoughts." The words came out rough. Torn from somewhere deep inside him. "I should be better than this. I should be stronger than this."

He dragged a hand through his hair. Pulled at the strands like he wanted to hurt himself for what we'd just done.

"But I don't want to be." His voice dropped lower. Almost a whisper. "And I realize how sick that sounds."

I stayed quiet. My heart hammered against my ribs. My lips still tingled from his kiss.

"My mom is in a room hooked up to machines." He continued. Each word seemed to cost him something. "Fighting for her life. And all I can think about right now is how badly I want to see you naked."

The confession hit me like a physical blow. Heat flooded my face and spread down my neck. Lower. The mate bond thrummed between us with an intensity that made my skin feel too tight.

"You want a distraction." I managed to say. My voice came out shakier than I meant it to.

He gave me a look that burned. Smoldering and dangerous and full of naked want.

"You almost make me sound noble." A bitter laugh escaped him. "But I should know better."

He crossed the distance between us in two strides. His hand reached for my shirt. I watched as one of his claws extended. Sharp and gleaming in the moonlight that filtered through the windows.

The fabric tore easily. The sound of it ripping seemed impossibly loud in the quiet ballroom. Cool air hit my exposed skin. My black lace bra was now on full display.

His eyes raked over me. Hungry and appreciative. His breathing had gone heavier.

He looked back up to meet my gaze. The question in his eyes was clear even before he spoke.

"Can I?"

I swallowed hard. My throat had gone completely dry. Every nerve ending in my body felt alive and hypersensitive. The bond pulled at me with an urgency that made rational thought nearly impossible.

I nodded.

That was all the permission he needed.

His hand came up to the nape of my neck. His fingers tangled in my hair. Firm and possessive. He pulled me to him roughly. His mouth crashed against mine with none of the tentative sweetness from before.

This kiss was different. Desperate and consuming. Like he wanted to devour me whole. Like he needed this more than air.

I kissed him back just as hard. Just as desperately. My hands found his shoulders again and dug in. Held on. His tongue swept into my mouth and I opened for him. Let him take what he needed.

He groaned into the kiss. The sound vibrated through me and sent heat pooling low in my belly. His other hand gripped my waist. Fingers digging into my skin hard enough to leave marks.

I didn't care. I wanted the marks. I wanted proof that this was real and happening.

His mouth moved against mine with a hunger that bordered on frantic. Each kiss deeper than the last. Wetter. More demanding. His teeth caught my lower lip again and tugged. Not gentle this time. Hard enough to make me gasp.

He swallowed the sound and kissed me harder. His hand in my hair tightened and tilted my head back. Gave him better access. He took advantage immediately. His tongue tangled with mine in a rhythm that made my knees weak.

I pressed closer to him. Needed to feel more of him. All of him. My chest pressed against his. The lace of my bra provided almost no barrier. I could feel the hard planes of his body through his shirt. Feel the heat radiating off him.

His grip on my waist shifted. Slid lower. Fingers splayed wide across the small of my back. He pulled me flush against him and I felt exactly how much he wanted this. Wanted me.

A whimper escaped my throat. He made another low sound in response. Primal and possessive. His mouth moved from my lips to my jaw. He trailed hot kisses down the column of my neck right before he found the sensitive spot where my pulse hammered wildly.

He paused there. His breath hot against my skin. Then his teeth scraped over the spot. Not quite a bite but close enough to make me shudder in his arms.

"Fia." My name came out like a prayer. Like a curse. Like he couldn't decide which one fit better.

My fingers clutched at him. Desperate for something to anchor myself to. The world had narrowed to just this. Just us. Just the heat building between us and the bond singing in approval.

His lips dragged over my throat and I felt his breath spill hot across my skin right before he growled my name again. Something inside me tightened at the sound and the bond throbbed through my chest like a pulse that didn't belong to me alone. His hands roamed my sides and the ache grew sharp and hungry. I felt the shift in him right before it happened, that split second where want hardened into something rougher.

His claws caught the torn edges of my shirt and with one violent jerk, he ripped the rest of it clean off me. The fabric came apart with a harsh rip that echoed in the ballroom and the scrap of cloth hit the floor near our feet. Before I could catch a breath he hooked a claw beneath the center of my bra and tore that too. The lace snapped and the cups fell open, leaving my chest bare and lifted toward him. The cold air hit my skin and my nipples tightened fast, the sensation sharp enough to make a small sound break out of me.

He stared at me with this stunned, ravenous look, like he'd stripped me and found something he'd been starving for. Then his gaze shifted down to himself and something wild flashed across his face. He grabbed his own shirt at the collar and ripped it open straight across his chest. The buttons flew everywhere, pattering across the smooth floor like small hard raindrops. They scattered around us in a messy arc that glittered

faintly in the moonlight. His shirt hung off his arms before he shrugged it away and let it fall.

His body stunned me. Broad chest, thick muscles, every line carved deep, every breath making his stomach pull tight. His skin glowed warm in the light and a faint dusting of dark hair trailed down from the center of his chest to the cut ridge of his abdomen. My mouth went dry looking at him. My heart didn't feel like it sat inside my ribcage anymore. It felt like it wanted to climb out and press itself against him.

He noticed the way I stared. He liked it. His mouth curved in something between pride and hunger.

"Take your trousers off," he said, voice low and rough.

Heat rolled through me. I fumbled with the button, breath shaking as I pushed my trousers down past my hips and my thighs. They dropped around my ankles and I stepped out of them, my panties the only thing left between us. He watched me like I was doing something sacred and filthy at the same time.

Then he pushed his own trousers down. The fabric slid over his hips and thighs and he let them drop to the floor. The bulge in his briefs was huge and throbbing and the sight of it made my thighs press together. He hooked his thumbs under the waistband and shoved them down in one smooth motion. His briefs dropped and pooled around his feet. He stepped out of them and stood completely naked in front of me.

My breath caught. My stomach flipped. He was thick, hard and flushed, the tip glossy with pre cum, caught the light. My pulse jumped and heat poured between my legs so fast I felt dizzy.

He walked toward me slowly. Purposefully. Like a predator closing in on something he'd already claimed. His fingers curled under my chin and he tilted my face up to look at him.

"On your knees," he said.

My body moved before my mind did. My knees hit the floor with a soft thud and the cold surface sent a shiver up my spine. He stood close enough that I smelled him, warm skin and something sweet and sharp that came from the bond. I lifted my eyes to him and he brushed his thumb over my lower lip.

"You're going to take me in your mouth," he said. "You're going to do it slow at first so I can feel every inch of your throat open for me. Understand?"

I nodded. Then I leaned forward and wrapped my hand around the base of him. He was hot against my palm, so hard it felt like he pulsed. I stroked him once, slow, and he exhaled sharply above me. I parted my lips and took the head into my mouth. The taste

of him hit me right away, salty and warm and clean. I sucked lightly and felt his entire body twitch.

"Good girl," he muttered, voice thick.

The praise shot straight down my spine. I took him deeper, inch by inch, letting my tongue glide along the thick underside of him. He growled low in his throat, his hand sliding to the back of my head. His fingers pushed into my hair and gripped tight. He guided my rhythm at first, slow and controlled. His hips moved in small rolls that brushed the tip of him against the back of my tongue.

Heat pooled heavy between my legs. I moaned around him. The sound vibrated through him and he shuddered. His fingers tightened in my hair.

"More," he said. "Take more."

I did. I relaxed my throat and let him slide deeper. My eyes watered when the tip of him hit the back of my throat. He groaned loud and sharp. His hips snapped forward once before he caught himself.

"Fuck. You feel perfect."

I let my hands slide up his thighs, gripping the muscles hard enough that my fingers sank into his skin. I sucked harder, bobbing my head, letting spit run down my chin and drip onto my chest as his cock filled my mouth. Wet sounds filled the room, obscene and slick. He watched me like he wanted to burn the image into his memory forever.

He suddenly tensed. His abdomen tightened and a harsh sound tore out of him. His hand jerked in my hair.

"Stop," he said, breath ragged. "Stop. Now."

I pulled back immediately, spit connecting my lips to the head of his cock before it broke and ran down my chin. He looked ruined. His chest heaved and sweat glistened along his skin. His cock twitched in the air and he shut his eyes hard for a second like he had barely caught control.

He grabbed my jaw. His thumb pressed against my cheek.

"Open your mouth."

I did. His fingers slid between my lips. He pushed them deep, deeper, until they hit the back of my throat and forced a choke out of me. My throat clenched around him. A messy sound escaped me and tears pricked my eyes again. He didn't pull back. He pushed his fingers down again, slower but harder, and my throat worked around them helplessly.

Spit flooded my mouth and spilled out past my lips. It dripped onto my bare chest and down the valley between my breasts. He watched it with something dark and hungry in his eyes.

"Look at you," he said. "So fucking messy for me."

My body trembled. I tried to swallow around his fingers and choked again. The sound made his cock jerk and his breathing roughened.

He pulled his fingers out of my throat and grabbed my face with both hands before crushing his mouth against mine. He kissed me hard and deep, tasting the spit he'd forced out of me, dragging his tongue into my mouth like he wanted to claim every inch.

He pulled me up off my knees with a rough grip. My legs wobbled under me but he held me steady. He turned me and walked me backward until my back hit one of the marble columns. The cold sent a shock up my spine. My panties were still on and soaked through. He hooked his thumbs under the waistband and yanked them down. They dropped to the floor and I stepped out of them.

He lifted my thigh. Then the other. He pinned them around his hips and held me up so easily I felt weightless. The head of his cock pressed against me. My breath hitched and my nails dug into his shoulders.

"Tell me you want it," he said.

"I want it," I breathed. "Please."

He groaned like something inside him snapped. He pushed inside me in one deep, slow thrust that stole my breath and forced a long shaky sound out of me. His thickness stretched me wide and filled every inch. My head fell back against the column and my fingers clenched around him like I needed to hold on to stay alive.

He pulled out halfway and slammed back in. The wet slap of our bodies echoed in the empty room. I gasped and my legs tightened around him. He fucked me harder, each thrust sharp and deep. Pressure built fast and hot in my belly. I moaned loud and broken, the sound bouncing off the walls.

He buried his face in my neck. His breath washed over my skin in short harsh bursts.

"I'm going to mark you," he said. "I'm going to put my teeth in you and make sure no one ever doubts who you belong to. Not even you."

My whole body shivered. I tilted my head without thinking, baring my throat to him.

He bit.

The pain was sharp and hot. His teeth sank into my skin and a gasp ripped out of me. Blood welled up fast and warm. The scent hit both of us at once. He growled against my throat and thrust into me harder, almost punishing, almost worshiping.

When he pulled back I felt the blood trickle down my chest. He caught it with his tongue first, licking a slow line up my throat to his bite. Then he kissed me. His mouth was warm and wet with my blood. The taste hit my tongue when he pushed his tongue into my mouth and I moaned into him.

The metallic taste was almost sweet as it was maddening.

He thrust harder. His rhythm turned erratic and desperate. The bond roared through me, wild and hot. My walls clenched around him and he groaned like he was in pain.

"I'm close," he said, voice shaking. "Look at me."

I forced my eyes open. His gaze locked on mine. His jaw clenched. His thrusts came faster and harder.

"Take it," he said. "Take all of it."

His body tightened. He slammed into me one last time and buried himself deep. He came hard, hips jerking against mine. His breath hitched and a guttural sound tore out of him. The heat of him filled me in long thick pulses.

I held him through it, legs locked around him, nails digging into his back. My own pleasure hit me fast and hard, almost violent, pulling a long cry from my throat as my body clenched around him again and again.

He kept thrusting through the aftershocks, slower now, deep and warm. His mouth pressed to the bite on my throat and I felt him smile against my skin. My blood stained his lips and my breath trembled when he kissed me again.

We stayed like that, tangled and shaking, his weight pinning me to the column and his heat pressed into every part of me, the bond humming through our bodies like it was pleased.

He held me close. Tight. Possessive.

And I didn't want him to let go. I didn't want this to end.

Chapter 112: A Sterling Absence

ALDRIC

The Skollrend library swallowed sound. Every footstep. Every breath. The thick carpets and heavy shelves absorbed it all until the silence became something physical. Something that pressed against my ears.

I liked it here. Always had. Even as a child. The smell of old paper and leather bindings. The weight of knowledge collected over centuries. This library was one of the largest in the shadow world. Generations of Skollrend alphas had built it. Had filled these shelves with records and histories and secrets.

And secrets were exactly what I needed.

The genealogy section took up an entire wing. Row after row of leather bound volumes organized by pack and region. Some dated back hundreds of years. Others were more recent. Updated regularly to track bloodlines and alliances and the shifting power structures that kept our world turning.

I pulled a volume from the shelf. The leather was cool under my fingers. Smooth from years of handling. I carried it to one of the reading tables and set it down with care.

The Silver Creek pack.

I flipped through the pages slowly. My eyes scanned the carefully recorded names and dates. Birth records. Death records. Matings and divorces and everything in between.

There. Alpha Joseph Hughes.

I leaned closer and studied the entry. His lineage was thoroughly documented. His father. His grandfather. The line stretched back seven generations. All proud alphas for an incredibly small and useless pack. All upholding the pack's reputation for supposed strength and tactical brilliance. Whatever the fuck that meant.

His mate was listed next. Isobel Hughes. Formerly Isobel Stathi. Daughter of Alpha Marcus Stathi. Another prominent family. A real strong bloodline. The entry devoted three full paragraphs to her accomplishments. Her education. Her role in strengthening the alliance between Silver Creek and Northern Ridge.

Their daughter came next. Hazel Hughes. The entry was just as detailed. Her education. Her training. Even her eventual coupling up with Cian which ended up in an epic disaster.

Then I found her. Fia Hughes.

The entry was bare. Almost insultingly so. Born on such and such date. Classified as omega at age seven. Mated to Alpha Cian Skollrend on such and such date after her treacherous deceit.

That was it. No details about her education. No mention of training or accomplishments. Nothing about her mother beyond a single line.

Mother: Muna Sterling.

I stared at that name. Let it roll around in my head. Muna Sterling. I'd never heard it before. Never come across it in any of the pack records I'd studied over the years.

I understood why of course. Omegas were creatures of no consequence. They contributed nothing to the bloodline beyond whelping pups and serving their betters. Most packs didn't bother recording omega lineages with any detail. Why waste the ink? Why preserve information that meant nothing to anyone?

But I needed more than this. I needed to understand what I was dealing with. If the omega possessed some hidden knowledge or ability then it had to come from somewhere. Talents didn't materialize from nothing. They were inherited. Passed down through blood and training.

I closed the volume and returned it to the shelf. Then I moved to the index system. My fingers traced along the labeled drawers until I found what I wanted.

S.

I pulled the drawer open and rifled through the cards inside. My eyes scanned name after name. Hundreds of them. Thousands maybe. But not a single Sterling.

I tried variations. Searched under different spellings. Different regions. Nothing. The name might as well have never existed.

That bothered me. Names didn't just disappear. Even the most minor families left some trace. Some record of their existence. But Muna 'Sterling' was a ghost. A blank space where information should have been.

I drummed my fingers against the drawer. The sound was loud in the silence. Too loud. I stopped and closed the drawer with a soft click.

Where did she come from then? She didn't just materialize out of thin air. Someone had birthed her. Someone had raised her. Someone had taught her whatever it was she knew.

My mind turned to other possibilities. Other explanations for the omega's unexpected competence.

What if she wasn't all wolf? Hybridization was frowned upon. But it didn't mean those vile creatures didn't exist. What if somewhere in that unremarkable bloodline ran

something else? Something that explained how she'd created a cure that defied every rule of alchemy I knew?

Witches. The thought settled in my mind and I considered it. Hybrids could pass as mostly wolves if they tried hard enough. If they suppressed their magic and played at being normal. It wouldn't be the first time one had infiltrated a pack.

But if the omega had witch blood then why hadn't anyone noticed? Why hadn't Cian sensed it? The mate bond should have revealed something like that. Should have made it impossible to hide.

Unless she didn't know. Unless whatever witch blood she carried was so diluted that even she was unaware of it.

That made more sense. A distant ancestor. A great grandmother or great great grandmother who'd mated outside her kind. The magic would be weak by now. Almost negligible. But it might be enough to give her an edge. Enough to let her stumble onto solutions that should have been beyond her reach.

I needed to be sure. I needed proof before I could act. And there was only one way to get that kind of proof.

Blood.

Blood didn't lie. Blood couldn't hide what it was. A proper analysis would reveal everything. Every trace of magic. Every hint of otherness. Every secret coded into her very cells.

I just needed to get a sample. Just needed to create a situation where taking it would seem natural. Reasonable even.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. The vibration was sharp against my thigh. I pulled it out and looked at the screen.

It looked like an unknown number. A message from someone using an encrypted app.

'Your plan might be failing again. The omega has managed to break his defenses completely. They are doing it right now in the ballroom.'

I stared at those words. Read them three times to make sure I understood correctly.

Then I laughed. The sound burst out of me before I could stop it. It echoed through the library. Bounced off the high ceiling and came back twisted. Wrong. The laugh of someone who'd finally snapped.

I squeezed the phone. My fingers pressed against the case until I thought it might crack. The screen went dark under my thumb.

Cian. My nephew. My brilliant strategically minded frustratingly noble nephew. He was fucking her. Right now. While his mother lay dying. While his pack fractured around him. While everything I'd worked toward trembled on the edge of success.

He couldn't help himself. That was his fatal flaw. His weakness that I'd counted on from the start. He thought mostly with his cock. Let his feelings override his judgment. Made decisions based on momentary desire instead of long term strategy.

And the omega. She'd done exactly what I'd expected. She'd wormed her way past his defenses. Used her body and her tears and her pathetic attempts at being helpful to make him forget why he'd despised her in the first place.

It was almost too perfect. Almost too easy.

No matter. The words formed in my mind with absolute certainty. The one thing I could count on my nephew to do was make life difficult for himself. Whatever frivolous rubbish that omega seemed to be setting in motion would fail. It always did. Cian's attempts at rebellion always circled back to exactly where I needed them.

She would only end up hurt. He would only end up more isolated. And I would be there to pick up the pieces. To guide him. To shape him into exactly what Skollrend needed. Six feet under.

I picked up the phone again and typed out a response.

'How many allies of ours did you have to sacrifice?'

The reply came quickly.

'Too much.'

Another message followed.

'Won't this hurt anyone who might still be considering allying with us?'

I smiled as I typed.

'I've already thought of that. Just play your role and I will play mine.'

I set the phone down on the table. Let it rest there beside the genealogy volumes. My eyes returned to the page still open in front of me.

Isobel Hughes. Hazel Hughes. The documented. The recorded. The ones who mattered enough to preserve in detail.

And below them. Barely mentioned. Barely acknowledged.

Fia Hughes. Daughter of Muna Sterling. A nothing name attached to a nothing girl who somehow threatened everything.

I looked back at the name of the daughter and mother who would definitely have it out for this bastard girl.

There had to be something I could use here. Some weakness. Some vulnerability. Some thread I could pull that would unravel whatever protection she'd managed to wrap around herself.

I would find it. I always did. No one stayed hidden forever. No one kept their secrets safe once I decided to uncover them.

The library was still silent. Still absorbing every sound. But in my head the gears were turning. Plans forming. Contingencies developing.

The omega thought she'd won something. Thought she'd saved Morrigan and earned Cian's gratitude and secured her place in the pack.

She had no idea what was coming. No idea that every victory I let her have was just another step toward her destruction.

I pulled out my phone one more time. Opened my contacts. My thumb hovered over a name I'd been avoiding all night.

Madeline.

She could help. She had resources I didn't. Knowledge I needed. A record of magic practitioners. But every message I sent her since the Omega bitch dampened my plans revealed more than I wanted. Showed cracks in my control. Made it clear that something had rattled me.

I couldn't afford that. Not now. Not when everything was so close.

I closed the contacts and set the phone down again. The blood test would be enough. I just needed to be patient. Needed to wait for the right moment.

And that moment would come. It always did.

Chapter 113: After glow

CIAN

Her weight sagged against me. I held her steady, one arm wrapped around her waist while the other braced against the column behind her.

"I feel drained," she whispered. Her voice came out thin and shaky.

"The marking does that to most." I pulled back enough to look at her face. Her eyes were half-lidded and unfocused. "Given that you're an Omega, it's a wonder you can still move straight."

She laughed. The sound was breathless and weak. "I don't think I can. I feel very light. Everything seems like it's spinning."

Her knees buckled. My hand shot out and caught her before she could hit the ground. I pulled her up against my chest and her head lolled against my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she mouted.

I liked the way her voice sounded when she was out of it. It just did something to me.

"I'll take you to bed."

I lowered her gently to the floor and stepped back to grab my trousers. The fabric slid over my legs and I fastened them quickly. My shirt lay crumpled nearby, torn open down the front. I scooped it up along with what remained of her top. The fabric was shredded beyond repair but it would have to do.

I draped the torn cloth around her body and lifted her into my arms. She felt light. Too light. Her head rested against my chest and her breathing came slow and even.

The hallway stretched empty and quiet ahead of us. Two sentinels stood at attention near the entrance. Their eyes fixed on the far wall as we passed. They knew better than to look.

"This isn't the way to my suite," Fia murmured against my shoulder.

"I'm taking you to mine."

She swallowed. I felt the movement against my chest.

"Just relax."

She shifted in my arms and pressed deeper into me. Her body went slack. Trusting. The bond hummed between us, warm and satisfied.

My suite was at the end of the east wing. I pushed through the door with my shoulder and carried her to the bed. The sheets were cool and crisp when I laid her down. I tucked them around her carefully, making sure she was covered and warm.

I sat on the edge of the mattress. The lamplight cast soft shadows across her face. Her eyes were barely open now, watching me through heavy lids.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"I'm not sure." The words came out before I could stop them. "I really used to hate you once. So I guess I'm wondering when all that changed."

Her lips curved into a faint smile.

"What spell did you cast on me?" I continued.

She chuckled. The sound was drowsy and rough. "You couldn't have hated me like I hated you."

Something tightened in my chest. "You should be careful with your next words. You know."

She chuckled again. Softer this time. And then she took a long sigh. "Why? Are you going to punish me?"

I placed my hand on her head. Her hair felt soft under my palm. "I wouldn't be able to. Not in the state that you are in. You should get some rest."

Her fingers wrapped around my wrist. Her grip was weak but insistent. "Stay here with me."

"Why? So I can't figure out what you got Thorne to really do?"

"I wish I was that calculating." She paused. Her eyes searched my face. "Can I say something?"

I nodded.

Worry pulsed through the bond. Sharp and clear. It hit me in the center of my chest and made my breath catch. I wondered what it could be that bothered her so much.

"You know what." She shook her head slightly against the pillow. "I'll tell you when I'm certain."

"I don't like being on edge. What exactly is it?"

"I'll tell you when I am certain."

"Goddess, do you think I was bad?" My voice dropped lower.

She couldn't help the small laugh that escaped her. "Oh, I wouldn't know. I haven't been around much."

She smiled again. "But it's not that."

"So what is it?"

"Like I said, I think I'll just mention it when I'm certain." She took a slow breath. "You tend to blow out and be set in your ways and what you believe. Even if it's wrong."

The words stung. Because they were true. To some extent. "Okay then."

Whatever she was holding, I couldn't force it out of her. So I would just have to wait until she was ready and trusted me enough.

"I'm sleepy." Her eyelids drooped further.

I ran my fingers through her hair. The strands slipped smooth and cool between them. "Sleep. I'll be by your side."

Her eyes closed. Her breathing deepened and evened out. I kept stroking her hair, watching the rise and fall of her chest until I was certain she had drifted off completely.

I stood slowly and crossed to the small lamp table near the window. The lamplight flickered when I turned the switch. Warm yellow light filled the corner of the room.

I opened the top drawer. The wood creaked softly. Inside, beneath a stack of old letters, lay the frame. Partly broken. The glass cracked down the middle from when Fia had her accident.

I pulled it out and held it up to the light. Blood had dried in dark streaks across the photo. My own blood from the morning I'd tried to pick it up. Even with the blood obscuring the picture, Madeline's smile was still prominent. It was certainly a time in our lives. We looked happy. Young. Untouched by everything that came after.

"I guess I'm over you now," I said quietly.

The words hung in the air. But for the first time, it did feel true. Final even.

I looked back at Fia. She had shifted in her sleep, curling onto her side. The blankets had slipped down to her waist. Her face looked peaceful in the dim light. Vulnerable in a way she would never let herself be when awake.

A smile tugged at my lips. Small. Unexpected.

I placed the frame back in the drawer and pushed it closed. The past could stay there. Broken, bloodstained and finished.

I walked back to the bed and sat down beside her. She didn't stir. Her breathing stayed deep and steady. The bond thrummed softly between us. Content. Settled.

I reached out and brushed a strand of hair away from her face. Her skin was warm under my fingertips.

Whatever came next, whatever complications waited in the morning, whatever secrets she was keeping from me right now, they could wait.

For tonight, this was enough.

Chapter 114: Blood is Thicker

FIA

The sunlight hit my eyelids first. Sharp and insistent. I blinked against it and turned my head away from the window.

Something moved in the corner of the room.

I jerked upright. The covers slipped down to my waist and I grabbed them quickly, pulling them up to cover my bare chest.

A woman stood near the dresser. She wore simple gray clothing and her hair was pulled back in a neat braid. Her eyes widened when she saw me move and she immediately dropped into a bow.

"I apologize for frightening you, Luna. I did not mean to startle you."

My heart hammered against my ribs. I pressed one hand to my chest and took a breath. "It's fine. I just didn't expect...you... to be here."

She straightened but kept her gaze lowered. "Alpha Cian instructed me not to disturb you. He wanted you well rested."

The memory of last night came rushing back. The marking. The way my body had felt like it was coming apart. The way Cian had carried me here and laid me in his bed.

Heat crept up my neck. I cleared my throat. "Oh."

"I've been assigned to assist you for today."

I nodded slowly. My body still felt heavy and sore. Like I'd been wrung out and left to dry. "Where is he? The Alpha, I mean."

"He's likely having breakfast now, Luna."

"Right."

She gestured toward a chair near the wardrobe. Clothing lay draped across it. "I brought fitting clothes from your suite. Do you like them? Or should I have another set brought?"

I glanced at the dress. It was simple. Blue fabric with long sleeves. Nothing too elaborate. "It's fine. Thank you."

She bowed again. "Would you like to have breakfast in the dining room or here?"

The thought of eating alone in Cian's room felt strange. Wrong somehow. Like I was hiding. "The dining room is fine."

"Very well. I will go run water for your bath."

She disappeared into the bathroom before I could respond. The door clicked shut behind her.

I sat there for a moment. The sheets pooled around my waist and I stared down at them without really seeing them.

What exactly were Cian and I to each other now?

The question sat heavy in my chest. He'd marked me... Rightfully claimed me as his. The bond hummed more between us now. It felt warm and it was constant. But that didn't necessarily mean anything beyond the physical. Beyond the immediate pull.

I could ask him.

But the mere thought made me want to crawl under the covers and never come out. That would be weird. Desperate. Like I was some naive girl who couldn't put two and two together.

But not knowing for sure felt worse. It felt like standing on unstable ground.

I put my hands over my face and groaned into my palms.

The bathroom door opened. The Omega stepped out and smoothed her hands down her dress. "The water is running. Warm is your liking, I presume."

Something in her tone made me look up. Her expression stayed neutral but there was a knowing quality to her eyes.

Everyone probably knew by now. The whole estate likely heard about what happened between Cian and me. Servants talked. Guards talked. There was no privacy in places like this. I knew that all too well.

I covered my face again, my face flush with embarrassment. "Yeah. Thank you."

I stood and the covers fell away. The Omega's gaze stayed carefully averted. I wrapped the sheet around myself and started toward the bathroom.

She moved to follow.

I stopped and turned. "Oh, it's fine. You can go."

She shook her head. "I apologize, Luna, but the Alpha's explicit instruction was that I stay at your side and be at your beck and call."

Of course it was. I bit back a sigh. "Okay. Just keep your distance."

She bowed and followed me into the bathroom. The door closed behind us with a soft click.

The bathtub was enormous. Easily twice the size of the one in my suite. Steam rose from the surface of the water in lazy curls. The scent of herbs and something woodsy filled the air.

I dropped the sheet and stepped into the water. Heat seeped into my muscles immediately and I sank down until the water reached my shoulders.

Bottles lined the edge of the tub. I picked one up and uncorked it. The smell was distinctly Cian. At least sometimes. Cedar and something sharper. I'd never had time to explore the things here before. The last time I was in this space, my heart had been trying to claw its way out of my chest while he washed blood from my skin.

I set the bottle down and reached for another. This one smelled like mint. I poured some into the water and watched it cloud and disperse.

The Omega stood near the door with her hands folded in front of her. Her gaze fixed on the wall above my head.

I scrubbed at my skin with soap that smelled like Cian. The scent clung to me even after I rinsed it away. I washed my hair twice. The water turned cloudy and gray.

When I finally stepped out, the Omega was there with a towel. She wrapped it around me before I could reach for it myself.

A new toothbrush sat on the counter. Still in its packaging. I tore it open and brushed my teeth until my gums hurt.

The personal Omega that Cian had forced upon me helped me into the dress. Her fingers were quick and efficient as she fastened the buttons down my back. She combed through my wet hair and braided it over my shoulder.

"Ready, Luna?"

I nodded.

We left Cian's suite and walked through the hallways. Morning light streamed through the tall windows. Servants moved past us with their heads down. A few nodded in greeting but none of them stopped.

"I want to go to the Infirmary first," I said.

The Omega didn't miss a step. "Of course, Luna."

The smell of herbs and antiseptic grew stronger as we approached the Infirmary. I pushed through the door and immediately spotted Maren near one of the beds.

She looked up when I entered. Her expression hardened.

Right. We still hadn't resolved our last conversation. I took a step toward her, trying to figure out what to say.

"Luna Fia."

I turned. Thorne stood in the doorway to the back rooms. He gestured for me to follow.

I glanced at the Omega. "Please wait here."

She bowed and I followed Thorne deeper into the Infirmary. He led me to a small room filled with glass vials and medical equipment. The door closed behind us.

"Goddess, you were right," he said without preamble.

My stomach dropped. "What?"

"I found something off in her bloodstream."

I moved closer. "What did you find?"

"When we made the cure, we didn't use any Silver Thorn Draft. It was not needed after all." He picked up a glass vial from the table. The liquid inside was dark red. "I found high traces in her system. And it would be around the time you gave her the cure."

My mind raced. "What else?"

"There was also a spike in her poison levels. Almost as if she relapsed badly."

I stared at the vial. Silver Thorn Draft. I knew that substance. "Isn't Silver Thorn Draft used as a powerful anesthesia? To prevent harmful regeneration?"

"Yes." Thorne set the vial down carefully. "But it was used on the grand Luna last night."

My breath caught. "Why would that be done if she was already in a coma?"

The words hung in the air between us.

And then it clicked.

All of it. The cure that didn't work. The mysterious relapse. The Silver Thorn Draft that shouldn't have been there.

I looked at Thorne. His expression mirrored what I was feeling. Horror. Realization.

"Goddess," I whispered. "Did our cure work?"

Thorne's jaw tightened. "I think it did."

"Then someone gave her the Silver Thorn Draft to make it look like it did not." The words felt heavy as they left my mouth. The pattern was unmistakable. "They would have dosed her again. They wanted her to stay under. To keep her in that coma."

"That is what the evidence suggests," Thorne replied quietly.

I pressed my hand against my lips as nausea rose. Everything pointed to one person. Alpha Aldric. He had been the one with unrestricted access to the grand Luna at that time. He had to be the person who sabotaged her recovery.

"Why would Alpha Aldric do this?" I asked, though the question tasted futile the moment I spoke it.

Thorne frowned. "I do not know. But this was intentional, methodical and cruel. I cannot wrap my mind around the idea that Alpha Aldric could be capable of this."

"We need to tell Cian."

Thorne's expression tightened. "I am not sure you should. Alpha Cian trusts his uncle, not lightly, not loosely. It is absolute. The moment you present this, he will be caught between the truth and the person he has relied on since childhood. The cognitive dissonance he will face will be severe, and I do not believe it will end well for anyone."

His warning settled over the room like a cold fog.

This was the truth. This was the danger. And Cian, for all his strength, would not be ready for it.

I swallowed hard. "But if we do not tell him, then what are we doing? Pretending nothing happened? What if we are right, Thorne?"

He looked away, his hand braced against the counter. "And what if we are wrong?"

The question stopped me.

He continued, voice low. "I have great doubts now. I will not pretend I do not. The evidence is damning. The access he had, the timing, the substances. It all points to him. But this is Alpha Aldric we are talking about. A man my paths are partly sworn to. A man I should say I trust with my life. Accepting that he could have done this feels like tearing out a part of my own history."

My throat tightened at the raw honesty in his words. He was shaken. Maybe even broken by the possibility.

"So you want us to do nothing," I said quietly.

"No. I want us to be certain," he replied. He finally met my eyes. "If we go to Cian with this and it turns out we misinterpreted something, even slightly, the damage will be irreversible. To him. To you. To the pack." His voice dropped to a whisper. "To the grand Luna."

My hands curled at my sides. "But if we are right, then someone tried to keep her in a coma. Someone tried to silence her. And that someone is currently in this estate. Playing Cian's loving uncle."

Before Thorne could answer, the door eased open.

We both turned.

Maren stepped inside. Her gaze flicked between us, sharp and unsettlingly focused. Her mouth was pressed into a thin line.

"What did you just say about Alpha Aldric?" she asked.

The room went still.

Thorne's eyes widened, and my heart kicked hard against my ribs.

Maren closed the door behind her, her attention fixed entirely on us. "I heard his name. And I heard enough to know you were not speaking of him kindly."

Silence hung for a heartbeat too long.

Chapter 115: Dining with the Enemy

FIA

I stood there frozen. The weight of what we'd just uncovered pressed down on my chest like a stone.

Thorne's jaw worked. He looked at Maren, then back at me. His hands gripped the edge of the counter.

I lifted my chin. "I told you what happened to the grand Luna wasn't my fault."

Maren's expression flickered. Something uncertain passed behind her eyes.

"Someone else did this," I continued. My voice came out steadier than I felt. "Alpha Aldric did this."

The words hung in the air. They sounded insane even as I spoke them. But they were true. They had to be true.

Maren's mouth opened. Just as it opened, it closed. She seemed in awe as she shook her head slowly. "Accountability cannot be that—"

Thorne straightened. "She's not lying."

Maren turned to him. Her eyes widened. "Elder Thorne—"

"I don't know if Alpha Aldric is responsible for this." He paused. The silence stretched between us. "But the cure we created. It worked."

The statement landed like a blow.

Maren went completely still. "What?"

"It's true," I said. My hands curled into fists at my sides. "The reason why Luna Morrigan had a reaction was because she was given Silver Thorn Draft. And probably poisoned

again to prevent the cure we made from working. To prevent her from waking up. To prevent ending this."

Maren's hand flew to her mouth. Her face drained of color. "Oh my Goddess."

She took a step back. Her shoulders hit the door.

"If that's true then..." She trailed off. Her gaze darted between Thorne and me. "No. No no no."

Her breathing picked up. I could see the panic rising in her chest.

"Why would Alpha Aldric do this?" Her voice cracked on his name.

"I intend to find out."

"I don't think that's a good idea." Maren's words came out rushed. Almost desperate. "If he's really the one, wouldn't he realize you're on to him?"

"I don't think so."

"Fia." She moved toward me. Her expression hardened with something that looked like fear. "Alpha Aldric can do no wrong in the eyes of Alpha Cian. This will be a difficult route for you to take. We have no definite proof. The Silver Thorn Draft situation can be explained away."

She wasn't wrong. I knew that. The reality of it sat like ice in my stomach.

"Something concrete would be needed," she finished.

I swallowed. My throat felt tight. "I'll find a way."

Thorne shifted beside me but didn't speak.

"And even if I don't, it wouldn't even matter." I looked at both of them. "If we indeed made the cure, we can make it again."

Maren's eyes widened. Understanding dawned across her face.

"I'm going for breakfast right now," I said. "You guys have to make another and give it to her."

"Is that smart?" Maren's voice dropped low. She glanced at Thorne. "Thorne already has a strike on his back because he covered for you. If we got this all wrong and we hurt the grand Luna again, we're done for."

The words struck hard. She was right. The risk was enormous. If we were wrong, if somehow we'd misread the evidence, then we were condemning ourselves. And worse, we'd be hurting Luna Morrigan all over again.

But if we were right...

Thorne spoke before I could. "It's a risk I'm willing to make." His voice was firm. Resolute. "Alone. If necessary."

"Elder Thorne!" Maren turned to him fully.

"I swore an oath to this pack and I intend to keep it." His gaze didn't waver. "Regardless of what happens to me."

Something in my chest tightened. I nodded once. "I'll be on my way."

I moved toward the door. My hand reached for the handle.

"Wait." Maren said.

I stopped and turned.

Maren stood there with her arms wrapped around herself. Her expression had shifted. The hardness was gone. In its place was something softer. Something that looked almost like regret.

"I..." She took a breath. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

The apology caught me off guard. I stared at her for a moment. Then I managed a small smile. "It's alright."

She nodded. Her lips pressed together.

I left the room and pulled the door shut behind me. The Omega straightened immediately when she saw me. Her hands folded in front of her.

"Let us go."

She bowed and fell into step beside me.

We walked through the hallways. My mind raced with everything we'd just discussed. The Silver Thorn Draft. The relapse. Alpha Aldric's access. It all pointed to him. But proving it would be another matter entirely.

And telling Cian...

My stomach twisted at the thought.

The dining room doors came into view. Tall and imposing. Light spilled through the gap beneath them.

I slowed my steps. My heart picked up its pace.

The Omega reached for the handle and pulled the door open.

I stepped inside.

The room was bright. Morning sun streamed through the windows and painted everything in gold. The long table stretched before me. Three figures sat at the far end.

Cian. Alpha Aldric and his daughter, Elara.

My feet stopped moving.

All the air left my lungs. My body went cold.

Alpha Aldric sat there like nothing was wrong. Like he hadn't possibly drugged his own sister-in-law. Like he wasn't the reason she was still trapped in that coma.

He lifted his cup to his lips. Took a sip. Set it down with a soft clink.

Elara laughed at something. The sound carried across the room.

And Cian...

He turned.

His eyes found mine immediately. The bond flared between us. Warm and insistent. It pulled at something deep in my chest.

I slammed my mental shields up. Hard and fast. Before he could sense anything. Before he could feel the churning mess of emotions threatening to spill over.

His expression shifted. Just slightly. A flicker of confusion passed across his face.

But then he smiled. "Good morning."

The greeting was casual. Easy. Like this was just another normal breakfast. Probably to him. But he didn't know what I now knew.

I forced my lips to curve upward. My face felt stiff. "Good morning."

My voice came out steadier than I expected. That was something at least.

Cian's gaze lingered on me. He was searching for something. Trying to read what I wouldn't let him see.

I kept the shields firmly in place.

Alpha Aldric turned in his seat. His smile was warm. Fatherly almost. "Luna Fia. Please, join us."

The sound of his voice made my skin crawl. I wanted to scream. To demand answers. To tell Cian everything Thorne and I had discovered.

But Maren's words echoed in my head. We had no concrete proof. Not yet.

I walked forward. Each step felt mechanical. My body moved on autopilot while my mind screamed.

The Omega pulled out a chair for me. I sat down slowly. My hands gripped the edge of the table.

"You look well rested," Elara said. Her tone was light but her eyes were sharp. Calculating.

"I am." The lie tasted bitter on my tongue.

"Hmmm." She replied. "I'm sure you are. The rooms are not exactly sound proof."

"Elara!" Aldric's tone turned authoritarian as he put his daughter in her place.

She looked back at her father and Cian while managing a curt smile. "I swear I wasn't being rude. It is just girl talk."

A servant appeared at my elbow. They placed a plate in front of me. Food I couldn't even identify through the haze of my thoughts.

Cian leaned back in his chair. His attention stayed fixed on me. "Are you alright?"

It wasn't a question. More like an observation.

"I'm fine." I managed. "I also went to check on things at the Infirmary before I came here." I looked at Aldric as I picked up my fork. My fingers felt numb as I watched it gauge his reaction.

"Dedicated as always," Alpha Aldric said. He cut into his food with careful precision. "Your commitment to your mother-in-law is admirable. I can promise you I am getting a witch to fix this madness either today or tomorrow."

I looked at him. Really looked at him.

He met my gaze without hesitation. His expression was open. Kind even. There was nothing there that suggested guilt. Nothing that hinted at the monster he might be.

How could someone hide it so well?

"Thank you," I managed.

The bond tugged at me again. Cian's confusion bled through despite my shields. He could tell something was off. Of course he could.

I needed to get better at hiding. At pretending everything was fine.

I took a bite of food. It turned to ash in my mouth. But I chewed anyway. I even forced myself to swallow.

Chapter 116: Roulette 1

FIA

I needed to start scoping him out. The thought settled in my mind as I chewed another tasteless bite of food. But how? I couldn't just ask him outright if he'd poisoned his own sister-in-law. That would be idiotic.

My gaze drifted across the table. Elara picked at her breakfast with delicate movements. She hadn't looked at me since her comment about soundproof walls.

Maybe I could start there.

"Elara."

Her head snapped up. Her fork paused midway to her mouth. "Yes?"

"Would you like to check out dresses with me?"

She blinked. "I'm confused."

"I bought a lot." I kept my tone light. Casual. "And while I had someone with an infinitely better fashion sense than mine help me out, it can't hurt to have two people look at them." I paused. Let a small smile touch my lips. "I remember you tooted your horn a little bit when we first met."

Her eyes narrowed. Just for a second. Then her expression smoothed into a smile. "Of course. Anything for you."

"It's nice that you two are growing close," Cian said.

Elara turned to him. "You make it sound like I'm someone difficult to befriend." She lifted her chin. "I have friends. Tons of them. I would need them, considering Father is always busy."

There it was. The opening I needed.

I turned to Alpha Aldric. My heart hammered against my ribs but I kept my face neutral. "Oh, what do you do, Alpha Aldric?"

He set down his knife. His smile was easy. Relaxed. "I like to build stuff." He gestured vaguely with one hand. "I wish I have a more concrete role in the pack, but I disliked the idea of entering the court of elders. Like damn, I'm still in my youth." He chuckled. "So I just focus on mundane businesses. Like giving my daughter a comfortable life."

"That seems interesting." I took another bite. Forced it down. "A simple life. So you get bored? Do you wish for something bigger?"

Aldric lifted his drink. The liquid caught the morning light as he brought it to his lips. He took a slow sip before answering. "I think everybody does." His smile widened. "It's the nature of mortals, is it not? To never be satisfied."

The words landed heavier than they should have. I nodded. "Right."

I continued eating. The silence stretched. My mind raced with ways to push further. To dig deeper. But then Aldric spoke again.

"What about you?"

I looked up. "What about me?"

His smile hadn't changed. It was still warm and very much friendly. "Rising ranks must have been hard. Do you find being Luna of such a huge pack difficult?"

"Oh, no." I shook my head and kept my voice light. "It's not like there's plenty for me to do. Lunas are mostly just pretty figureheads, aren't they?" I turned slightly toward Elara when I said it. Watched for a reaction.

Her expression remained smooth. Too smooth. She'd gotten better at controlling herself. Or maybe it was because her father sat right there. That thought made something cold settle in my stomach.

"I believe you make the reality you want," Aldric said. His fingers tapped against his cup. "Luna Morrigan was anything but a pretty figurehead. She was very involved in the political state of Skollrend." His voice held something I couldn't quite place. Pride? Hidden disgust? "She was a force to be reckoned with."

I smiled and looked at Cian. "Well, if I'm given an inch, I'll probably run a mile. What do you say, Cian? Should I be involved in the political state of this pack and more? Would you let me?"

Cian's eyebrows rose. "Well, I don't see why not. If politics is your strong suit."

"To be honest, no." I turned back to Alpha Aldric. "But I can learn." I paused and let the words sink in as usual. "You seem like you would be great in politics though."

Aldric chuckled. The sound was low. Genuine. "I wish."

"No, no. I mean it." I leaned forward slightly. "You're very charismatic." My next words came out carefully measured. "You would probably be able to run a cult well, and I say that as someone who barely knows you."

His eyes flickered. Just for a heartbeat. Then he gave a mock bow from his seat. "Wow. Thank you." He laughed again. "I don't know if that's a compliment."

"Why wouldn't it be?" I kept my gaze steady on his. "I really am just praising what I see."

Aldric nodded. "Well, thank you. But you should see Cian. He might not look it, but just like his father, he understands how the politics of a pack should work."

I smiled and continued eating. The food still tasted like nothing. "I never met my father-in-law. But I bet he was a force to be reckoned with."

"He was." Aldric's voice softened. "He will forever be missed."

I looked back at him. That ghost of a smile he wore seemed to be cracking at the edges. The corners of his mouth trembled. Just slightly. Just enough.

I took a sip of my juice. The taste hit my tongue. Sweet and tangy with something else underneath. Something familiar.

"Oh." I stared at the cup. "This tastes so unique."

The Omega behind me shifted closer. "It's a blend of fruit and herbs. Do you like it?"

I nodded slowly. "There's almost a hint of silverthorn I believe."

"I don't know if that was added to this blend, but I'm glad you enjoy it." Her voice brightened. "I'll ask the kitchen to keep note."

I turned back to Aldric. He looked just as composed as before. His posture remained relaxed. His smile stayed in place. But that was the tell, wasn't it? The fact that nothing changed. The fact that he didn't react at all.

The door opened.

Ronan walked in. The Beta moved quickly across the room toward Cian. He leaned down and whispered something low enough that I couldn't hear.

Cian nodded. He looked around the table. His eyes landed on each of us in turn. But they lingered on me. Searching again for something behind my shields.

"I have to go."

I nodded, watching as he stood. His movements were fluid. Confident. He gave one last look in my direction before he left. The door closed behind him with a soft click.

The room felt different now. Smaller somehow. More confined.

It was just Elara, Aldric, the Omega, and me.

I took another sip of juice as the silence continued to build. My eyes flicked toward Aldric.

He was already looking at me.

The expression on his face made my blood run cold. Something dark flickered in his eyes. Something that hadn't been there before. Or maybe it had been there all along, and I was only now seeing it clearly.

Then it vanished. Quick as it came. His face smoothed back into that warm, fatherly smile.

"Silverthorn?" His voice was light. Almost amused. "You sure know your herbs."

My throat felt tight. I forced myself to smile back. "I know my poisons too."

The words hung in the air between us. Heavy and loaded.

I set down my cup. The glass clicked against the table. "What about you, Alpha Aldric?" I kept my tone conversational. Like we were discussing the weather. "Are you good with herbs and poison?"

Elara's fork clattered against her plate. The sound echoed through the quiet room.

But I didn't look at her. I kept my gaze locked on Aldric.

His smile didn't waver. Not even a fraction. "I know enough." He leaned back in his chair. The movement was casual. Too casual. "One has to, in our world. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I would." My heart thundered in my chest. "It's important to know what can hurt you. What can kill you." I paused. "What can save you."

His fingers drummed against the armrest of his chair. A slow, steady rhythm. "Indeed. Knowledge is power, after all."

"And what kind of knowledge do you have?" The question came out sharper than I intended.

Aldric tilted his head. Studied me with those dark eyes. "Enough to survive. Enough to protect what's mine." His voice dropped lower. "Enough to know when someone is fishing for something."

The air between us crackled with tension. My hands clenched in my lap under the table. Every instinct screamed at me to back down. To laugh it off. To pretend this was all just innocent conversation.

But I couldn't. Not when Luna Morrigan lay in that bed. Not when Thorne was risking everything to create another cure. Not when the truth sat right across from me wearing a kind smile.

"I'm not fishing." The lie tasted bitter. "I'm just curious."

"Curiosity." Aldric's smile widened. "Such a dangerous thing, don't you think?" He picked up his cup. Swirled the liquid inside. "It can lead people down paths they shouldn't walk. Make them see things that aren't there." He took a sip. "Or make them blind to what is."

My pulse pounded in my ears. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing." He set the cup down gently. "Just an observation." His gaze never left mine. "You seem tense, Luna Fia. Is something troubling you?"

Everything about him was wrong. The way he sat. The way he spoke. The way he looked at me like he knew exactly what I was thinking and found it amusing.

"I'm fine." My voice came out steadier than I felt. "I must just be tired."

"Of course." He nodded slowly. "It must be exhausting. All this worry about Luna Morrigan." Something flickered across his face. "All this searching for answers."

The emphasis on those last words made my stomach drop.

He knew. Or at least he suspected.

I picked up my fork. Forced myself to take another bite. The food turned to sawdust in my mouth but I chewed anyway. I swallowed and made sure to smile.

"You're right," I said. "I am worried about Luna Morrigan. Anyone would be."

"Anyone with a conscience." Aldric agreed. "It's admirable. Though I wonder..." He trailed off. Let the sentence hang.

"Wonder what?"

"If all this dedication comes from genuine care." His eyes gleamed. "Or from something else entirely."

My fork froze halfway to my mouth. "What else would it come from?"

"Guilt, perhaps." He shrugged. "The need to prove oneself. Fear of what others might think." He leaned forward slightly. "Or maybe the desire to uncover something that would change everything."

Each word felt like a blade. Precise and cutting.

I set down my fork. Looked him dead in the eye. "I care about her because she's family. Because she deserves to wake up. Because whoever did this to her deserves to be found."

"Noble sentiments." Aldric's smile never wavered. "I'm sure the person responsible will be found. Eventually. Truth has a way of coming to light." He paused. "One way or another. I will make sure of it."

The threat was clear. Wrapped in pleasant words and a warm smile, but clear nonetheless.

"You think so?"

"Do you not?"

Chapter 117: Roulette 2

FIA

"Do you not?"

Silence followed.

The word hung between us. Heavy and thick. I couldn't look away from him. His eyes held mine like a predator watching prey decide whether to run.

"Goddess, you two hate each other." Elara's voice cut through the tension.

I blinked and turned toward her. She was staring at both of us with wide eyes. Her fork hung suspended over her plate.

She shook her head. Took one more bite of her food and pushed back from the table. "Whatever you all got going here, I want none of it." She stood and smoothed down her dress. "So I'll just find the pool."

Aldric's smile returned. That warm, fatherly expression that made my skin crawl. "I have no idea what you mean, but good idea, sweetheart."

She left without another word. The door clicked shut behind her.

I turned to the Omega who stood silently against the wall. My throat felt tight. "Could you step out for a minute?"

The Omega stiffened. She had to have felt it. The weight pressing down on the room. The way the air itself seemed to constrict around us.

"It's a private conversation. You must understand that."

She bowed low. "Of course, Luna."

Then she was gone too. The door closed with another soft click.

The room felt smaller now. It was just me and him. No witnesses. No buffer.

My phone sat in my pocket. I could feel its weight against my thigh. I slipped my hand down slowly. Carefully. My fingers found the device and I pressed the record button without looking.

"Are you ready to confess?"

Aldric lifted his cup. Took another long drink. When he set it down, that smile was still plastered on his face. "I really am confused about what you mean."

My hands trembled. I pressed them flat against my thighs under the table. "You poisoned your own sister-in-law. Did you not?"

He stood.

The sound of his chair scraping against the floor made my heart jump into my throat. He moved around the table. Each step was measured. Deliberate. He wasn't rushing but he also wasn't hesitating.

I gripped the edge of my seat. Every instinct screamed at me to run. To call for help. To break through those shields around the mate bond so Cian would feel my terror and come running.

But I couldn't. Not yet. I needed proof. I needed him to say it.

Aldric stopped beside me. He was so close I could smell his cologne. Something woodsy and expensive. He reached past me and adjusted my plate. Moved it half an inch to the left. Then he picked up my cup and repositioned it.

Like the arrangement bothered him. Like we were having a normal breakfast conversation and he was simply fixing the table settings.

"I..."

He paused.

The silence stretched. My heart hammered so hard I thought it might burst through my ribs. But I kept my breathing steady. I kept my face neutral even though terror clawed at my insides.

My hand tightened around the phone in my pocket.

"I believe recording is the oldest trick in the book."

His hand shot out.

I jerked back but he was faster. His fingers closed around my wrist and he yanked hard. The phone tumbled out of my pocket and he caught it with his other hand.

"Did you think I would just say I committed a crime and you would get it?" He looked at the screen. His thumb moved across it. "I didn't do anything."

He tapped. Swiped. The recording disappeared.

"You have nothing on me."

My breath came too fast. I tried to pull my wrist free but his grip was iron.

"Cian would know, you know." I managed to whisper.

His eyes flickered. Back and forth between mine. Searching. "Know what?" His voice dropped lower. Quieter. More dangerous. "Who do you think he would believe right now? The Omega who came into his life through a lie?" He leaned closer. "Or me?"

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think.

"Not that I did any wrong though." He released my wrist and I pulled it back against my chest. He tossed my phone onto the table. It skidded across the surface and stopped just before falling off the edge. "Whatever you believe I have done, you have to prove it."

I stared at him. This man who had sat across from me at breakfast. Who had smiled and laughed and talked about building things and giving his daughter a comfortable life.

This monster.

"I must have been sloppy." He straightened and rolled his shoulders back. "And I would admit that it is because I wanted to punish you."

The words hit me like a physical blow. "What?"

"But I am not the only one who has given in to my mortal nature and done something stupid." His smile was cold now. All pretense gone. "You had something over me and you revealed your cards so quickly. How stupid."

My hands shook. I pressed them together to stop the trembling.

"So now I have to make sure you go down." He tilted his head. Studied me like I was something interesting under a microscope. "It's a an eat or be eaten world and I don't want to be eaten."

"What sort of monster are you?"

"I am just like you." He said it so simply. So matter-of-factly. Like we were discussing the weather again. "Just as you are an opposition to me, I am to you." He paused. Let that sink in. "I will be kind to give you a head start though."

My throat closed. I couldn't swallow. Couldn't speak.

"Fucking my nephew will not save you." The vulgarity of it shocked me more than the words themselves. "If you want to save yourself, run now."

He lifted his hand.

"Or better still..." He pointed to my wrist and made a slicing notion across it. The gesture was made slowly. Deliberately. "Because today is the only day you will matter to him."

The blood drained from my face. My vision tunneled. All I could see was him. This man who had just threatened my life. Who had admitted to wanting to punish me. Who had poisoned Luna Morrigan and was now standing here telling me to kill myself.

He picked up my phone and proceeded to hold it out to me. "It was nice talking to you."

I took it. My fingers felt numb. Disconnected from my body.

He turned and walked toward the door. Each step was calm. Unhurried. Like he had all the time in the world. Like he hadn't just destroyed everything.

The door opened.

He paused in the doorway. Looked back at me over his shoulder. "Oh, and Fia?" His smile returned. That warm, fatherly smile. "Good luck."

Then he was gone.

I sat frozen in my chair. The phone felt like a lead weight in my hand. My chest hurt. Each breath came shallow and quick. Too quick.

He knew. He knew everything. And he had just walked away because he knew I had nothing. No proof. No recording. Nothing but my word against his.

And he was right. Who would Cian believe?

Me?

Or Aldric? His uncle. His father figure. The man who had been there his whole life. Who had helped raise him after his father died.

I looked down at my hands. They were still shaking. I couldn't make them stop.

The mate bond pulsed in the back of my mind. Still locked away behind those shields. Still hidden. I could break them right now. I could flood Cian with everything I felt. The terror. The despair. The absolute certainty that I was now afraid.

But what would that prove? That I was scared? That didn't mean Aldric had done anything. It didn't mean I was telling the truth.

It just meant I was emotional. Unstable. Exactly what an Omega would be if she was lying and getting caught. It was just stereotypical. Exactly what Aldric wanted.

I swallowed hard. My stomach rolled. I covered my mouth with one hand as nausea climbed my throat.

Aldric believed he had already won. That he had ended the game before it even began. That was why he could smile. Why he could walk away.

I stood, legs trembling. The chair scraped against the floor, loud in the empty room that now felt hollow and ruined.

I had thought I was clever, that I could trap a man like Aldric with something as simple as a recording. Instead I revealed my hand and he sank his teeth into the opening.

Run or die. Those were the choices he believed he left me with.

I looked at my wrist, at the thin blue veins beneath the skin. His gesture echoed in my mind, cold and unhurried.

I laughed. It was quiet but it stayed sharp. Nothing was funny but at the same time, it was.

Who did he think he was?

This was not a loss. It was confirmation. Absolute proof in everything except a sound file.

Alpha Aldric poisoned Luna Morrigan. He had to be entangled with Alpha Gabriel as well. His mask had slipped in front of me, and he did not even realize how much that gave me.

With Maren and Thorne, I could protect Luna Morrigan. I could watch him. I could drag him out of the shadow he hid in and force him into the light.

This was not a defeat.

This was the beginning.

And I would make sure he regretted speaking to me like I was already dead.

Chapter 118: Pushing it down

CIAN

I walked through the corridor with Ronan at my side. The fluorescent lights overhead cast everything in that sterile white glow that made the walls look like they went on forever. My boots hit the tile in a steady rhythm. Each step brought me closer to the technical department. Closer to whatever they had found.

"You're awfully jolly," Ronan said.

I glanced at him. "Well, it's a good day."

"I bet it was a good night too." His mouth curved into that knowing smirk he always got when he thought he had something on me. "The music wasn't loud enough. And the servants talk, you know."

Heat crept up the back of my neck. I kept my eyes forward. Kept walking.

"When we get Luna Morrigan up and running, you'll never hear the end of it," he continued.

"I guess we won't."

Ronan's hand came down on my shoulder. Not hard. Just a solid thump between my shoulder blades. Friendly. The kind of hit that said more than words could.

"I'm happy for you, man." His voice had lost that teasing edge. Now it just sounded genuine. "I still don't like her. But if you do, I'll warm up to her."

Something loosened in my chest. I hadn't realized how much I needed to hear that. How much it mattered that Ronan was trying. Even if he didn't understand it yet. Even if Fia rubbed him the wrong way.

"She has her soft edges," I said. "I promise you. You'll like her."

"I bet. Assuring words from a man who hated his way to... What? Love?"

We kept walking. The technical department was just ahead. Two more turns and we would be there. But Ronan wasn't done apparently.

"I'm just glad you're over Madeline now."

My feet stopped moving. The words hit me harder than they should have. I stood there in the middle of the hallway and stared at the wall across from me. The paint was the same boring beige it had always been. Nothing special. Nothing worth looking at. But I looked anyway because it was easier than looking at Ronan.

"Oh." His voice dropped. "I overstepped, didn't I?"

"No." I shook my head and forced myself to start walking again. "You know what? I really do think I have risen above it."

Ronan fell back into step beside me. "That's good. The last thing that needs to happen is a part of you still holding on to the past. It'll only hurt everyone involved."

"It's not like I'll ever see her again." The words came out easier than I expected. "Out of sight. Out of mind."

Ronan's hand shot out. He grabbed my arm and pulled me to a stop again. His expression had gone serious. All traces of that earlier humor were gone.

"Do you think that's enough?"

I frowned. "Why not?"

"It used to be a very touchy subject." He let go of my arm but didn't step back. "So it never needed to be brought up. But Madeline never got into another relationship after you. Her father even tried to get her married. But she just wouldn't agree."

My jaw clenched. I didn't want to hear this. Didn't want to think about Madeline sitting alone somewhere. Didn't want to imagine her turning down suitors because of something that happened between us and the sliver of hope that something could still happen.

"I was so certain you two would get over your hard feelings and grudges and would eventually get back together," Ronan continued. "But then you got married into the Silver Creek pack. Even if it was for your mother's sake. And now..." He paused. Searched my face for something. "It seems like things are different between you and Fia. I really hope you have your—"

"I do." The words came out sharper than I meant them to. I took a breath. Softened my tone. "I'm not hurting anybody. Not again. Just let us find out what technical has for us."

Ronan nodded slowly. "Right."

We started walking again. The silence between us felt heavier now. Weighted with things unsaid. Things that maybe should stay unsaid. The door to the technical department came into view at the end of the hall.

"I really didn't ask," I said. "But what did what I asked you result in?"

"Four sentinels and two omegas died when they retook their oath to you."

Six. Six traitors in total. Six people who had looked me in the eye. Who had sworn loyalty to this pack. To me. And then they had turned around and betrayed everything.

"What exactly did Gabriel have to offer them?"

Ronan shrugged. "A seat at the table, I guess. It would convince me." He chuckled at his own joke.

I punched his arm. Not hard. Just enough to knock him off balance for a step. "You prick."

He laughed. The sound echoed down the empty hallway. It felt good. Normal. Like we were back to being two friends walking to check on some mundane pack business instead of hunting down the bastard who tried to kill my mother.

I pushed open the door to technical. The familiar hum of computers and the blue glow of monitors greeted me. Roth looked up from his station. His glasses had slid down his nose again. He pushed them up with one finger.

"What do you have?" I asked.

The red-haired technician turned in her chair. "We checked Ophelia Cottonwood's shop and connected to the surrounding cell towers. We checked several pings to supernaturals and we didn't find any belonging to a witch or warlock. So the killer... Whoever they are... they were skilled enough to not bring phones."

My hands curled into fists at my sides. Of course they were. Of course Gabriel would make sure whoever he contacted knew how to cover their tracks.

"But we did find this."

The younger technician typed something. The main screen flickered and changed. A phone number appeared. Clear as day. Undeniable.

Gabriel's phone number.

"He was there," the technician said.

Heat flooded through me. That familiar rage that always came when I thought about Gabriel. When I pictured him standing in that shop. Talking to that witch. Planning her death. All while wearing that smug smile he always had. Like he was untouchable. Like he could do whatever he wanted and face no consequences.

"I am so sick of this bastard."

The words came out low. Controlled. But underneath them was something volcanic. Something that wanted to tear through my chest and consume everything in its path.

"At least there's definitive proof that it was definitely him." I took a breath. Let it out slowly. "Is that all?"

"That's all for now," Roth said.

"Keep up the good work."

I turned and walked out. My feet carried me back into the hallway before my mind fully caught up. Ronan followed. His footsteps were steady behind me. Familiar.

"I wasn't wrong when I said you were jolly," he said.

I glanced back at him. "What now?"

"Usually you would crash out. You're very hot-headed when you think the surface was only scratched."

Was I? Maybe I had been. Maybe the old version of me would have put his fist through the nearest wall. Made his rage everyone's problem in that moment. Consequences be damned.

But that version of me hadn't woken up next to Fia this morning.

"Well, I'm not," I said.

"What's changed?"

"The day is young." I kept walking. My shoulders felt lighter than they had in months. "My uncle will get a witch or warlock today. And I have to give someone more dancing lessons."

Ronan's laugh echoed down the hallway. "It's good to see you this way again, man. Really."

I smiled. Couldn't help it. He was right. Something had changed. Something fundamental had shifted in my chest. Where there used to be just anger and duty and the crushing weight of responsibility, now there was something else. Something softer.

"Thanks," I said.

We walked in comfortable silence. The kind that only came from years of friendship. From knowing someone well enough that words weren't always necessary. Ronan had been there through everything. Through my father's death. Through the fallout with Madeline. Through all the late nights and early mornings when the weight of being Alpha felt like too much to carry.

And he was still here. Still walking beside me. Still making stupid jokes and calling me out when I needed it.

Chapter 119: Fire Starter

ALDRIC

I made it to my quarters before the composure shattered.

The door clicked shut behind me and my hands went to the nearest shelf. I swept everything off in one motion. Books tumbled to the floor. The sound of them hitting was satisfying. Thud. Thud. Thud. Each one a punctuation mark to the rage building in my chest.

She had nothing. No recording. No proof. Nothing.

I had won.

So why did my hands shake?

I grabbed another stack of books and hurled them across the room. They hit the wall with a crash that echoed through the space. Papers scattered. One of the hardcovers left a dent in the plaster.

Good.

I turned to the wall next to my desk. Drew my fist back and slammed it forward. Pain exploded across my knuckles. The impact jarred up my arm but I pulled back and hit it again. Again. Again.

The skin split. Blood smeared across the white paint. My knuckles screamed but I didn't stop. I needed to feel it. Needed something real and immediate to anchor me because my thoughts were spiraling out in directions I couldn't control.

That Omega bitch.

I hit the wall harder. More blood. The pain felt clean. Sharp. Better than the churning mess in my head.

She had nothing. I had made sure of it. Deleted the recording right in front of her face. Watched her realize she had lost. Watched the color drain from her cheeks and the fear bloom in her eyes.

So why did I feel like this?

A laugh bubbled up from somewhere deep in my chest. It came out wrong. Too high. Too jagged. I couldn't stop it. I laughed and laughed while blood dripped from my hand onto the floor.

Slow burn. That had been the plan. Subtle. Careful. Let her destroy herself through small mistakes. Let Cian see her for what she was over time. A liar. A manipulator. Someone who couldn't be trusted.

But I didn't want that anymore.

I wanted her dead.

The word pulsed through my skull like a heartbeat. Dead. Dead. Dead.

Not ruined. Not discredited. Not quietly removed from the picture.

Dead.

I wanted to watch the life leave her eyes. I wanted to see her realize in her final moments that she had been nothing. That all her little schemes and her stupid attempts at cleverness had amounted to exactly what they deserved.

Nothing.

My breathing came too fast. I forced myself to slow it down. In. Out. In. Out.

Think.

How could I do it? How could I make sure she ended up in the ground without it tracing back to me?

The problem was Cian.

I hadn't accounted for that. I hadn't even seen it coming. My nephew was supposed to use her and discard her. Maybe keep her around as a convenient body if he was that down bad. A warm hole to fuck when he needed release. Nothing more.

But he had gone soft for her.

The stupidity... To go soft on her.

The word tasted like ash in my mouth.

Cian looked at her the way his father used to look at Morrigan. With something that bordered on tenderness. On care. On feelings that had no place in arrangements like theirs.

Variables were changing. Shifting faster than I could track them.

What else would change? What other pieces of my carefully constructed plan would fall apart because people refused to behave the way they were supposed to?

I had built an image over years. Decades. The supportive uncle. The wise advisor. The man who stepped in when Cian's father died and made sure the boy became the Alpha he needed to be for the time being.

Surely Cian wouldn't throw that away for some Omega's ramblings.

Right?

I waited for the certainty to come. For that solid foundation of knowing that I had done enough and been enough and secured enough loyalty that nothing could shake it.

It didn't come.

For the first time in longer than I could remember, I didn't have an answer.

The rage surged back. Hotter this time. More violent. I spun toward the mirror mounted on the far wall and drove my fist into it. Glass exploded outward. Shards rained down. Some embedded in my knuckles. I pulled back and punched again. The mirror spiderwebbed further. Blood mixed with glass and reflected light.

Again.

Again.

The pain was exquisite now. My hand was a mangled mess but I kept going. Kept destroying the image staring back at me. That face. That smile I wore like armor. All of it needed to break.

The door burst open.

Footsteps rushed across the floor. Hands grabbed my arm and yanked it back before I could hit the mirror again.

"What are you doing?"

I tried to pull free. Whoever had grabbed me was strong. They held on tight and spun me around.

My other hand shot out. Fingers closed around a throat. Soft. Delicate. Regardless, I squeezed.

The person made a choking sound. Tried to pry my fingers away but I was stronger. Always stronger. I could crush this windpipe. Feel the cartilage give way beneath my grip. Watch them realize they were about to die.

"Dad."

The word cut through the red haze.

"It's me. Elara."

I blinked. Focused. My daughter's face swam into view. Her eyes were wide. Scared. Her hands clawed at my wrist.

I let go.

She stumbled back. Gasped for air. One hand went to her throat. The skin there was already turning red. Finger-shaped marks blooming across her pale neck.

Horror crashed over me. Cold and sharp. "Sweetheart." My voice came out hoarse. "What are you doing here?"

Elara didn't run. She never ran. Just like her mother that way. Stubborn. Fierce. She rushed back toward me and grabbed my destroyed hand. "What the fuck happened?" Her eyes darted from my bloody knuckles to the shattered mirror to the books scattered across the floor. "It's that Omega bitch, isn't it?"

"No baby."

"Don't lie to me, father." She looked up at me. Fire burned in her gaze. So much like her mother. "I was there when she was throwing weird jabs at you during breakfast." Her grip on my hand tightened. "What did she say to you? Tell me."

An opportunity.

It opened up in front of me like a door I hadn't known was there. My brilliant, impulsive, protective daughter standing in front of me asking how she could help.

I could use this.

"You know how Luna Morrigan coded."

Elara's expression shifted. Understanding dawned. "Yeah."

"I suspected that Thorne took the fall for something he didn't do." The lie came easily. I had been telling stories for so long they felt more natural than truth. "I suspected it was actually Fia." I paused. Let that settle. "I might have been wrong."

"You weren't wrong." Elara's voice dropped lower. Harder.

"She made sure to let me know though." I pulled my hand free from hers gently. Looked at the damage. Glass glinted between torn skin. "Said now that she's closer to Cian, she

can spin any story she wants against me." I met my daughter's eyes. "Said I better watch my mouth and my back."

"That conniving bitch."

I reached out and pulled Elara into my arms. Careful not to get blood on her dress. "Do not do anything."

She stiffened against me. "But—"

"I'm telling you in confidence." I held her tighter. "She's just rattled, I guess. An Omega with sudden power." I pulled back enough to look at her face. "It must be new. Addicting and scary. I understand that."

"I don't." Elara's jaw set in that stubborn line I knew so well. "Nobody fucks with my father." She pulled away from me completely. "I'll deal with that bitch."

"Elara—"

But she was already moving. Already storming toward the door with purpose in every step.

The door slammed behind her.

I stood alone in the wreckage of my quarters. Blood dripped from my hand onto the floor. Tap. Tap. Tap.

My daughter would make Fia's life hell. She had her mother's temper and her mother's inability to let slights go unanswered. She would be vicious. Creative. She would dig at Fia in ways that couldn't be traced back to me.

After all, she had always been this way.

It was the perfect distraction.

I needed that. Needed something to occupy Fia's attention and energy while I prepared for the real play. The introduction of Madeline.

That performance would require my full focus. Every detail needed to be perfect. Every word. Every gesture. Every manufactured emotion.

I couldn't afford any more variables spinning out of control.

I looked down at my mangled hand. Glass caught the light. Blood still oozed from the deeper cuts. I should clean it. Bandage it. Take care of the damage.

But not yet.

I wanted to feel it a little longer. Wanted the pain to remind me what was at stake.

That Omega thought she could outmaneuver me. Thought she was clever enough to trap me with a recording and a few pointed questions.

She had no idea who she was dealing with.

I had survived worse than her. Had destroyed better than her. Had built an empire of influence and power on the backs of people who thought they could challenge me.

They were all gone now.

She would be gone too.

I just needed to be patient. Needed to let the pieces fall into place. Let Elara do her damage. Let Cian's attachment fray under the weight of constant conflict. Let Fia realize that she had made an enemy she couldn't defeat.

And when the moment came, when everything aligned perfectly, I would strike.

Not with poison this time. That had been too subtle. Too easy to miss or misattribute.

No. When I moved against her, it would be final. Absolute. There would be no coming back from it.

I walked to the window. Looked out at the grounds. Everything here was mine. The pack. The power. The legacy.

Some Omega with delusions of grandeur wasn't going to take that from me. Neither was some pussy obsessed nephew.

I pressed my bloody hand against the glass. Left a perfect print there. Red and stark against the clear surface.

I let it stay. I let it remind me.

This was war now.

And I always won my wars.

Chapter 120: Shattered Faith 1

FIA

I walked back to the Infirmary. My steps were faster now. Harder. Each footfall echoed in the hallway.

The Omega trailed behind me. I could hear her breathing. Trying to keep up.

My mind wouldn't stop racing. Aldric's words played on repeat. That smile. That gesture across his wrist. The absolute confidence in his voice when he told me to run or die.

He thought he'd won.

He thought I would crumble. That I would break and flee like a scared animal.

But he was wrong. So incredibly wrong.

I reached the Infirmary doors and stopped. My hand gripped the handle. Behind me, the Omega's footsteps slowed.

"Stay here."

"Luna, I—"

"Stay. Here."

My voice came out flat. Final. I didn't look back to see if she obeyed. I just pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Thorne stood near the counter. Vials and equipment spread before him. Maren hovered beside him, watching as he worked. They both looked up when I entered.

"Luna Fia." Maren straightened. "Is everything—"

"Is it done?" I cut her off. "The cure. Is it ready?"

Thorne held up a vial. The liquid inside caught the light. Golden. Just like before. "Almost. Just finishing the last step."

I moved closer. My eyes fixed on that vial like it was the only thing in the world that mattered. Because maybe it was.

Maren shifted. Her gaze darted between Thorne and me. "Are we sure about this? If we're wrong—"

"We're not wrong." I said it with more certainty than I felt. But I needed to believe it. Needed them to believe it too.

Thorne didn't respond. He just continued his work. His movements were precise. Steady. Like he'd done this a thousand times before.

The silence stretched. Maren crossed her arms then uncrossed them. She also rubbed at her temples.

Finally, Thorne capped the vial. He held it up to the light. Examined it. Nodded once.

"It's done."

He turned toward Luna Morrigan's bed. Each step was measured. Deliberate. He reached her side and looked down at her still form.

"Here goes nothing."

He uncapped the vial. His hand moved toward her feeding tube.

"Wait."

Maren's voice stopped him. She stepped forward. Her eyes found mine. "Did you get something? From breakfast? Anything we can use?"

My jaw clenched. I could still feel Aldric's fingers around my wrist. Still see him deleting that recording. "No."

"Nothing?"

"I tried to record him." The words tasted bitter. "He figured it out. Deleted everything."

Maren's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh goddess."

"But he did reveal himself." I continued. "He admitted he's the one. That he wanted to punish me. That was why he did this."

"He said that?" Maren's voice dropped to barely a whisper. "He actually said it?"

"Yes."

She turned to face the wall. Her shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. "Everyone trusts him. We all trusted him. He's been part of this pack for decades. Cian thinks of him like a father." She looked back at me. "How do we fight that?"

Thorne spoke before I could answer. "We make things right. One step at a time." He gestured to the vial in his hand. "If we can wake Luna Morrigan, it will show we made a real medical discovery. It will give Luna Fia stronger credibility. And it will ruin whatever plans Aldric has."

The logic was sound. Simple. If Luna Morrigan woke up, everything changed.

Maren stepped aside. Her arms wrapped around herself but she nodded.

Thorne turned back to Luna Morrigan. He inserted the tube into her feeding line. The golden liquid disappeared slowly. Drop by drop. We watched it drain until the vial was empty.

Then we waited.

Luna Morrigan didn't move. Her chest continued its steady rise and fall. Her eyes stayed closed. The machines beeped their constant rhythm.

Nothing changed.

I counted the seconds in my head. Ten. Twenty. Thirty.

Still nothing.

"It might not be immediate." I heard myself say. "Last time there was a delay before she responded. I wasn't here when it must have happened after all."

Thorne nodded. "That's true. We should give it time."

So we waited more. The seconds ticked into a minute. Then two. Then three.

My heart started to sink. That familiar weight pressed against my chest again.

Maren moved to Luna Morrigan's side. She checked her pulse. Her pupils. Her vitals on the machines. "She's not having an adverse reaction." Her voice was careful. Clinical. "But it's not like this did anything either."

I looked at Thorne. He stared at Luna Morrigan with furrowed brows. Confusion painted across his face.

"This doesn't make sense." My voice cracked. "If it worked before... It did work before. I saw it. You saw it. Why would it not work now?"

"We can wait longer." Maren suggested. "Maybe it just needs more time to—"

"No." I shook my head. "This isn't working. It didn't work."

The words felt like stones dropping from my mouth. Heavy and final.

My throat tightened. I swallowed hard against the pressure building behind my eyes. "Nothing worked."

Maren stepped toward me. Her hand reached out. "Luna Fia—"

I turned and walked toward the door. My vision blurred at the edges. I couldn't stay here. Couldn't stand in this room and watch Luna Morrigan lie there unchanged while my world collapsed around me.

The door swung open. I pushed through it. The hallway stretched before me. Too long. Too narrow. The walls pressed in from both sides.

I needed air. Space. Something.

My feet carried me forward. I didn't know where I was going. I didn't particularly care. I just walked. Past doors and corners and windows that let in too much light.

The estate opened up around me. I found myself outside. The morning air hit my face. It was cool and the air had a sharp bite to it. It filled my lungs but didn't ease the tightness in my chest.

I kept walking. My feet found a path. I felt the stones beneath my shoes. The grass on either side.

I didn't stop until water appeared before me. A pool. Large and still. The surface reflected the sky above. Blue and cloudless.

I hadn't been here before. I didn't even know this existed on the estate grounds.

I stopped at the edge and stared down at my reflection. The woman looking back at me seemed like a stranger. Her face was pale. Her eyes were too wide. Too lost.

Footsteps approached behind me. Soft against the stone path.

"Goddess." My voice came out rough. "I need some space please. I need to breathe."

"I'm sorry, Luna." The Omega says and I heard her retreat. I heard her steps move back several paces.

I closed my eyes and drew in another breath. I let it out slowly.

My heart rate started to settle. The pressure in my chest eased just slightly. Enough that I could think. Enough that I could—

My thoughts got muddled because I started to hear footsteps again.

They were heavier this time. Most likely because they were faster.

I turned. "I said I need—"

But when I looked, it wasn't the Omega.

It was Elara and she strode toward me. Her face was twisted with barely contained fury. Her hands were clenched into fists at her sides. Her eyes blazed.

"Is something wrong?"

She didn't answer. She didn't slow down. She just charged straight at me.

Her hand came up fast. I registered the movement but couldn't react in time.

The slap connected with my cheek. Hard. The sound cracked through the air. My head snapped to the side. Pain bloomed across my face. Hot and stinging.

I stumbled back. My hand flew to my cheek. The skin burned beneath my palm.

"What the hell—"

"You bitch." Elara's voice shook. "You absolute bitch."

I stared at her. My cheek throbbed. My thoughts scattered. "What are you—"

"You think I don't know?" She took another step forward. "You think I'm stupid?"

My heart hammered. I dropped my hand from my face. "Know what?"

"Don't play innocent with me." Spit flew from her mouth. "You think you are tough shit now because you have risen to the ranks of Luna? You think that gives you the right to threaten my father?"

The blood drained from my face. "What?"