

To ruin an Omega

#Chapter 121: Shattered Faith 2 - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 121: Shattered Faith 2

Chapter 121: Shattered Faith 2

FIA

I stared at Elara. My cheek still burned from the slap. The world tilted slightly but I forced myself to focus.

"My father told me everything." Her voice cracked with rage. "How you cornered him at breakfast after I left. How you threatened him. Told him you could spin any story you wanted now that you're close to Cian because he dared to question your involvement with what happened to my aunty."

My mouth opened but nothing came out. The accusation was so absurd I couldn't find words.

"Don't just stand there looking stupid." Elara's hands shook. "Say something. Defend yourself if you can."

"I never—"

"Liar!" She screamed it. The sound echoed across the pool. "You think I don't know what you are? What you've always been? You're nothing but an opportunistic bitch who saw a chance and took it."

The Omega behind me shifted. I heard her take a step forward.

Elara's head snapped toward her. Her eyes narrowed to slits. "If you want to scrub dungeon grounds for two months with a toothbrush, take a step forward."

The Omega froze.

Heat flooded my chest. I moved between them. "You have no right to talk to her like that."

Elara laughed. It was sharp and cruel. "Why not?" She tilted her head. "I am a Luna. Born and bred. I have every right." She took a step closer. Her breath hit my face. "If it makes you feel some kind of way, it's because you still recognize where you belong in the pyramid of things."

I swallowed. The familiar sting of classism wrapped around my throat like a noose. She reminded me of Hazel. That same entitled superiority. That same belief that birth determined worth.

But I couldn't focus on that. Not now.

"I made no threat to your father." My voice came out steady despite the trembling in my hands. "I never said any of that."

"He told me—"

"If he saw what I did say as a threat, then that is his business. Not mine."

Elara's face twisted. "You're calling him a liar?"

"Your father is a monster." The words ripped out of me. "A murderer. And you stand here and defend him?"

Her hand moved before I could react. The second slap landed harder than the first. My head whipped to the side. Stars burst across my vision. I tasted copper. My lip had split.

I held my face. Shock rippled through me in cold waves.

"You weren't kidding when you said if you were given an inch, you would run a mile." Elara's voice dripped with venom. "This is why Omegas do not deserve nice things. My father? A murderer? A monster?" She laughed again. "Says the whore who stole her sister's place because she craved Alpha dick?"

Something snapped inside me. A cord pulled too tight for too long finally breaking.

"I suggest you watch it." My voice dropped low. Dangerous. "You are starting to overstep."

Elara closed the space between us. She was so close I could see the flecks of gold in her dark eyes. "And so?" She smiled. "What will you do? Am I wrong?"

Her hand shot out. She grabbed at my collar. I slapped her hand away but the movement pulled my dress down slightly. Just enough to expose the low side of my throat.

Where Cian's bite mark sat.

Elara's eyes locked on it. She scoffed. "Just stick to fucking my cousin." She released my dress and shoved me back. "Get your grubby hands away from my aunt and stay the fuck away from my father." She leaned in. "Or I will fuck you up, whore."

Then she spat in my face.

The warm saliva hit my cheek. Slid down toward my jaw.

"That is too much, Luna Elara." The Omega's voice shook.

"I told you to shut the fuck up, bottom feeder!"

I closed my eyes. Everything inside me went still. Quiet. Like the moment before a storm breaks.

I had spent my entire life gentling my anger. Being the bigger person even when I wanted to scream. Even when I wanted to fight back. Even when every fiber of my being demanded I defend myself.

But I was tired.

So tired of swallowing my rage. Of letting people like Hazel and Elara walk all over me because I was supposed to be better. Supposed to be above it.

Hazel had humiliated me for years. Aldric had threatened my life this morning. And now his daughter stood here spitting in my face and calling me a whore.

Something inside me fractured. Split open. All that carefully controlled anger poured out like water through a broken dam.

I opened my eyes.

Elara was still standing there. Still smirking. Still so certain of her superiority.

I grabbed the front of her dress. My fingers twisted in the fabric and yanked her forward.

Her eyes went wide. "What are you—"

My palm connected with her cheek. Hard. The sound cracked through the air like a gunshot.

Her head snapped to the side.

I pulled her back. Hit her again. Harder this time. My hand stung. The impact jarred up my arm but I didn't stop.

A third slap. This one was the hardest. My palm burned. My fingers throbbed.

Elara's face turned bright red. Handprints bloomed across her cheeks. Her mouth hung open. Her eyes were huge with shock.

I shoved her back. She stumbled. Her hands flew to her face.

"You—" Her voice cracked. "You hit me."

"Yes." My hand throbbed. The pain was sharp and immediate. "I did."

"You can't—"

"I just did." I stepped forward. She stepped back. "You came here and put your hands on me. You spat in my face. You called me a whore." My voice rose. "What did you think would happen?"

Elara's shock was shifting. I could see rage building behind her eyes again. Her hands dropped from her face. They curled into fists.

"You're dead." Her voice shook. "You're fucking dead."

"Am I?" I laughed. It sounded wrong even to my own ears. Too high. Too sharp. "Your father said the same thing this morning. Told me to run or kill myself. Said today was the only day I would matter to Cian." I moved closer. She backed up another step. "But I'm still here and I will remain here. Still standing. Still breathing."

"My father would never—"

"Your father admitted he poisoned Luna Morrigan." The words poured out. "He admitted he did it because he wanted to punish me. He deleted a recording I tried to make but he said it. He said it all."

Elara's face went pale. Then red again. Then pale. "You fucking Liar."

"Ask him." I gestured toward the estate. "Go ask him right now. See what he says."

"He told me you threatened him."

"No." I shook my head. "He told you a story. He manipulated you. Used you. Because that's what he does. He lies and manipulates and destroys people." I stopped moving. "And you're letting him use you as a weapon right now."

Elara stood frozen. Her chest heaved. Her hands trembled at her sides.

For a moment I thought she might actually listen. Might actually consider what I was saying.

Then her face hardened again.

"You're poison." She spat the words. "You came into this pack and everything went wrong. My aunt, the grand Luna Luna is hooked up on machines and fucked. My father is upset and hurting himself. Cian is acting different and currently betraying one of my closest friends. It's all you." She pointed at me. "Everything was fine before you showed up."

Chapter 122: The Perfect Victim

FIA

"Was it?" My voice softened. "Was everything really fine? Or were you just not paying attention?"

"Fuck you." She turned and stormed toward the pool. I thought she was leaving. Thought this was over.

But she grabbed a pool chair. Lifted it. Started to swing it toward me.

The Omega screamed.

I dove to the side. The chair missed me by inches. It crashed into the ground where I'd been standing. Metal scraped against stone.

Elara grabbed for it again.

But this time, I did not move out of fear. I moved with intention.

Her fingers barely closed around the metal before my hand wrapped around her wrist. A simple twist. A sharp pivot of my foot. Her body turned with the force whether she wanted it to or not. The chair slipped from her grip and clattered harmlessly to the ground.

She stumbled forward with a shocked breath.

I stepped in close.

"Did you forget something?" I said. My voice was quiet. Calm in a way that made her flinch. "This whore took defense classes. Real ones. Not the pretty Luna etiquette nonsense you grew up with."

Her mouth opened but nothing came out.

"Since you want to be a classist pig who is blind to her father's sins, let me tell you something." I leaned in. My breath warm against her ear. "I might be a bottom barrel Omega. But I am the mate and bride to your cousin. I am Luna. Ruling Luna. It does not

matter if you were born and bred and classified a certain way. You will still bow to this whore."

I reached up and wiped the last streak of spit from my cheek with two fingers. Slowly. Deliberately.

Then I smeared it through her perfect hair.

Elara froze. Her eye twitched. Just once. It was sharp and preached of violence nonetheless.

I smiled.

"There it is." She murmured. "The person you showed my father. The real you. I knew the sweet innocent weak little act you put on was nothing but a mask. This is who you are."

"Okay?"

The single word seemed to throw her. Her face reddened. Her hands clenched tighter at her sides.

"You filthy creature." Her voice cracked. "You will not last here. I promise you."

"Or maybe," I said, "it is you who will not last here."

That landed. I saw it hit her. Saw the panic flicker in her eyes before rage swallowed it up.

She lunged.

Her palms slammed into my chest. She shoved with everything she had.

Then familiar feeling tugged me in my guts and I suddenly saw Cian in the corner of my eye.

He hadn't been there before. His entire body was tense. Ready to leap. Ready to tear someone apart.

I could have caught myself. Easily. My training and instincts screamed at me to balance. To turn the fall into a step. To stay standing. To remain in control.

But Elara needed a taste of her own medicine. She needed consequences. She needed witnesses.

Everyone loved a victim. I had seen it a million times. Even Hazel had played it a thousand times. If she had spent her whole life pretending she was one, it has to feel good.

Right?

So I let go.

I smiled at her.

Then I let my body fall.

The world tilted. Sky became water. Water became sky. My hair whipped back. The cold air rushed past my face.

I kept my eyes open the whole way down. Watched Elara's face shift from rage to horror as she also notices Cian. I watched her realize what she had done. What it looked like. What he would see.

The splash was loud. Cold water swallowed me in a single rush.

It shocked my system. Drove the air from my lungs. My dress billowed around me. Heavy. Dragging me down.

But I did not panic.

I floated there beneath the surface. Suspended. The world above was muffled. Distorted. I could see shapes moving. Blurred figures against the bright sky.

Cian's roar followed. Raw and vicious. It cut through even the water. I felt it in my bones. In the bond that connected us.

He was furious.

Perfect.

I kicked toward the surface. Broke through with a gasp. Water streamed down my face. My dress clung to my body. My hair was plastered to my skull.

I blinked water from my eyes and looked up.

Cian stood at the pool's edge. His chest heaved. His eyes were wild. Feral. He looked like he wanted to rip something apart with his bare hands.

Those eyes were locked on Elara.

She stood frozen. Her face was pale. Her hands still extended from where she'd pushed me. She stared down at me in the water with wide eyes.

"I did not mean..." Her voice shook. "She..."

"You pushed her." Cian's voice was deadly quiet. "I saw you push her."

"She provoked me."

"I do not care." He took a step toward her. Elara stumbled back. "You put your hands on my mate. You pushed her into the pool."

"Cian, she..."

"Leave." The word was a command. Absolute. "Now."

Elara's mouth worked but no sound came out. She looked from Cian to me. Back to Cian. Tears gathered in her eyes.

"I said leave! Before I do something I regret."

She turned and ran. Her footsteps echoed against the stone. Then faded.

Cian was at the pool's edge in seconds. He knelt down. Extended his hand.

I swam toward him. My movements slow. Deliberate. When I reached the edge, I placed my hand in his.

He pulled me up with ease. Water poured off me. Pooled at my feet.

His hands went to my face. Cupped my cheeks. His eyes searched mine. Looking for injury. For pain. For anything wrong.

"Are you hurt?"

I shook my head. Water dripped from my hair onto his hands. "I am fine."

"She hit you." His thumb brushed across my cheek. Where Elara had slapped me. "I see the marks."

His rage kept hitting new limits.

"I hit her back."

Something flickered in his eyes. Surprise maybe. Or approval. "Good."

Chapter 123: Easier

FIA

"You're wet." Cian's voice pulled me back to the present. His hands were still on my face. Warm against my cold skin. "We should get you dry."

The Omega who had been assigned to watch over me appeared at his side. She held out a towel without a word. Her eyes were fixed on the ground.

Cian took it and wrapped it around my shoulders. The fabric was soft. Warm. It soaked up some of the water that clung to my skin. He rubbed my arms through the towel. Trying to warm me up.

"I'm fine," I said.

"Are you sure?" His brow furrowed. The concern in his eyes was genuine. "I don't want you to catch a cold or something."

I nodded as I pulled the towel tighter around myself. The weight of my wet dress was uncomfortable. It clung to every curve and it made every movement feel heavier than it should.

Cian's jaw tightened. He glanced back toward where Elara had disappeared. Then his gaze returned to me.

"What was that about?"

The question hung in the air between us. I could feel the bond humming with his curiosity. His anger had cooled slightly but it still simmered beneath the surface. Ready to ignite again if I gave him reason.

I considered telling him. All of it. Every suspicion. Every piece of evidence with no definite proof I had gathered. The truth sat on the tip of my tongue.

But I sighed instead.

"Elara believed I threatened her father."

Cian's eyebrow rose. "Why would Elara even think that?"

"I really do not know."

The lie tasted bitter. I hated it. Hated that I had to hold back when part of me believed he would see reason. That he would understand. That he would help me bring Aldric down.

But Cian's anger made him blind. I had seen it myself. The way he lashed out. The way he defended the people he trusted without question. Maren had warned me. Thorne had warned me. Even my own observations had shown me the truth.

I wanted to take the risk. I wanted to trust him with this.

But I couldn't. Not yet. Not when one wrong move could let Aldric slip free. Not when it could make Cian doubt me instead.

I swallowed hard. "I guess I did sort of imply that he was the last one in the room with her and it didn't make sense that the cure had that bad of an adverse reaction on her. Elara must have heard that and gone with it."

Cian's expression shifted. The concern gave way to something else. Confusion maybe. Or disbelief.

"Why would you think that? My uncle would never do that."

There it was. The answer I had been scoping for. The blind trust I needed to see confirmed.

Cian still believed in Aldric. Completely. Without question.

"You shouldn't trust anyone that deeply," I said. My voice was quiet but firm. "Take it from me. Question everyone and everything."

"I do." His response was immediate. Defensive. "I try to at least." He paused. Looked away for a moment. "But you cannot be a one man army. You need a support system."

"Not every support system is built to last." The words came out sharper than I intended. "Take it from me. I was deceived into taking my sister's place and betrayed in the worst way possible."

His hand found mine and he squeezed gently. "I guess that's why you would be distrustful of most people."

He guided me toward the estate. His arm wrapped around my waist. Keeping me close to his side. The warmth of his body seeped through the damp towel and into my skin.

"I did try," I said. My voice softer now. "But even I wasn't invisible. When you need someone in your corner, you tend to attract the worst of people."

We walked in silence for a few steps. My wet shoes squelched against the stone path.

"I trusted Bo." The admission hurt. "Bo was one of the first people to show me kindness here and it turned out she was working for your other uncle."

Cian stopped walking. His grip on my waist tightened slightly. "Is this what you didn't want to tell me yesterday?"

"I guess." I looked up at him. Met his gaze. "It still feels like there are enemies close to you."

His jaw clenched. "You suspect my uncle?"

"I did." I paused. Let the words settle. "I'm sorry if that offends you."

"Of course not." But his tone had shifted. Grown colder. More guarded. "But I can beat my chest and tell you that Uncle Aldric would never do that to me."

I stayed quiet. Let him continue.

"A lot of people do not know this but his brother Gabriel got close to annihilating me. Aldric was who saved me." Cian's voice carried weight. The kind that came from deep conviction. "If he wanted me dead at any time, there are ample opportunities to kill me. But he did not. He was my biggest ally in securing my father's legacy. He is no beast."

I smiled. Small and tight. "I realize that now."

The lie felt heavier this time. But I kept it in place. Kept my expression neutral. Kept my heartbeat steady.

"I do apologize for my cousin," Cian said. "She has always been this way. She is a lot like her mother."

"What happened to her mother?"

"Nothing." He shrugged. "She and Aldric just drifted apart."

"It was not a match of fate?"

Cian shook his head. "No. It was a chosen bond and the goddess did not bless the bond. Not like with us."

I nodded. Absorbed the information. Filed it away for later use.

It would be difficult to convince Cian of anything truly. The blind loyalty ran deep. Deeper than I had initially thought. So I needed to find another way to show him Aldric's true colors rather than tell him.

But now that we were close to the house, my mind shifted. It drifted back to last night. To the way his hands had felt on my skin. The way his lips had moved against mine. The way my body had responded to his touch.

My heartbeat picked up. Heat flooded my cheeks despite the cold water still dripping from my hair.

"What is wrong?"

I looked up to find Cian watching me. His face was full of concern. His eyes searched mine for answers.

"Nothing." I tried to sound casual. "I'm cold I guess."

"You should shield the bond more if you are going to lie."

My cheeks burned hotter. "Well, if I did, you would figure I wanted to keep a secret regardless."

A small smile tugged at his lips. "I am free today. So would you like more dancing lessons?"

The question hit me like a physical blow. My face felt like it was on fire. The memory of his hands guiding me. The closeness of our bodies. The way he had looked at me in that moment.

"Oh." The word came out breathless. "Yes."

"We should get you changed then."

He led me inside. Through the hallways I was starting to call home. Past servants who bowed their heads as we passed. Their eyes lingered on my wet dress. On the water trail I left behind.

But I barely noticed them. My mind was too full. Too distracted.

Cian's presence beside me felt different now. Charged in a way it hadn't been before. The bond hummed between us. Warm and insistent. It pulled at something deep in my chest.

"Are you sure you're alright?" His voice was gentle. Patient.

"Yes." I forced myself to meet his gaze. "Just processing everything I guess."

He nodded. Seemed to accept that answer. "Elara won't bother you again. I will make sure of it."

"Thank you. But I can fight my own battles Cian."

"Well, I don't want you to."

My heart skipped a beat when he said that. That had to mean something deep. Right?

We reached my chambers. Cian pushed open the door and guided me inside. The room was exactly as I had left it. Though the bed was made now and Bo's blood was scrubbed clean from all the surfaces.

"I will give you a minute to change into fresh clothes," Cian said.

He turned to leave but I caught his arm. The movement was instinctive. Unplanned.

"Cian."

He looked back at me and waited. "Yes?"

"Thank you. For pulling me out. For standing up for me."

Something softened in his expression. "It is not a problem."

The word settled over me like a promise. Heavy, warm and terrifying all at once.

He left then and closed the door behind him with a soft click.

I stood there for a long moment. Dripping water onto the floor. The towel still wrapped around my shoulders. My heart still racing from something that had nothing to do with being pushed into the pool.

This was getting complicated. More complicated than I had anticipated. The bond made everything harder. Made separating my new mission from my feelings nearly impossible.

But I couldn't afford to lose focus. I couldn't let myself get distracted by the way Cian made me feel. By the way he protected me.

I had a job to do. A monster to expose. A pack to save from its own blindness.

Chapter 124: Close

FIA

I peeled the wet dress from my skin. The fabric clung stubbornly to every curve before finally releasing its hold. Water pooled at my feet. I kicked the dress aside and reached for something simpler. A loose tunic and fitted trousers. Comfortable. Easy to move in.

The newer towel felt soft against my damp hair. I rubbed until the strands were merely damp instead of dripping. My fingers worked through the tangles with practiced efficiency.

I glanced at the spot where Bo had died. Where Cian had killed her. The floor was clean now. Spotless. But I could still see it. The blood. The way her body had crumpled. The light leaving her eyes.

My reflection stared back at me from the mirror. Pale skin. Dark eyes that held too many secrets. I looked tired. Worn down by the weight of everything I carried.

But I couldn't afford to look weak. Not now.

I straightened my shoulders, lifted my chin and put on the mask I had perfected over the years.

Then I walked to the door and pulled it open.

Cian stood right there. His hand had been raised. Perhaps preparing to knock. He lowered it slowly when he saw me. His eyes swept over my casual attire and something warm flickered in their depths.

"I'm ready."

"Great." He offered his hand.

I took it. His fingers closed around mine. Warm and secure. The bond hummed with satisfaction at the contact.

We walked through the corridors in comfortable silence. My wet shoes had been replaced with soft slippers that made no sound against the stone floors. Servants bowed their heads as we passed. I wondered what they thought. What rumors were already spreading about the Omega who had been thrown into the pool by Aldric's daughter.

The ballroom doors loomed ahead. Cian pushed them open.

I stopped in the doorway and stared in.

The entire space had been repolished. The marble floors gleamed under the chandelier light. Every surface sparkled. Clean, perfect and completely unlike the chaos we had left here last night.

The scattered buttons were gone. Every single one. No evidence remained of how we had torn at each other's clothing in our desperate need to get closer.

My cheeks burned at the memory.

Cian's hand slipped from mine. He crossed the room to where a music system sat against the far wall. His fingers moved over the controls with practiced ease.

A beautiful score filled the space. Violin and piano wove together in perfect harmony. The melody was hauntingly romantic. Aching intimate.

He turned back to me and extended his hand. "You still remember our practice from yesterday?"

I walked toward him and placed my hand in his. "I told you I learn fast."

His other hand settled on my waist. Mine found his shoulder. We fell into the familiar position easily. Naturally. Like we had done this a thousand times before instead of just once.

The music swelled. We began to move.

My feet followed his lead without thought. One step. Two. Turn. The rhythm came as easily as breathing. My body remembered every correction he had made. Every adjustment. Every moment his hands had guided me into the proper form.

"Your memory is a wonder."

I looked up at him and met his gaze. "I tend to remember a lot in color."

His smile widened. "Everything?"

The hunger hit me through the bond. Sharp and immediate. It crashed over my senses like a wave. My breath caught in my throat. I swallowed hard.

Cian pulled me closer. The space between us disappeared. His hand on my waist tightened. His eyes darkened with an intensity that made my heart race.

He leaned down. His intention clear in the way his gaze dropped to my lips.

I turned my head at the last second.

His lips brushed my cheek instead. They were warm, soft and so close to where I wanted them. But not quite.

His hand came up. His fingers were gentle but firm as he craned my face back toward his. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No."

"Then why—"

"It's just that..." I paused. The words caught in my throat. How did I explain this? How did I put into words the confusion that had been building since last night without sounding desperate?

"Just what?"

I took a breath and used that to steady myself. "Yesterday was good. Nice even. But..."

His brow furrowed. "But what?"

"What is this?" The question came out in a rush. "What are we?"

"I'm confused."

I pulled back slightly. Put enough distance between us that I could think clearly. That I could say what needed to be said without getting distracted by his proximity.

"Before last night, I didn't know what we were or what I wanted from you." My voice was quiet but steady. "But I..."

The words died. Fear rose up. Sharp and bitter. Being vulnerable was dangerous. Showing someone your true feelings gave them power over you. I had learned that lesson the hard way a lot younger.

But Cian's smile shifted and they grew wider. Almost like that of a Cheshire cat in its knowing quality. Then he stepped closer and crowded into my space until I could feel the heat radiating from his body.

"You what?"

I swallowed. "I just want to know where you and I stand."

His hands came up and cupped my face with infinite gentleness. His thumbs brushed over my cheekbones. The touch sent shivers down my spine.

"Where we stand," he repeated. His voice had gone low. Intimate. "You want to know what you mean to me?"

I nodded. Unable to speak.

"Fia." My name on his lips sounded like a prayer. "From the moment you walked into my life, everything changed. I told myself it was just the bond. Just the goddess playing her games with fate and destiny. But it's more than that. So much more."

His forehead pressed against mine. Our breaths mingled in the space between us.

"You challenge me. You question everything I thought I knew. You make me want to be better. Stronger. Worthy of the way you look at me when you think I'm not watching."

My heart thundered in my chest. The bond sang with the truth of his words.

"I've spent my whole life being careful. Being measured. Making decisions based on logic and reason and what's best for the pack." His thumb traced my bottom lip. "But with you, I don't want to be careful. I don't want to hold back. You make me even see it is possible to forget my first."

"Cian—"

"Let me finish." His eyes searched mine. Desperate and vulnerable in a way I had never seen before. "You scare me. The way you make me feel scares me. Because I know what it means. I know what I'm risking by letting you in."

I held my breath and waited.

"I've been there. I've also watched people fall in love my whole life. I know and I have watched how it can destroy them when it goes wrong. I know how it makes them weak. Makes them stupid." He laughed. Soft and self deprecating. "And now here I am. Doing all the things I swore I would never do again. Feeling all the things I promised myself I would avoid."

His hands tightened on my face. He held me like I might disappear if he let go.

"You asked me what we are. What this is between us." He took a shaky breath. "We're two people who found each other in the worst circumstances imaginable. Two people who should probably still hate each other based on everything that brought us together. But instead..."

He paused. His gaze held mine with an intensity that made everything else fade away.

"Instead I find myself thinking about you constantly. Wondering what you're doing. If you're safe. If you're happy. I find myself wanting to protect you from everything. Even from the parts of yourself that are so determined to face danger alone."

My eyes stung. I blinked rapidly.

"I want to know everything about you. Your favorite color. What makes you laugh. What keeps you up at night. I want to be the person you turn to when things fall apart. The one you trust with your secrets and your fears and all the broken pieces you try so hard to hide."

His voice dropped to barely above a whisper.

"I want mornings with you. And nights. And every moment in between. I want to dance with you in empty ballrooms and argue with you about pack politics and watch you roll your eyes at me when I'm being insufferable."

A tear slipped down my cheek. He caught it with his thumb.

"So I guess I like you, Fia. I guess I might even..." He paused. The words hung between us. Heavy with meaning. "Love you."

The world stopped. Everything went still and silent except for the pounding of my heart and the music still playing in the background.

"Is that what you wanted to know?"

I nodded. Unable to form words around the lump in my throat.

"Good." His smile was pure warmth. Pure joy. "Is that enough?"

I nodded again. More emphatic this time.

"Good," he repeated, the word roughened by promise as he drew me in, erasing the last whisper of space between our bodies. His breath warmed the shell of my ear, a deliberate brush that sent a shiver down my spine. "Now bring those lips over here."

I didn't hesitate. I rose onto my toes, already leaning into him, already aching for the contact, and closed the distance.

His mouth claimed mine with a hungry certainty that stole the air from my lungs. This wasn't a gentle test or a careful start; it was raw, immediate need, the kind that spoke without words. His hands slid from my face to my waist, strong and sure, pulling me flush against him until there was no mistaking how much he wanted me. My arms looped around his neck, holding on as the room tipped and spun, as if the rest of the world had slipped out of focus.

The bond between us flared to life, a sudden rush of heat and electricity that made every sensation blaze brighter. I felt his heart pounding beneath my palms, fast and unrestrained. I tasted his desire in the kiss, sensed his emotions cresting and breaking against me in steady, overwhelming waves.

His tongue traced my bottom lip in a slow, coaxing sweep. I opened for him without thinking, welcoming him closer, letting the kiss deepen until I was lost in him—in the warmth of his mouth, in the firm pull of his hands, in the way he held me like I mattered, like I was something precious and necessary and longed for.

We only broke apart when we had no choice, when breath became an urgent need. He rested his forehead against mine, our breaths mingling, both of us still catching up.

"I've wanted to do that all day," he said, his voice low and honest.

I laughed softly, lightheaded and giddy. "Just all day?"

"Maybe longer." His thumb traced slow, absent circles on my hip, each pass a quiet promise that this was only the beginning.

Chapter 125: Bite

ALDRIC

The medic Omega worked quietly on my hand. Her fingers were gentle as she pulled glass from my knuckles. Each shard clinked into a metal tray beside her. The sound was methodical. Almost soothing.

I watched her work without really seeing it. My mind was elsewhere. Calculating. Waiting.

How had my little play against Fia gone? Had Elara been vicious enough? Had she pushed hard enough to make the girl crack?

The door burst open.

Elara rushed in. Her face was blotchy. Red. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her breathing came in short gasps like she had run the entire way.

I stood immediately. The medic's hands fell away from mine.

"What happened?"

Elara's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. No words came out. Just a strangled sound that might have been a sob.

My pulse quickened. Not from concern. From curiosity. From the need to know what had transpired. What pieces had moved on the board while I was here getting bandaged.

"Tell me." I kept my voice calm. Steady. The anchor she needed.

"She's insane, Father." The words finally tumbled out. Broken. Frantic. "She framed me!"

Perfect.

I crossed the space between us and pulled her into my arms. She collapsed against my chest. Her whole body shook.

"I warned you." I stroked her hair. Let my voice carry just the right amount of gentle reproach. "I told you not to do anything."

"I know. I know." Elara's fingers clutched at my shirt. "But she wanted... She wanted Cian to see me as an enemy." Her voice cracked. "And I think she succeeded."

I held her tighter. Felt her tears soak through the fabric. "Don't worry about this."

"But—"

"Cian is your cousin." I pulled back enough to look at her face and to let her see the certainty in mine. "He can never quite hate you."

Elara looked up at me. Her eyes were desperate. Searching for comfort. For reassurance. "You didn't see the way he looked at me, Father." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "He was repulsed."

I cupped her face in my hands. Careful of my bandaged knuckles. "Don't worry about it, baby. Daddy will take care of this."

"You mean it?"

I nodded as I let the weight of that promise settle between us.

Relief flooded her features. Then something harder replaced it. Determination. "That Omega bitch has to go." She studied my face. "You agree, right?"

I paused, letting the silence stretch just long enough. "If she poses a threat to Cian, then of course. But I believe she was just throwing her grief in the wrong place. It is a big pack and traitors were recently outed. She was even a victim of one. She must just be afraid."

Elara stiffened in my arms. Her expression shifted. Confusion. Then anger. "This is not the time to be noble, Father."

"I'm not being noble." I kept my tone measured. Reasonable. "I'm being careful."

"No." She pulled away from me. Her hands clenched at her sides. "You needed to see the sinister look on her face. It was like she got me right where she wanted me." Her voice rose. "Like she knew to egg me on so I would react exactly the way she wanted."

Interesting.

So Fia had been strategic. Calculated. She had played Elara like an instrument and my daughter had danced to every note.

Could the girl be even more dangerous than I had given her credit for if she was actually being intentional with her meddling?

"I don't think that's what happened." I let doubt creep into my voice. I made sure Elara heard it.

Her eyes went wide. "Are you defending her?"

"I'm being objective."

"I'm your daughter!" The words exploded out of her. Raw and full of hurt. "You're supposed to always be in my corner. Just like I was in yours!"

The accusation was supposed to sting, I guess. Not because it was true. But because it revealed how deeply I had hooked her. How completely she believed in this image of us against the world.

I had built that. Nurtured it. And now it was paying dividends even as it demanded more of me.

"You acted rash." I kept my voice soft. "Despite me telling you not to."

"You just wanted me to sit there while a low hanging Omega slandered your name?" Elara's chest heaved. Her face flushed darker. "She even said it was you who put Luna Morrigan in that state. The things she said... Goddess..."

She shuddered. The rage and hate rolled off her in waves I could almost feel.

Good.

I moved to her again and pulled her back into my embrace. She needed it. She needed to feel safe. Protected. "You know I wouldn't do that."

"Of course." Her voice was muffled against my chest. "But with the way Cian seems now... with her..." She pulled back to look at me. Fear shone in her eyes. Real fear. "What if she deceives him? What if she makes him believe those vile things about you?"

If Fia had real proof, If she was sure her voice was enough, I would already be in a cell right now. Or dead. Cian would have come for me with all the rage of a protective father and mate. Nothing I said would have stopped him.

But I was here. Free. Unbothered except for my self-inflicted wounds.

My swift experiment had been a success.

Elara hated Fia to the bone now. Nothing was going to change that. The girl had cemented herself as an enemy in my daughter's mind. Every future interaction would be filtered through this lens of betrayal and manipulation. Elara was vindictive. The one good trait she inherited from her bitch mother. She would want the Omega buried now.

And Fia had proven she was not a stray with all bark and no bite. She could be a creature of cruel logic if pushed. Strategic. Willing to play along just to make Elara look like the villain.

Clever, I guess.

Not that a dying dog's struggle would matter in the end.

I hugged Elara even tighter and let her feel the strength of my conviction. "That will never happen."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I know my nephew." The words flowed smooth as silk. "And I know how to handle situations like this."

Elara relaxed slightly in my arms. Not completely. But enough. She wanted to believe me. Needed to believe me.

I glanced over her head at the medic Omega still standing by the table. She had gone very still. Very quiet. Her eyes were locked on the floor.

She had heard everything.

"Please leave us." My voice carried no room for argument.

The medic gathered her supplies quickly. The tray of glass shards rattled as she picked it up. She scurried out without a word. The door clicked shut behind her.

I guided Elara to sit on the edge of my desk. She looked small suddenly. Younger than her years. Like the little girl who used to come running to me when the world felt too big and scary.

I had protected her then. Soothed her fears. Made her feel invincible.

I could do it again now.

"Tell me exactly what happened." I kept my voice gentle. Curious rather than demanding. "From the beginning."

Elara took a shaky breath. "I found her by the pool. With another Omega." She wiped at her face. "I confronted her. Told her what you said. About how she threatened you."

"And?"

"She denied it." Elara's jaw tightened. "Said you were lying. That you were a monster. A murderer." Her hands clenched in her lap. "So I slapped her."

Of course she did.

"Then what?"

"She hit me back." Elara touched her cheek. I could see the faint redness still there. "Three times. Hard."

I felt a flicker of genuine surprise. Fia had fought back? Had she actually matched Elara blow for blow instead of cowering?

Interesting.

"I tried to..." Elara's voice faltered. "I grabbed a pool chair. I was going to just scare her. But she moved. She twisted my wrist and made me drop it." She looked up at me. "She said she took defense classes. Goddess, she is an insufferable bitch."

Better and better.

"And then?"

"I pushed her." The words came out small. Ashamed. "I just pushed her. Because I was angry. I wasn't thinking. And she..." Elara swallowed hard. "She fell into the pool."

"Cian saw."

It wasn't a question.

Elara nodded miserably. "I didn't know he was there. But he saw me push her. He saw her fall." Tears welled up again. "And the way he looked at me, Father. Like I was garbage. Like I was nothing."

I processed this. Turned it over in my mind.

Fia had let herself fall. Just like Elara was, I was certain of it. A trained fighter didn't just topple into a pool from a simple push. She had choices. She could have caught herself. Could have turned it into something less dramatic.

But she had chosen the fall.

Chosen to be the victim in front of Cian.

Brilliant.

Manipulative.

Exactly what I would have done but with a lot more grace.

"She played you." I said it quietly. I let Elara hear the respect in my voice even as I condemned the act.

"I know!" Elara's frustration boiled over. "I know she did. But how do I make Cian see that? How do I make anyone see that?"

"You don't." I moved to stand in front of her. "Not right now."

"Then what do I do?"

"You wait." I reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "You be patient. You let her think she's won this round."

Elara's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Because people who think they've won get careless." I smiled. "They make mistakes. They overreach. And when they do, the people they hurt will be there to catch it."

"What if she doesn't make mistakes?"

"I frankly do not believe she is evil. But if she is this monster, she will reveal herself. Everyone makes mistakes, sweetheart." I cupped her chin and lifted her face so she had to look at me. "Everyone."

She searched my eyes. Looking for the certainty I always gave her. The absolute conviction that Daddy would fix everything.

I let her find it.

"What about Cian?" Her voice was small again. Vulnerable. "What if he never forgives me?"

"He will." I said it with complete confidence. "Blood is thicker than water. And you are his blood. She's just..." I paused. "She's just an Omega who got lucky."

The words landed exactly how I needed them to. I saw Elara's spine straighten. Saw some of that fire return to her eyes.

"You're right." She nodded. "You're right."

"I always am." I smiled. I let it be warm and almost paternal. "Trust me, baby. I've been navigating pack politics since before you were born. I know how these things work."

Elara stood. She wrapped her arms around me again. This time not from fear or desperation. But from gratitude. From love.

"Thank you, Father."

"Always." I held her close. Breathed in the scent of her hair. Let myself feel something almost genuine for just a moment.

Then I let it go.

Because genuine feelings were dangerous. They made you weak. Made you vulnerable. Made you do stupid things like Cian was doing right now with his little Omega mate.

I had learned that lesson long ago.

Elara pulled back. She wiped the last of her tears away. "I should go."

"Good idea." I walked her to the door. "And Elara?"

She turned back.

"No more confrontations." I made my voice firm. "Not until I say so. Understood?"

She hesitated. I could see the rebellion brewing. The desire to strike back. To hurt Fia the way she had been hurt.

"Understood?"

"Yes, Father." The words came reluctantly. But they came.

Good enough.

She left. The door closed behind her with a soft click.

I stood there for a long moment. Staring at the wood grain. Processing everything.

Fia had shown another of her hand today. She could be smart, strategic, willing to take hits if it meant winning the larger game. And it was almost like she wanted to send a message to me that she had Cian wrapped around her finger tightly enough that he would turn on his own cousin for her. And soon enough, me.

That was dangerous.

Very dangerous.

But not invincible.

No one was invincible.

I looked down at my bandaged hand and flexed my fingers. Pain shot through my knuckles but it was manageable now. Dulled by whatever the medic had given me. It would heal in a few hours anyway.

The game was getting more complex. More variables than I had planned for. But that just made it more interesting.

I had played against skilled opponents before. Had won against people who should have destroyed me.

Fia thought she was clever. Thought she had created a rift that would weaken my position.

What she didn't understand was that I had been in this game for a long time. And I didn't play to lose.

I did get something from this though. Oh... now I knew.

Now I understood what I was really dealing with.

A worthy opponent.

Not worthy enough to win. But worthy enough to make this interesting.

I walked back to the window. The sun was starting to reach its peak. The heat was insufferable.

Beautiful.

Chapter 126: Covert 1

CIAN

I kissed her again because I couldn't help myself.

My hands found her waist and I pulled her closer. The bond hummed with contentment. With rightness. Like every piece of my life had finally clicked into place.

Fia's fingers tangled in my hair. Her body pressed against mine. Soft, warm and perfect. The music still played in the background but I barely heard it anymore. There was only her. Only this.

I deepened the kiss. Tasted her. Let myself drown in the sensation of having her in my arms. Of knowing she was mine and I was hers and nothing else mattered.

She made a small sound in the back of her throat. Need and surrender all wrapped together. The bond flared bright with desire. With emotion so intense it made my chest ache.

I had meant what I said. Every word. I loved her. The realization still felt new. Raw. But undeniable.

Breaking the kiss took more willpower than I wanted to admit. I rested my forehead against hers. Our breaths came quick and uneven. Her heart raced under my palm.

"I could do this all day," I murmured.

She laughed softly. The sound made me want to kiss her again. "You probably have other things to do later."

"They can wait."

"Cian."

"I'm serious." I traced the curve of her jaw with my thumb. "They can all wait."

She smiled and shook her head but I felt her happiness through the bond. Pure and unguarded. It wrapped around me like sunlight.

A knock echoed through the ballroom.

I groaned. "You've got to be kidding me."

The knock came again. Sharper this time. More insistent.

I pulled back reluctantly. My hands lingered on Fia's waist for another heartbeat before I let go. "Who is it?"

The door opened slowly.

Aldric walked in.

My uncle looked tired. Worn down in a way I hadn't noticed before. But what caught my attention was the bandaging wrapped around his hand. White gauze stark against his skin.

I crossed the space between us quickly. "Are you alright, Uncle?"

Aldric waved his injured hand dismissively. "It's fine. I had a little accident. That's all."

Something shifted in the air. A tension I couldn't quite name.

I glanced back at Fia. She stood exactly where I had left her. Her posture was rigid. Too rigid. Her face gave nothing away but through the bond I felt something change. Her contentment twisted. Morphed into something darker.

Worry. It was sharp and sudden. She was full of it too.

Then fear.

The emotion hit me like a physical blow. Crippling terror that made no sense. Nothing had happened. Nothing had changed except Aldric walking into the room.

I looked between them. Aldric's expression was neutral. Pleasant even. Fia's face remained perfectly composed. But the bond told a different story. It screamed warnings I didn't understand.

Why was she so frightened?

Aldric had and would never do anything to hurt her. He had been nothing but welcoming since he arrived. He was the most supportive person I knew. Kind even in his own measured way.

But Fia was terrified of him.

The realization settled in my gut like a stone. I had felt her fear before. During the Omega's attack. That time when she talked about her past. But this was different. This was immediate. Present. Real.

I needed to understand this. Needed to figure out what had put that fear in her. And I needed to show her that whatever she believed about Aldric, she was wrong. He was my uncle. My father's one good brother. The man who had helped raise me with my mother after my father died.

He wasn't a monster.

"Why are you here?" I kept my voice level.

Aldric smiled. "I was initially looking for you to tell you about developments with the witch I promised to find." He paused. "But I also bumped into my daughter. She told me what happened."

My jaw tightened. Elara. Of course.

Aldric walked toward Fia. His steps were slow. Deliberate. Non-threatening. But I felt Fia's fear spike through the bond. She didn't move. She didn't even react outwardly. But inside she was screaming.

"I heard the horrid things my daughter said to you in her anger," Aldric said. His voice was gentle. Apologetic. "I'm sorry that she misinterpreted what I said to her."

He bowed. Actually bowed. Low, formal and completely sincere.

"It will never be able to suffice for the shame and humiliation but I hope you forgive my foolish child."

Fia went completely still. The fear through the bond intensified until it was almost overwhelming. Like she was standing on the edge of a cliff and couldn't see the bottom.

I moved without thinking. I crossed back to Aldric and put a hand on his shoulder. "Uncle, this is no fault of yours."

I made him straighten. I practically forced him to stop bowing. He shouldn't have to apologize for Elara's cruelty.

"It's Elara who needs to apologize," I said firmly.

"It was because of me she reacted that way." Aldric's expression was troubled. He was genuinely upset.

"No." I shook my head. "I saw her. She was callous and cruel. Even if she was mad and misunderstood what you said to her, it didn't warrant a reaction like that."

The memory of Elara shoving Fia into the pool flashed through my mind. The cold calculation in her eyes. The satisfaction when Fia hit the water.

"If it was anyone else, they would suffer and rightfully so," I continued. "Her privilege blinds her."

Aldric bowed again. This time to both of us. "That is precisely why I must apologize. For not training my daughter well enough." He looked at me. Then at Fia. "I'm sorry, Alpha Cian. I'm sorry, Luna Fia."

The formality of it struck me. He never called me Alpha unless we were in official settings. We tried not to use titles with family.

I looked at Fia. "Do you forgive my uncle?"

She smiled then. But the bond shifted. Something slammed it shut. She had a shield going up between us. Blocking me from feeling her emotions. From mostly sensing what seemed to be going on in her mind.

The sudden absence was jarring. Like losing a sense I had grown dependent on.

"You didn't do any wrong," Fia said. Her voice was steady. Warm even. "If Elara is indeed sorry, she can come here and beg sincerely like you have and I will forgive her."

Aldric nodded. Relief crossed his features. "Thank you, Luna Fia. Your grace is appreciated."

He turned back to me. The moment shifted. Business replacing personal matters.

"On to the next matter," Aldric said. "I found a witch."

My attention sharpened. "Already?"

"Yes. But she says she will only be available tomorrow." He paused. "I intend to ditch Alpha Knight's wedding and stay back to help her acclimate while she helps with the Grand Luna's condition."

The shield on the bond vanished.

Fear crashed into me. Not my fear. Fia's. It slammed through the bond with enough force to make me stagger. Overwhelming. Crippling. Terror so absolute it stole the breath from my lungs.

It was a warning.

She was warning me without words. Without speaking. Because she couldn't. Or wouldn't. But she needed me to know.

Needed me to understand that something was wrong.

I steadied myself and tried to process the conflicting information. Aldric stood there looking helpful and concerned. Exactly like he always did. Exactly like the uncle who had taught me to fight, negotiate and lead.

But Fia was terrified.

And she was trying to tell me something.

Chapter 127: Covert 2

FIA

The terror slammed through me so hard I thought I might collapse.

Aldric wanted to stay behind. Wanted to be here while everyone else was at the wedding. While the estate would be nearly empty. While Morrigan would be most vulnerable.

This was it. This was his move.

My hands trembled. I clenched them into fists and tried to keep my breathing steady. Tried to keep my face neutral. But the fear was suffocating. Overwhelming. I couldn't think past the screaming panic in my head.

I dropped the shield and let everything I felt crash through the bond.

I let Cian feel the absolute terror coursing through my veins. It was a gamble. A desperate attempt to communicate what I couldn't say out loud. Because how could I? When he was here being humble and smiling and pretending to be anything but a snake?

But I had to try.

Cian went still. His eyes found mine across the room and something shifted in his expression. Recognition maybe. Understanding. I didn't know. But he looked at me like he was seeing something he hadn't noticed before.

"That isn't necessary, Uncle," Cian said.

My breath caught.

Aldric's smile didn't falter. "It is not a bother at all." His gaze slid to me for just a second. It was still pleasant. It was still kind. But I saw something flicker beneath the surface. Rage. Cold and calculating rage that made my blood run cold.

He was furious that I had somehow interfered.

"It will be weird if you aren't at Julius's wedding," Cian continued. His voice was casual but firm. "You two and Father were close after all before the rift happened. I would rather let sleeping dogs lie especially now that Julius was the first to toss the white flag."

"Who cares what they think?" Aldric kept his tone light yet dismissive. He had a way and an art with his words. "Morrigan is the priority."

"I'll have Ronan stay back."

The relief that flooded through me was immediate and just as intense. Ronan. Beta Ronan would be here. Someone strong. Someone capable. Someone who could fight if Aldric made his move.

I breathed out slowly and tried to steady my racing heart.

"Cian, it is not a bother," Aldric said again. His smile was still in place but I caught the edge in his voice. The annoyance he was trying to hide.

"I insist."

The silence stretched. Aldric's jaw tightened. Just barely. Just enough for me to notice. He swallowed like the words tasted bitter.

Then he smiled again. Wider this time. More forced. "Of course."

"I will leave now," he added.

"No problem at all," Cian replied.

Aldric turned and walked out. The door closed behind him with a soft click. The moment he was gone I felt like I could breathe again. Like the oppressive weight pressing down on my chest had lifted just enough for me to function.

Cian crossed the space between us. His eyes searched my face. "Do you feel alright now?" He paused. "Did I do well?"

"Yes." The word came out steadier than I expected.

"But why did you do it?" I asked. "It looks like you trust him deeply and nothing I say seemed like it would change your mind."

Cian's expression softened. "Because I want you to see that Aldric is nothing like what you seem to also believe."

I didn't know what to say to that. I didn't know how to explain that his faith in his uncle was exactly what Aldric was counting on. That trust was a weapon. And Aldric wielded it better than anyone.

"We should continue dancing," Cian said. He reached for my hand.

"I'm actually a bit famished." The lie came easily. Too easily.

"I will get the Omegas. They can get drinks."

"I actually want to lay down."

Cian tilted his head and studied me with an intensity that made me want to look away. "Are you being dishonest again? Your shields are up."

Damn it. I hadn't even realized I had thrown them back up. The habit was so ingrained. So automatic. Protecting myself was second nature.

"I guess it is just a bit hard," I admitted. "Being vulnerable."

His expression shifted into something gentler. There was more understanding in his gaze.

"But I am not hiding anything from you," I added quickly. "I promise."

Cian closed the remaining distance between us. He took my hand and turned it over. He studied my palm like it held answers to questions he hadn't asked yet. His thumb traced the lines there. Gentle yet reverent.

"Should I join you?"

Heat rushed through me despite everything. Despite the fear still coiled tight in my chest. "I'm sore."

He chuckled. The sound was warm and entirely too pleased with himself. "I didn't say I want to do anything." He tapped my forehead lightly. "You sure have a dirty mind."

A knock echoed through the ballroom before I could respond.

"Open," Cian called out. "It is open."

Two Omegas walked in. They bowed slightly. "Aloha Cian, we apologize for disturbing but the tailored piece is ready and they are ready for the fitting in case there is a need to make quick adjustment."

Cian sighed. "Well, I guess I have to go." He looked at me. "See you."

He pressed a quick kiss to my temple and left. The door closed behind him and the silence that followed felt heavy. Suffocating.

I walked to the record player and turned it off. The music died and the quiet that replaced it was almost worse. My thoughts were too loud now. Too chaotic.

I had to talk to Beta Ronan.

The realization settled over me like a weight. I barely knew the man. Our one conversation had made it abundantly clear he didn't like me. Didn't trust me. Probably wished Cian had chosen someone else as his mate.

But I had no choice.

This witch that Aldric had found. I didn't know what to think about her. She could be legitimate. She could be someone genuinely trying to help. Or she could be working with Aldric. Another piece in whatever plan he was putting together.

I had to warn Ronan. I had to make him understand that something was wrong even if I couldn't prove it. Even if it made me look paranoid or crazy.

How would I even start that conversation? How would I look him in the eye and tell him that the Alpha's beloved uncle might be planning something terrible? That the man everyone respected and trusted was actually a threat?

I shook my head. I was overthinking this. Overthinking how Ronan would react. How he would look at me. What he would say.

I just had to fucking do it.

I left the ballroom. A sentinel stood in the hallway and I turned to him. "Do you know where I could find Beta Ronan?"

"Beta Ronan is at the training grounds," he replied.

I thanked him and headed in that direction. The walk gave me too much time to think. Too much time to second guess myself. To imagine all the ways this could go wrong.

The training grounds were behind the estate. Set back far enough that the noise wouldn't disturb anyone inside. I could hear the sounds before I saw anything. Grunts. The thud of fists against flesh. The scrape of boots against packed earth.

I asked around until someone pointed me toward the back section. Away from the main area where most of the sentinels trained.

The scene that greeted me was brutal.

Beta Ronan was in the center of a cleared space. Two sentinels circled him. Both looked experienced. Both moved with the confidence of trained fighters.

Ronan moved like water. He was fluid in his movement, yet controlled and mostly devastatingly efficient.

He ducked under a punch then drove his fist into the first sentinel's ribs hard enough that I heard the impact from where I stood. The sentinel staggered back. Ronan pivoted, caught the second sentinel's arm mid swing and twisted. The sentinel went down with a pained shout.

The first sentinel recovered and came at Ronan from behind. Ronan spun at the last minute. His elbow connected with the sentinel's jaw. The man dropped like a stone.

The second sentinel was back on his feet. Determination written across his face. He lunged. Ronan sidestepped, grabbed the sentinel's wrist and used the man's momentum against him. The sentinel went airborne then crashed to the ground hard enough to knock the wind from his lungs.

Ronan was on him in an instant. Knee pressed to the sentinel's chest. Hand wrapped around his throat. Not choking. Just holding. Establishing dominance.

"Submit," Ronan growled.

The sentinel tapped twice against Ronan's arm. The universal signal.

Ronan released him immediately. Stood. Rolled his shoulders like he had just finished a light warm up instead of taking down two trained fighters at once.

Then his eyes found mine.

He smiled.

It wasn't friendly. It wasn't welcoming either. It was the smile of a predator who had just spotted prey wandering into its territory.

Chapter 128: A Better Beta

FIA

Ronan straightened from his crouch over the sentinel. His chest rose and fell with steady breaths. Sweat gleamed on his skin. His eyes never left mine.

He crossed the training ground. Each step was deliberate. Measured. The kind of walk that said he owned the space and knew it.

"Luna Fia." His voice carried across the distance between us. "What brings you all the way out here?"

I forced myself to stand taller. To not look like I was interrupting. To not feel small under his scrutiny. "I need to speak with you."

He stopped a few feet away. Close enough that I had to tilt my head back slightly to meet his gaze. The corner of his mouth twitched. "Want to spar?"

My brain stuttered. "What?"

He laughed. The sound was low and somehow managed to feel condescending. "Kidding."

Heat rushed to my face. There was nothing embarrassing about this. This was just anger. "What? You think I can't?"

"Well..." He trailed off. His expression said everything his words didn't.

I scoffed. "Because I'm an Omega? Because we Omegas can't function?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you meant it though."

Ronan raised his hand. Palm out. The universal gesture for peace. "I apologize. I didn't think you would get that triggered."

Triggered. Like my reaction was an overreaction. Like I was being sensitive. I bit the inside of my cheek hard enough to taste copper.

"Contrary to popular opinion," I said carefully, "many of us can defend ourselves. In fact, it's a prerequisite." I paused and let that sink in. "But I'm not here to fight you."

His eyebrows lifted slightly. Interest replaced the mockery in his expression. "What could that be about?"

I glanced around. The other sentinels had moved back to their own training. They weren't listening. Or at least they were pretending not to. But sound carried out here. So I lowered my voice anyway.

"Cian will ask you to stay back tomorrow. When we go for Alpha Knight's wedding."

Ronan shrugged. "Not an issue. I didn't feel like faking smiles anyway."

"That's not it." I took a breath. This was the hard part. The part where I had to sound rational while saying something that would make me look paranoid. "Alpha Aldric is bringing a witch. If you do stay by Luna Morrigan's side, you need to watch what she does. Be very careful with her."

His expression shifted. The casual dismissiveness faded. He studied me with an intensity that made me want to look away. "I always am. But what for? You seem on edge."

You wouldn't believe me. The words almost came out. I caught them just in time and shook my head instead.

But fuck, I couldn't bottle shit in without speaking it. It was getting exhausting.

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Try me."

I stared at him. I searched his face for any sign that he was humoring me. That he would take whatever I said and twist it into proof that I was unstable. Unfit. That I would turn around and find out he had gone straight to Cian with concerns about my mental state.

But his expression was steady. Open even as he waited.

"Cian might be blinded," I said slowly. Each word felt like pulling teeth. "But you're his Beta. You have to see things more objectively." I paused. "With everything that you have in you, can you say that Alpha Aldric is a good person who wants the best for the pack?"

Ronan's expression changed.

It was subtle. Just a flicker of something crossing his features. But I recognized it. I had seen Cian make that same face in the ballroom. When I had let my terror crash through the bond. When he had looked at me like pieces of a puzzle were starting to fit together in ways he didn't like.

The realization hit me like cold water.

Aldric's charm worked on most people. On everyone except those who were really paying attention to what he was doing. Those who weren't too close to see clearly or too far away to notice the details. Ronan occupied that middle ground. Close enough to observe but distant enough to question.

My heart sank anyway. Because recognizing the look didn't mean Ronan would admit to anything. It didn't mean he would help. He could acknowledge the discomfort and still choose to ignore it. To pretend everything was fine because that was easier than facing the alternative.

"You know what?" I shook my head. "Forget it. Just watch Luna Morrigan please."

I turned to leave. My hands were shaking again. I shoved them into my pockets and focused on putting one foot in front of the other. On getting away before I said something else. Before I made this worse.

"I didn't give my reply yet."

Ronan's voice stopped me mid-step.

I turned back slowly. Half afraid of what I would see. Half afraid he would be looking at me like I was crazy after all.

"What?"

He moved closer. His voice dropped lower. Quiet enough that no one else would hear. "I used to think I was crazy."

My breath caught.

"But Goddess no." He shook his head. Something like relief crossed his features. "There's something off about that man."

The world tilted.

My heart literally floated. It rose up in my chest until I thought it might burst right through my ribs. Someone else saw it. Someone else felt it too. Maren, Thorne and I weren't alone in this.

"You see it?" The words came out barely above a whisper.

"I see something." Ronan's jaw tightened. "I can't put my finger on it. He's always pleasant. He's always helpful. He says the right things. Does the right things." He paused. "But it feels rehearsed. Like he's playing a part."

I nodded. My throat was too tight to speak.

"Cian's blind to it," Ronan continued. "He was impressionable when his father died. Aldric stepped in. Helped raise him. Taught him everything. In Cian's mind, Aldric is practically a saint." He looked at me. "But I've been watching for years. There are things that don't add up."

"Like what?"

"Small things. The way he positions himself. The way he guides conversations. How he's always there at the right moment to offer advice that just happens to benefit him in the long run." Ronan's expression darkened. "And the way people who question him too

loudly tend to transfer away. Or find themselves reassigned. Or suddenly decide pack life isn't for them."

My stomach dropped. "Has he ever done anything directly?"

"No. That's the problem. There's never anything concrete. Nothing I could take to Cian without sounding paranoid." His eyes met mine. "Until now maybe. Do you think the witch is part of something?"

"I think the timing is convenient. Morrigan's condition worsens. Alpha Knight extends an olive branch. A wedding that will pull most of the pack's leadership away. And suddenly Aldric has a solution that requires him to stay behind." My voice was flat. Matter of fact. "Too convenient."

"You make it sound like you know him inside out."

"I am just putting the pieces that fit together."

Ronan nodded. "What else do you know?"

Chapter 129: Believe me, Thomas 1

FIA

The silence stretched between us. Ronan's eyes stayed on mine. Waiting. Patient in a way that made my skin prickle.

I knew how this would sound. Insane. Paranoid. The ravings of someone who had already been labeled a liar and a manipulator. But he was standing here. He was listening. He saw something wrong with Aldric too.

Maybe that would be enough.

"It sounds insane," I said finally.

"Most things worth saying do."

I looked past him. At the sentinels scattered across the training ground. They were far enough away. Their own conversations would drown out ours. I would like to think so. But paranoia still crawled up my spine like spiders.

"When the Grand Luna coded," I said quietly, "it was an intentional act."

Ronan's expression didn't change. He just watched me as he waited for me to continue.

"Alpha Aldric poisoned her again."

That got a reaction. His eyebrows drew together. Not quite a frown. More like he was trying to work through a math problem that didn't make sense.

"Poisoned her," he repeated slowly.

"Yes."

"Again."

"Yes."

"Why?" He tilted his head slightly. "She was already under. Already dying. What would be the point if he didn't succeed in killing her?"

"I don't know. But I know he wanted her dead. It might have been because she was waking up."

The words hung between us. Ronan stared at me. His face was blank. Carefully blank. The kind of expression someone wore when they were trying very hard not to show what they were thinking.

"The Grand Luna was waking up?" he said. His tone was flat. Neutral. The kind of voice lawyers used when they were leading witnesses toward admissions.

"Yes."

"From a magical coma induced by alchemized poison that no one in our pack has been able to cure because we aren't witches or warlocks."

My hands clenched in my pockets. "Yes."

"Luna Fia." He said my name like he was trying to be patient. Like he was talking to someone who needed to be handled carefully. "You have to see how that sounds."

"I know how it sounds."

"Do you?" He took a step closer. It was not in aggressive manner. He simply wanted to be closer. "Because it sounds like you're claiming something impossible happened. And that Aldric somehow knew about it and acted to prevent it."

"I'm not claiming anything," I shot back. "I'm telling you what happened."

"Right." He nodded slowly. "And how exactly did the Grand Luna start waking up from poison that's supposed to be incurable?"

My throat tightened. This was the part I couldn't explain. The part that would make me sound even crazier. But I had already started. Backing out now would just make everything worse.

"We made a cure."

Ronan blinked. "We."

"Yes."

"We," he repeated. "As in you and who else?"

"Thorne and I."

"Thorne." His voice was still flat. Still neutral. But something flickered behind his eyes. "The healer."

"Yes."

"The healer made a cure for alchemized poison." He paused. Let that statement sit between us. "Last I checked, he's not a witch and he is nothing like the true ones that existed during the age of legends."

"He's not."

"So how did he cure magical poison?"

I wanted to grab him. To shake him until he stopped using that calm reasonable tone and just listened. But that would only make things worse. So I forced myself to stay still. To keep my voice level.

"You really have to believe me here."

"I'm trying." He held up his hands. "But you're not making it easy."

"We found a way," I said. "I don't know all the details. Thorne handled most of it. But we made something that worked."

"And you know the cure that was made did this because? It could have been anything else."

"Because I gave it to her."

The silence that followed was deafening. Ronan stared at me. His expression shifted from careful neutrality to something harder to read. Calculation maybe. Or suspicion.

"You gave it to her," he said slowly.

"Yes."

"Not Thorne."

"No."

"But Thorne took the fall for it."

My chest tightened. "Yes."

"So you're telling me that you administered an experimental cure to the Grand Luna. That Thorne covered for you. And that she started waking up because of it."

"Yes."

He shook his head. Not denial exactly. More like he was trying to process information that didn't fit into any framework that made sense. "Forgive me. But that feels like another lie."

The words hit harder than they should have. I knew he would doubt me. I knew that my history made everything I said suspect. But hearing him say it still hurt.

"It's not a lie."

"Then why did Thorne take the blame?"

"Because he felt he owed me. Who the fuck knows!"

"Doesn't explain why. And I am trying so hard to believe you."

"Because..." I stopped. Because admitting the truth would mean admitting how powerless I really was. How easily I could be dismissed or punished. How little my word meant compared to theirs. "Because it was safer for me that way. Imagine how Cian would have been if the blame was thrown at me?"

Ronan studied me. His eyes moved over my face like he was searching for cracks in my story. For signs of deception or delusion.

"Okay," he said finally. "Let's say I believe that. Let's say you somehow cured her. What does that have to do with Aldric?"

"After she coded, we did a blood test."

"We." His tone sharpened slightly. "You and Thorne again."

"Yes."

"And this blood test showed what exactly?"

I met his eyes. Held his gaze even though every instinct screamed at me to look away. "Trace amounts of an anesthetic. Something that would slow down healing. Make her weaker. Silver Thorn Draft."

"And?"

"And more of the poison. In lethal doses."

His jaw tightened. "You're saying someone gave her more poison after you supposedly cured her."

"I'm saying Aldric did."

"Because?"

"Because she was waking up. Because maybe she would have known something and she would have told everyone what really happened. Because he couldn't let that happen. Plenty things do come to mind. So stop being a doubtful Thomas."

Ronan was quiet for a long moment. He looked away. Looked at the training ground. At the sentinels sparring in the distance. When he looked back at me his expression was guarded.

"You understand what you're accusing him of," he said quietly.

"I do."

"This isn't just scheming or manipulation. You're saying he tried to kill the Grand Luna. Multiple times."

Chapter 130: Believe me, Thomas 2

FIA

"Yes."

"That's..." He trailed off. Shook his head. "That's a massive accusation."

"I know."

"It could destroy the pack if it came out."

"I know."

"And you have what? A blood test that could be explained a dozen different ways? A theory that hinges on you secretly curing magical poison with no explanation for how?"

My hands were shaking again. I pressed them harder into my pockets. "I know how weak it sounds."

"It's not weak," he said. "It's insane. For lack of better word and forgive me if I sound rude."

The word hit like a slap. I flinched before I could stop myself.

"You're forgiven. Just sit with it."

Ronan sighed. He rubbed his face with one hand. When he dropped it he looked tired. "I believe Aldric is a schemer. I believe he wants to be indispensable to Cian and this pack. I believe he's manipulative and self-serving." He paused. "But wanting to kill the Grand Luna? That's too far. It wouldn't even make sense."

"Why not?"

"Because she's already incapacitated. Already out of the way. Killing her would just raise questions. Draw attention. Why take that risk?"

"Because she was waking up."

"You keep saying that," he said. His voice was sharper now. "But you're forgetting something. She's poisoned and being kept under by literal magic. Even if she did wake up temporarily, the poison would still be there. The magic would still be there. She'd just slip back under."

"About that..." I started.

His eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Did you not hear me? The cure worked. She was actually waking up. Getting better."

"In a few hours?" He stared at me. "You're telling me that you cured poison that's had her unconscious for days and she just started recovering immediately? With no magic involved? Just herbs and vibes?"

Oh, I hated him so much. But he was right to question me so hard.

"I know it sounds impossible."

"Because it is impossible."

"But it happened."

Ronan took a step back. Put some distance between us. When he spoke again his voice was careful. Too careful. "Luna Fia. I want to help you. I do. But you're asking me to believe something that defies logic. That contradicts everything we know about how magic and poison work."

"I'm not asking you to understand it," I said desperately. "I'm just asking you to trust me."

"Trust you." He said it like he was tasting the words. Testing them. "Based on what exactly? Your track record? Your proven reliability?"

The sarcasm stung. But he wasn't wrong. My track record was shit. Thanks to Hazel. Every reason he had to doubt me was valid.

Still. I couldn't just walk away. Not when I was this close to having someone on my side.

I moved forward and grabbed him by both shoulders before I could think better of it. He stiffened under my hands but didn't pull away.

"You really really have to believe me here," I said. My voice came out raw. Desperate. "I know how it sounds. I know my word means nothing to most people. But I'm telling you the truth."

He looked down at my hands on his shoulders. Then back up at my face. Something shifted in his expression. Not belief exactly. But maybe the possibility of it.

"Let's say everything you're telling me is true," he said slowly. "Let's say Aldric poisoned her again. That he's actively trying to keep her under. What do you want me to do about it? I need something concrete to take him down. Do you have that?"

"No. But that is why I am here. Watch him moving forward. He'll be less suspicious of you. Watch the witch he's bringing. Don't let them anywhere near Luna Morrigan without supervision."

"And if you and I see something suspicious?"

"We stop it. Whatever it is. We don't let him hurt her again."

Ronan was quiet. His eyes searched my face. Looking for something. I didn't know what. Didn't know if he found it.

"You have to know that I want to believe you," he said finally. "But this is hard."

"I know."

"You're asking me to trust you over someone Cian sees as family. Someone who's been part of this pack longer than either of us."

"I'm asking you to protect your Grand Luna."

"By accusing someone of attempted murder based on circumstantial evidence and a story that sounds like a fever dream."

I dropped my hands from his shoulders and stepped back. The defeat must have shown on my face because his expression softened slightly.

"I'm not saying no," he said. "I'm just saying this is a lot. And I need to think about it."

"We don't have time for thinking. The wedding is tomorrow."

"I know." He ran a hand through his hair. "Look. I'll watch them. I'll be careful. If I see anything that backs up what you're saying, I'll act."

It wasn't enough. But it was more than I had before.

"Thank you."

He nodded. Then his expression shifted again and I watched it become thoughtful. "He was right about you."

I froze. "What?"

"Cian." A small smile tugged at his mouth. "He said there was more to you than people thought. That you were sharper and softer around the edges than you seemed."

Heat crept up my neck. "He said that?"

"Something like it." His smile faded. "But you have a valid point. I'll take everything you say with a grain of salt. And I'll protect my Grand Luna. Do my sworn duty like I swore to do."

Relief flooded through me. It wasn't complete trust. But it was something. A foothold.

"Thank you," I said again.

"And whenever you want," he added, "you can come spar. Prove the haughty and narcissistic Beta wrong."

I couldn't help it. I smiled. "Oh, I will."

He grinned back. Then his expression turned serious again. "You should be careful, Luna Fia. If you're right about Aldric, then you're in more danger than you know."

"I know."

"Good."

I turned to leave. My legs felt shaky. My hands were still trembling. But something in my chest had loosened. I wasn't alone anymore. Not completely. We had someone with stronger political power and someone that Cian trusted on our side now.

"Luna Fia?"

I looked back.

Ronan was watching me with that same calculating expression. "If you're wrong about this... If it turns out you're seeing threats that aren't there..."

"Then I'm wrong," I said. "But I'd rather be paranoid and wrong than right and too late."

He nodded slowly. "Fair enough."

I left him standing there and walked back across the training ground with my head high. My heart was still racing. My thoughts were still scattered. But for the first time since I knew what sort of monster Aldric was, I felt like maybe I had a chance.

Maybe I could actually protect Morrigan.

Maybe I could stop whatever Aldric had planned.

Maybe.