

To ruin an Omega

#Chapter 251: Eyes that see 2 - Read To ruin an Omega

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FIA

The volume was heavy. Heavier than I expected. I pulled it down and carried it to a nearby reading table. Moonlight streamed across the surface, aiding the overhead lights and giving me just enough light to see by.

I opened it and immediately looked for the Pauline Strati because the existence of Athena had to be during their time. Did it not?

I found what I was looking for almost immediately.

Pauline was the third daughter of a small pack who clawed her way into becoming a Luna of Alpha Marcus Strati who renamed himself Dimitri. I laughed a little when I saw a note there that said he did so because he found it to be a cool name and he wanted to sound cooler.

At least someone in that just as demented family had a sense of humor.

But I wasn't here for them. Not really.

I looked deeper. At the Omegas section. My fingers traced down the list of names. Some had detailed entries. Mostly because they were sucking up to their bosses. Others had almost nothing. Just a name and a date.

Then I found something.

Athena Stellan. Deceased.

That was all there was to her. No birth date. No death date. No cause of death or even a tiny nudge at a family lineage or anything that would tell me who she actually was.

Just her name and one word.

Deceased.

It was exactly as Cian had theorized. And it made sense she would be dead. Being bound and experimented on by some sick fuck of a warlock didn't exactly leave me with much hope.

Still...my eyes lingered on her surname.

Stellan.

I mouthed it and it rolled it around on my tongue while I also let it settle in my mind.

Why did it sound a lot like my mother's maiden name? Sterling.

The similarity was too close to be a coincidence. Too close to ignore. Stellan. Sterling. They were practically the same name with different letters at the end.

My heart hammered in my chest. The bond hummed gently in the back of my mind, responding to my spike of emotion. Cian was probably still sleeping. I didn't want to wake him. Not for this.

Not until I knew what this meant.

I stared at Athena's name until my vision blurred. Until the letters seemed to shift and move on the page. Blood memories. That's what Elder Moira had called them. Memories passed down through blood. Through generations.

Was that what this was? Was Athena somehow connected to me through blood? Through my mother?

I thought about the dreams. About being strapped to that table. About the chainsaw and the injection and the man's cold, clinical voice asking why Athena was rejecting what he'd injected inside of her.

About him pressing his hand to her stomach and feeling something move.

About him asking if she was pregnant.

My hand moved to my own stomach without thinking. It was flat and empty. There was nothing there but my own organs, blood and bone.

But Athena had been pregnant. In that memory. In that moment of horror.

What had happened to her? What had happened to the baby?

The genealogy didn't say. It gave me nothing. All I had was just her full name and that freaking word.

Deceased.

I needed more. I needed answers. Real ones. Not riddles from goddesses or vague explanations about blood memories.

I turned the page and kept looking. Maybe there was something else. Some other record. Some other mention of Athena Stellan or her family or what had happened to her.

But the next page was blank of anything I needed. And the one after that started a new family line entirely.

Athena was a ghost. A footnote. A place in a book that no one probably looked at anymore.

Except me.

I closed the volume and rested my hands on the cover. Let my forehead drop against them.

Lady Selene had brought me here. To this pack. To Cian. She'd favored me for reasons I didn't understand. She'd shown me Athena's memories for reasons that felt just as murky.

But there had to be a reason. There had to be.

The goddess didn't do anything by accident.

I just had to figure out what the hell she wanted me to see.

I opened the genealogy book again and that was when I heard the door open.

The sound was soft. But it sounded like it was open too carefully.

My head snapped up. Every muscle in my body went tight as my gaze flicked toward the entrance of the library which was hidden from where I had nothing to go with.

"Hello?" I called out.

My voice echoed back at me, thin and brittle against the tall shelves. No answer came. But I still caught the faint sound of footsteps moving closer.

I straightened, closing the genealogy book with care and sliding it back across the table. My pulse picked up. I could feel it in my throat, in my fingertips. The bond stirred, uneasy, like it knew it needed to inform Cian that something was off even if I was keen on keeping my secrets.

"Who's there?" I asked again, sharper this time.

The footsteps stopped.

For a brief moment, nothing happened. Then a shadow stretched across the floor, long and distorted by the moonlight pouring through the windows. It crept forward first, followed by the outline of a shoulder, then the curve of a head.

A face slowly emerged from behind one of the shelves.

Ronan.

The spike I had been holding back with everything I had slammed into me all at once. It was not fear exactly. But I was taken aback seeing him here and I knew deep in my heart that this couldn't be good.

My fingers curled against the edge of the table.

Of course it was him.

He looked the same as he always did. Too calm. Too sure of himself. Dark hair neatly kept, eyes steady as they locked onto mine. The kind of gaze that weighed and measured, that never quite revealed what it was thinking.

"Oh, what do you want?" I asked, trying my best not to sound as freaked out as I felt.

Because what the fuck was he doing here?

He took another step forward, then another, stopping just far enough away to be polite. Or at least pretend to be.

"Luna Fia," he said. "I have been looking all over for you."

Chapter 252: Eyes that see 3

Leon's POV

The alarm never needed to sound. My body knew the time before the digital display clicked to 6:00 a.m. Five years of the same schedule had carved grooves into my nervous system deeper than any external reminder could reach.

I rolled from bed, feet finding the cold hardwood floor. The apartment held that particular silence of early morning, when the city hadn't yet remembered how to make noise. My neighbors lived different lives, kept different hours. They stumbled home at 2 a.m. while I slept. They slept through the dawn while I worked.

The bathroom mirror reflected back what it always did. Pale skin that rarely saw sunlight. Dark circles under gray eyes. Hair that stuck up in the same three directions every morning. I didn't bother trying to fix it yet. That came later, after the coffee, after the routine that kept me sane.

Water ran cold from the tap. I splashed it on my face, letting the shock wake up parts of my brain that sleep had dulled. The towel hung exactly where I'd left it. Everything in its place. Everything predictable.

My reflection stared back from the frosted glass window that faced east. The morning light filtered through it, turning my image into something soft and blurred. I preferred it that way. Sharp edges hurt to look at, especially my own.

The new apartment building across the courtyard had filled up over the past month. Moving trucks, voices in the hallway, the sounds of people building lives in empty spaces. I'd watched from my kitchen window, careful to stay back from the glass. People fascinated me in theory. In practice, they made me nervous.

My morning ritual began the same way it had for years. Private. Methodical. A release that had nothing to do with pleasure and everything to do with maintaining equilibrium. Like taking vitamins or checking email. Just another task that kept the machinery of my day running smoothly.

The frosted glass cast strange shadows. Light played across the bathroom tiles in patterns that shifted as clouds moved overhead. I closed my eyes and let muscle memory take over. This wasn't about fantasy or desire. It was about balance. About starting each day with a clean slate.

The minutes passed in familiar rhythm. My breathing stayed even, controlled. Outside, the city began its daily resurrection. Car engines turning over. Footsteps on pavement. The distant hum of traffic growing stronger.

I finished with the same detachment I brought to washing dishes or folding laundry. Functional. Necessary. The shower would come next, then coffee, then three hours of painting before the light got too harsh.

But something felt different today. A weight in the air that hadn't been there yesterday. I glanced toward the frosted window, seeing nothing but my own distorted reflection staring back. The feeling passed. Everything was as it should be.

The routine continued. Shower temperature set to exactly what my skin could tolerate without flinching. Soap in the same order, same motions. Hair washed twice, conditioned once. The ritual of cleanliness that followed the ritual of release.

Steam fogged the frosted glass completely. My reflection disappeared into white mist. Better that way. I'd never been comfortable with mirrors, with the way they forced you to confront yourself whether you wanted to or not.

Twenty minutes later, I stood in my kitchen with coffee that tasted like it always did. Bitter, strong, necessary. The easel waited in the front room, canvas stretched and primed. The morning light would be perfect for another hour, maybe two.

I'd been working on a series of self-portraits, though I never called them that. Studies in isolation, I told myself. Examinations of solitude. The kind of work that sold well to people who understood loneliness but didn't want to admit it.

The coffee mug warmed my hands. Outside, the building across the courtyard looked different in daylight. More windows had curtains now. More signs of life. I wondered about the people behind those windows, what routines they followed, what rituals kept them anchored.

Then I turned away from the window and went to paint.

Julian's POV

The boxes could wait another day. I'd been telling myself that for a week, but the truth was I liked the chaos. Empty spaces made me nervous. They demanded decisions about where things belonged, and I'd never been good at making those kinds of choices.

Coffee first. Always coffee first. I'd managed to unpack the machine on day one, priorities being what they were. The kitchen faced east, which meant morning light, which meant I could see the building across the small courtyard while the caffeine worked its magic.

The architecture here was different from my last place. Older, more character. Windows that actually opened. Neighbors close enough to wave to if that were something I did. Which it wasn't, but the option existed.

I'd been in the city for three years but had never lived anywhere long enough to learn the rhythms of a neighborhood. Six months here, eight months there, always ready to move when the rent got too high or the walls closed in. This place felt different, though. Like somewhere I might stay.

The coffee maker gurgled to life. I leaned against the counter and looked out at the morning. The building across the way had character too. Fire escapes zigzagging down brick walls. Windows with different curtains, different lives behind them.

Movement caught my eye. A light had come on in one of the bathrooms. Frosted glass, but bright enough to see through. I wasn't trying to look. The light just drew attention, the way sudden changes always did.

Someone was moving around in there. A figure, blurred by the textured glass but clearly human. Clearly male, from the height and shape. I should have looked away. Should have focused on my coffee, on the boxes that needed unpacking, on anything else.

But I didn't.

The figure moved with purpose. Routine. There was something methodical about it that made me think of dancers or athletes, people who knew their bodies well enough to move without thinking. The frosted glass turned everything into suggestion, shadow and light playing tricks on perception.

I told myself I was being ridiculous. People lived their lives. They moved through their spaces. There was nothing unusual about someone being in their bathroom at 6:15 in the morning. Nothing worth staring at.

The coffee finished brewing. I poured a cup and took it to the window, closer than I needed to be for just looking outside. The warm mug felt good in my hands. The morning air coming through the crack in the window felt cool on my face.

The figure was still there. Still moving in that same deliberate way. I wondered what his life was like, what brought him to that bathroom at exactly this time every morning. Did he work early shifts? Was he one of those people who got up before dawn to exercise?

The movement changed. became more focused. More intimate.

I should have walked away then. Should have taken my coffee to the living room, unpacked another box, done something useful with my morning. Instead, I stayed by the window and watched.

The frosted glass revealed nothing explicit. Just shapes, shadows, the suggestion of movement. But there was something hypnotic about it. Something that made me forget about coffee, about boxes, about everything except the figure behind the glass.

He was tall. Lean. The kind of build that came from not eating enough rather than from working out. His movements were precise, controlled. Even through the distortion of the glass, I could see that he approached everything with the same careful attention.

Minutes passed. I lost track of how many. The coffee grew cold in my hands. The morning light shifted, casting different shadows across the courtyard. But I stayed where I was, watching someone I'd never met perform a private ritual he had no idea he was sharing.

When it ended, it ended quickly. The figure moved away from the window. Water ran. The shower, probably. Normal morning routine resuming after whatever that had been.

I stepped back from the window, suddenly aware of what I'd been doing. The coffee tasted bitter and cold. My hands were shaking slightly, though from caffeine or something else, I couldn't tell.

The bathroom light stayed on. Steam began to fog the frosted glass from the inside. The figure became even more indistinct, just a suggestion of movement behind white mist.

I forced myself to turn away, to walk back to the kitchen, to think about breakfast or unpacking or anything other than the stranger across the courtyard. But the image stayed with me. The careful way he moved. The precision of his routine. The inadvertent intimacy of watching someone who thought he was alone.

The boxes in my living room seemed less important now than they had an hour ago. I had something else to think about. Someone else to wonder about. A neighbor I'd never met but already felt connected to in a way that probably said more about me than I wanted to admit.

Tomorrow morning, I told myself, I'd sleep in. Or drink my coffee somewhere else. Or keep the curtains closed.

But I knew I wouldn't. Some routines, once started, were impossible to break.

Chapter 253: People you know

CIAN

I couldn't sleep.

The bed was comfortable enough. The sheets were cool against my skin. The room was dark and quiet. Everything should have been perfect for rest, but my mind refused to shut down.

I stared at the ceiling, watching shadows move across it. The truth sat heavy in my chest, pressing down on my lungs until every breath felt like a deliberate struggle. Gabriel's business card kept appearing behind my eyelids every time I closed them. That bloodstained white surface with its black lettering. Evidence that felt too damning to ignore and too devastating to accept.

Ronan.

The name echoed in my head like a curse I couldn't shake.

My fingers curled into the sheets. I wanted to get up. I wanted to march down the hall to his room and demand answers right now. The goddess had to know how bad I wanted to confront him and make him explain. Make him deny it so I could either believe him or watch him lie to my face.

But I stayed where I was.

Because charging in hot would ruin everything. If he really was working with Gabriel, if he really had betrayed me, then tipping him off now would only give him time to cover his tracks. To prepare. To disappear into whatever network of lies he'd built around himself.

So I waited. I forced myself to stay still even though every instinct screamed at me to move.

I'd known Ronan for so long. Years. More than a decade of trust built between us. He wasn't just my Beta. He was my friend. My brother in everything but blood.

Or so I'd thought.

The memory surfaced without warning, pulling me back.

I was maybe sixteen and hiding behind the massive oak tree at the far edge of the garden. The cigarette between my fingers burned slowly as I took another drag. Smoke curled up into the branches above me.

I hated these gatherings. Small or big... it didn't matter. They all felt the same. Like I was being paraded around for inspection. My father called it a "small brunch," but I knew exactly what it was. All the invited guests had brought their children. Future heirs mingling together. Networking. Building alliances that would supposedly matter when we all took over our respective packs.

I wasn't interested in any of it.

Being Alpha held no appeal for me. The weight of that responsibility, the expectations, the politics. I wanted none of it.

I finished the cigarette and crushed it under my heel. It was time to head back before someone noticed I'd been gone too long. At least the cigarette gave me the strength to pretend these gatherings didn't kill me a little.

I turned to leave and when I did so, I froze.

Someone was standing behind the tree. They had probably been watching me and when our eyes met, they let out this jolly smile that just came across as creepy.

The expression on his face was too bright and far too eager. To say it creeped me the fuck out was an understatement of the century.

I stumbled backward. My foot caught on a thick root jutting out from the base of the oak. My balance went sideways and I was falling, arms windmilling uselessly.

A hand shot out and grabbed my arm.

The grip was firm. Stronger than it should have been for someone our age. He pulled me upright easily, like I weighed nothing.

I yanked my arm free the second I had my footing back. "What the hell are you doing here, creep?"

Then I actually looked at him. Really looked.

He was dressed well. Button-up shirt, dress pants. The kind of outfit you wore to a pack gathering when your parents wanted you to make a good impression. I recognized the style even if I didn't recognize his face immediately.

Wait.

He was at the party. One of the guests' kids. My brain caught up and supplied the information. The son of my father's Beta.

What was his name again? Roman? Something like that.

Still, it didn't matter. He'd probably sought me out on purpose. Trying to get chummy with the future Alpha. After all, when the time came, we'd be expected to work together. An Alpha and his Beta. What a repulsing thought.

"You could say thank you," he said. His smile hadn't dimmed. "You were about to eat dirt."

"I had it handled."

"Sure you did." He leaned against the tree, completely at ease. "I'm Ronan, by the way."

"Roman. Got it."

"Ronan."

"That's what I said."

His smile twitched but held. "Right. Well, I thought I'd come find you. Everyone's been wondering where the Alpha's son disappeared to."

I pulled out another cigarette even if I didn't want to. I needed to show I was busy in a way and cigarettes always seemed to bother people's spirits. "And you appointed yourself as the search party?"

"Something like that."

I lit the cigarette and took a drag. "You can head back and tell them I'm fine. Or don't. I don't really care."

I'd be damned if he got himself some gold stars by somehow selling the adults the idea that he was the reason I was wheeled back into that plastic gathering.

He didn't move. He simply kept watching me with that same earnest expression. It was annoying and I couldn't place a finger on why.

"Look, Roman." I exhaled smoke toward him. "I get what you're doing. Trying to build rapport with the future Alpha. Smart move, I guess. But you're wasting your time."

"It's Ronan."

"Whatever. Point is, I'm not interested in being Alpha. So you should probably focus your networking efforts elsewhere."

He tilted his head. "Who said anything about networking?"

"Come on. Your father's the current Beta. My father's the Alpha. You and me?" I gestured between us. "We're supposed to be the next generation of that dynamic. But here's the thing. I have zero intention of taking that role."

"Okay."

I blinked. "Okay?"

"Yeah. Okay." He shrugged. "If you don't want to be Alpha, that's your choice."

This wasn't the response I'd expected. Usually when I told people this, they either tried to convince me otherwise or looked at me like I'd committed some kind of heresy.

"Every Beta in the Skollrend Beta line was made for their own Alpha," Ronan continued. His voice was steady, matter-of-fact. "If you don't want to be Alpha, then that's fine. I just want to serve you."

I nearly choked on smoke. "That's even worse."

I leaned back against the tree, studying him. He looked completely serious. There was not a hint of irony or sarcasm in his expression.

"Is that the noble shit your father told you to say? Make my head swell with pride so I'll fall in line?"

"I'm merely stating my duty."

"Well, I don't need a servant, Roman."

"Ronan. And your Beta can be anything." He stepped closer. "I can be your right hand. Your friend. Whatever you need."

Those words made me pause. I met his eyes. They did not hold a lie in them. This creep meant it. I could see it in the set of his shoulders, the openness in his expression. He wasn't playing a game. He was making an offer.

A genuine one.

I chuckled. The sound came out rougher than I'd intended. "You know what? You're fucking good."

His smile widened.

"I'll take you up on that offer, Ronan." I said his name correctly this time, let it roll off my tongue properly. "I'm Cian."

The smile he gave me then was bright enough to light up the shadows under the oak tree. "I think everyone knows that."

The memory faded but the feeling of it stayed with me. That moment when something had shifted between us. When Ronan had stopped being just the Beta's son and became someone I could trust.

Or thought I could trust.

I rolled onto my side, punching the pillow into a better shape. The fabric was already warm from my body heat. Everything either felt too warm or too tight or too itchy.

I did not feel right in my skin.

How could someone I'd grown up with be a traitor? Someone who'd been there through everything. Who'd stood by my side for years. Who knew me better than almost anyone.

It didn't make sense.

I didn't want it to make sense.

But Garrett's words kept circling back. The business card. The way his words felt like evidence themselves. And there was also Fia's warning before that. It wasn't the first time. The concept of fool me once was starting to make so much sense in my life right now. Fia and Garrett's certainty that something was wrong with people close to me.

Fuck!

She'd been right about too many things already for me to dismiss this.

The only thing that calmed my restless heart now that the fact that the trap had been set. Tomorrow, when Garrett gave Ronan that bloodstained card, we'd see what happened. How he reacted. What he did with the information.

The truth would reveal itself one way or another.

I closed my eyes and tried to find some kind of peace in the darkness behind my eyelids. It didn't come. Instead, I found myself forming words I hadn't spoken in years. A prayer. A quiet and desperate one might I add.

Please let me be wrong.

Please let Fia and Garrett be wrong.

Please let Ronan prove us all wrong.

Let him be the friend I thought he was. Let this all be some terrible misunderstanding that we'd laugh about later. Let the bond between us be real and not just another illusion I'd been fool enough to believe in.

The silence of the room offered no answers.

Tomorrow would come whether I was ready for it or not. Tomorrow I'd know for certain if the person I'd trusted most in this world had been lying to me all along. If the foundation I'd built my life on was solid or if it had been rotting from the inside out this entire time.

And after that? After I knew the truth about Ronan?

If it wasn't what I was parting for. What then?

I hated that I didn't have an answer.

Chapter 254: The trouble with too many pieces 1

ALDRIC

The drive back to Skollrend took longer than I expected. Mostly because I could not stop thinking about the crazy way Pauline has ended our conversation. The roads were empty at this hour. So it was just me and the occasional truck hauling goods to nowhere I cared about. My headlights cut through the darkness and lit up the white lines on the asphalt. They disappeared under my wheels one after another in an endless rhythm.

I replayed the conversation with Pauline in my head. Her confidence at the end bothered me. That certainty in her voice when she said nothing would be found. Like she had something up her sleeve I didn't know about. Like she was holding cards she hadn't shown me yet.

People who kept secrets from me didn't last long in my service. I knew all too well that secrets were currency but I preferred to be the banker.

The gates of Skollrend appeared in the distance. Tall iron bars topped with decorative spikes. They swung open as my car approached. The sentinels on duty stepped forward. One of them raised a hand in greeting.

I rolled down my window.

"Alpha Aldric." The sentinel on the left dipped his head. He was young. Maybe twenty-five. His uniform was crisp and his posture was perfect. "Welcome back."

"Thomas." I nodded at him and then at the other sentinel. "Mark."

"Long night?" Mark asked. He had a scar on his cheek from some fight years ago.

"Aren't they all?" I gave them a small smile. The kind that put people at ease. "You two staying warm out here?"

"Warm enough." Thomas grinned. "Coffee helps."

"Make sure you get some rest when your shift ends." I let the car roll forward slowly. "Can't have my best sentinels falling asleep on the job."

They both laughed. Mark waved me through.

Useless imbeciles.

The drive up to the main estate was short. The deciduous trees lined both sides of the wide path. Their branches hung over the road and created a tunnel of shadows. My headlights swept across the front of the house. The stone facade looked gray in the predawn light. Most of the windows were dark. Which could not be good because it meant that Ronan was right about the things he said about Fia since everyone was asleep.

I parked the car and got out. The air was cold. It bit at my face and hands. Winter was coming quick. I pulled my coat tighter and walked toward the entrance. My breath came out in white puffs that disappeared almost as soon as they formed.

The front door was unlocked. I stepped inside and closed it behind me. The click of the latch echoed in the quiet foyer. My footsteps on the marble floor sounded too loud. I headed toward the stairs and climbed them two at a time.

The hallway on the second floor was dimmer than I remembered. A few of the lights had burned out. I'd have to tell someone to replace them. Details mattered. Small things like burned out bulbs sent messages. Messages about negligence and lack of attention.

I walked down the hall toward my room. The sentinel I'd stationed outside my door straightened when he saw me approaching. He was older than the ones at the gate. He had prominent smile lines around his eyes and mouth. And it was clear that this was someone who had been doing this job for some time now.

He bowed. A small dip that was just enough to show respect.

"Alpha Aldric."

"Thank you for your service." I stopped in front of him and pulled my keys from my pocket. "You can leave now."

"Oh. It is no problem at all Alpha Aldric. After all, I am simply doing my job." His voice was steady in that professional proud manner their kind usually had. Like there was much to be proud about being born into a life of servitude.

It was less self-respect than adaptation, a psychological adjustment to a system that offered no alternative but submission.

I looked at him. Really looked at him. He had dark circles under his eyes. His shoulders sagged just slightly and he made an active effort to make sure it was barely noticeable unless you were paying attention.

It still grinded my gears.

"Well, it's almost morning already." I gestured down the hallway. "A few hours wouldn't matter. Plus, you look like you need rest."

Would he take it or would that fucking pride of theirs that could only survive in rigid hierarchies like this, where obedience is reframed as virtue and survival is mistaken for purpose take over common sense?

His expression shifted just a fraction. It was surprise mixed with gratitude.

"Thank you, Alpha." He bowed again, deeper this time.

I turned to the door and slid the key into the lock. It turned smoothly. Just one click and the handle gave way under my hand.

I froze.

One click?

Not two?

I always locked my door twice. Always. It was habit. Muscle memory. I'd done it for so long I didn't even think about it anymore. My hand just did it automatically.

I turned back to the sentinel. He'd taken a few steps away but stopped when I spoke.

"Wait."

He turned around. His eyebrows raised slightly.

"Did someone come in?" I kept my voice casual and light. Like I was just asking about the weather. But every bit it was meant to come out as accusatory as it was.

"No." He shook his head. "I was here all day. I didn't even take a break."

I studied his face. He looked sincere. His eyes met mine without flinching. There were no tells. Neither were there nervous twitches.

"Are you sure?" I tilted my head. "Perhaps my daughter Elara came by?"

"She did show up." He nodded. "But I assumed when the door was locked, it would be best she showed up when you were around. So I turned her on her way."

Hmm.

Chapter 255: The trouble with too many pieces 2

ALDRIC

That made sense. Elara knew better than to disturb my things when I wasn't here. But still. One lock instead of two? That didn't make sense. But perhaps I was just reading much into it.

Starving my brother longer than expected was something that did linger on my mind. I was worried that his hunger would have taken him out. Though wolves had definitely survived worse in hard times. But these weren't hard times.

"Okay then." I waved my hand. "You can go."

The sentinel hesitated. Just for a moment. Like he could sense something was off.

"I can stay here if you think something might be missing." His voice was careful. "I assure you though, Alpha Aldric, that no one was allowed to enter that room."

I forced a smile and relaxed my shoulders. There it was again... That pride in their simple ability. I let the tension drain out of my posture.

"I'm being paranoid." I shook my head and laughed. It sounded natural enough. "I got a nice necklace for my daughter and I want to surprise her. I guess that is why I am so on edge."

His face softened. The concern in his eyes faded and was replaced with something warmer.

"Oh." He smiled. A genuine one. "That is wonderful to hear, Alpha Aldric. But your secret is safe. I swear on my heart, Luna Elara or anyone else for that matter did not come close to this room."

"Thank you." I nodded at him. "You can go."

He bowed one last time and walked away. His footsteps faded down the hallway until they disappeared completely.

I turned back to the door and pushed it open. The hinges creaked slightly. I stepped inside and shut it behind me. The lock clicked once, then twice. The way it should have been.

The room looked exactly as I'd left it. The curtains were drawn. The desk in the corner was clean. Papers stacked neatly in the tray. Pens lined up like soldiers. My chair was pushed in at the perfect angle.

I walked over to the dresser and pulled the key from around my neck. The thin chain slid over my head easily. I unlocked the top drawer and opened it.

My folded clothes sat inside. Shirts on the left. Pants on the right. Everything organized by color and type.

Except the edges weren't sharp.

They were crinkled.

I ran my finger along the fold of one shirt. The fabric had been disturbed. Someone had touched it. Moved it. Put it back but not quite right.

My jaw tightened.

I opened the second drawer. The matching wristwatch I shared with Ronan sat inside. Beautiful black leather strap with silver face.

Except...

It wasn't where I'd left it.

Not exactly.

It was close. Very close. But off by maybe half an inch. Turned at a slightly different angle.

I closed the drawer slowly. The sound of wood sliding against wood filled the room.

This was too many things. Too many small details that were wrong. I didn't forget things like this. I didn't make mistakes with locks or folded clothes or watches. My mind didn't work that way.

I reached under the dresser and found the hidden latch. It clicked when I pressed it. A small drawer slid out from the side. Barely visible unless you knew it was there.

I dropped the key and the red ring inside. They clinked against the wood. I closed the drawer and it disappeared back into the dresser like it had never existed.

I walked back to the door and turned aroundz letting my eyes sweep across the room again.

Everything was in place.

Except it wasn't.

The door had been locked once instead of twice. The clothes had crinkled edges instead of sharp ones. The watch had been moved. These weren't things I imagined. These weren't things I forgot.

Someone had to have been in here.

Or was I doing too much.

My bed was made after all and there was not a crease or fold in sight. The pillows were fluffed and arranged perfectly. The blanket was pulled tight and tucked under the mattress.

My eyes moved to the bookshelf against the far wall.

Rows and rows of books. Organized by subject and then alphabetically by author. Philosophy on the top shelf. History on the second. Strategy and warfare on the third.

I walked toward it. My feet moved across the carpet without sound.

There was a gap.

Right there on the third shelf. A small space where a book should have been.

I put my hand in the convenient little space that wasn't supposed to be there. Right where my copy of "On the Management of Lesser Wills" was supposed to be.

Fucking hell.

Someone had indeed been here.

But why take that book?

It made no sense. The title alone should have tipped them off that it wasn't particularly valuable. It was a philosophical essay and that was putting it nicely. The books whole premises was categorizing wolves by temperament and utility. Omegas are framed as resources. Betas as stabilizers and Alphas as inevitabilities. It was useful information but nothing groundbreaking. Nothing that couldn't be found in a dozen other texts.

Unless they were looking for something specific.

Unless...

I stepped back from the shelf and crossed my arms as my mind worked through the possibilities.

It couldn't be Fia. She'd been in Silver Creek all day dealing with whatever fresh she had there. Then the accident. She wouldn't have had time to come here and rifle through my things.

That left only one person.

The witch currently living in this house.

Madeline.

It made sense. She had access. She had knowledge of magic and its applications. She would know how to move through a house this big without being detected. How to get past a sentinel without raising suspicion.

And she had motive.

Given the hold I had on her family, she would be looking for leverage. Any information they could use.

I wondered though. What would a book that simple do for her? The question died as soon as I thought it. These were witches. Trying to understand their thought process as a wolf was near impossible.

I walked over to the window and looked out at the grounds. The sky was starting to lighten. Deep blue fading to purple and then to pink. Morning was coming.

I'd deal with Madeline later. First I needed to understand exactly what she thought she'd found. What she hoped to gain from stealing that particular book.

This was alas the trouble with having too many pieces in your hands. You could never be certain which one believed it was playing its own game.

Chapter 256: Gut feeling 1

MADLINE

A knock at the door pulled me from sleep so heavy it felt like drowning. I jerked upright in bed, disoriented. Warm sunlight streamed through the window. Dawn had already broken.

My first thought was of Cian.

Was he back yet? Was he okay? Last night he'd been falling apart at the seams when he couldn't feel Fia through their bond. I'd never seen him act like that before. So raw, terrified and completely unraveling.

The knock came again, sharper this time and successfully disorienting my train of thoughts.

"Who is it?" My voice came out rough from sleep.

"It's me."

Shit. It was Wilhelm.

I pushed the blankets off and crossed to the door. When I opened it, he stood there in fresh clothes, a tiny travel bag slung over one shoulder. He looked put together. Composed. Nothing like the blood-soaked mess I'd scraped off my floor last night.

"You're already leaving?"

"Well, it's no fault of mine." He stepped inside before I could invite him in. The door clicked shut behind him and I heard the lock turn.

He looked around the room. His gaze went straight to the spot where he'd collapsed, where his blood had pooled on the floorboards and the scrying bowl had sent up plumes of acrid smoke. But there was nothing there now. I'd scrubbed every inch of that floor on my hands and knees, working by lamp light and urged by my own fears of being discovered to hurry. The main worry was Werewolves could probably smell blood better than most and I knew the servants of the house couldn't see this. Nobody could know what had happened.

The trash sat bundled in the corner of my closet. I'd have to dispose of it myself later. Carefully. Where no one would find burnt book remains and now blood-soaked rags of my least favorite clothes.

"No fault of yours?" I repeated. "Did Father call you in?"

"I talked to him last night. That was part of it." Wilhelm set his bag down and turned to face me properly. "He wants something on Alpha Aldric as quickly as he can get it. He also thinks you've done more than enough for the family and doesn't want to actively involve you anymore. So Aldric won't know what hit him until it fucking hits him."

I opened my mouth but he kept going.

"But there's also the fact that I watched Aldric when he returned to the estate last night."

My hand shot out and grabbed his arm. Hard. "Are you insane? Your body went through hell last night. Why would you do that?"

He didn't even flinch at my grip. "It wasn't hard. There was no distance this time. I didn't have to strain myself. And there was no protective spell shielding the fucker either."

"Wilhelm..."

"Listen. He has a secret drawer where he keeps the key. The one he's using to lock up whoever's in that cage." His eyes were bright now. Excited. Like he'd uncovered buried treasure instead of nearly dying twelve hours ago. "But I don't fucking need that key."

I waited.

"There was something else. A ring." He pulled his arm free from my grasp and started pacing. Three steps to the window. Three steps back. "I'm not sure what it is but if he's hiding it that badly, it has to be useful."

"A ring." The word felt strange in my mouth.

"Yeah. And I know Dad said a whole lot about keeping you out of the breaking-into-Aldric's-estate business and he'll probably have that conversation with you himself." Wilhelm stopped pacing and looked at me dead on. "But I have a feeling that ring is a key to something. So ignore whatever Dad tells you and attempt to look into that ring for me."

The request sat between us. Heavy with all the things he wasn't saying. All the ways this could go wrong.

I was curious too. So common sense and self preservation flew right out of the window.

"Yeah. Sure."

He smiled then. The kind of smile that reminded me we were related. That we'd grown up pulling each other out of trouble and into it with equal frequency.

He grabbed his bag and headed for the door. His hand was on the knob when he paused and turned back.

"Oh, one more thing." His tone had gone carefully neutral. "You weren't wrong about the fucker."

My stomach dropped. "What... What does that mean?"

"My possession sight noticed more than just the ring when I was spying on him."

"What else did you notice?"

"Aside from the fact that we technically gave ourselves away with the lock?" He said it so casually. Like he was commenting on the weather instead of telling me we'd fucked up badly. "Turns out Aldric turns his lock twice and that was something I missed when I was using my magic to open it and close it. Also, Aldric did notice the missing book. He'll most likely be onto you now. Be careful and play him good."

"Fuck." The word came out before I could stop it.

"Yeah." Wilhelm's smile had gone sharp at the edges. "But you're good at playing people. You'll figure it out."

"I really don't enjoy it. But thanks for the heads-up." I tried to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. I failed completely.

"Do what you need to do and come home, sis."

"I'll try." I crossed the room and hugged him. He hugged back, tight enough that I felt the tremor still running through his muscles from last night's ordeal.

When I pulled back, I kept my hands on his shoulders. "A big help for me when Aldric is breathing down my neck with his accusations would be an even better distraction. Get Father to work on the blood I gave you first. Aldric's obsession with Fia's mate seems to make him blind to a lot. I hope it's still that way even if she could technically be dead."

Wilhelm's expression shifted. Something flickered across his face that I couldn't quite read.

"Well, you're in luck. Cian's mate didn't perish."

I broke the hug and stepped back. The words had come out before I'd really thought them through, and I knew how they sounded. Like I'd been hoping the poor girl actually had died just to keep things simple.

But that wasn't what I'd meant.

Not exactly.

"Whaaattt?" I stared at him. "She's alive?"

"Very much so, from what I gathered from my sight." Wilhelm adjusted his bag on his shoulder. "Apparently whatever happened last night, she survived it. Cian found her. They're both fine."

Relief hit me like a physical thing. It knocked the breath out of my lungs and made my knees weak. I hadn't realized how much I'd been dreading the alternative. How much the thought of Cian losing her had been sitting in my chest like a stone.

It was a strange feeling. Because a few days ago, I wouldn't have minded a tragedy bringing Cian towards me again.

"That's..." I couldn't find the right words. "That's good."

"Good for your distraction plan I guess." Wilhelm's voice had gone dry. "For matters of the heart, not so much."

"Oh shut up."

Wilhelm chuckled as he pulled the door open. Cold morning air rushed in from the hallway. "Figure out what you can about the ring. And for fuck's sake, be careful around Aldric."

"I will."

"I mean it, Mads. He's not playing games anymore. If he knows you took that book..." Wilhelm let the sentence hang there. The implications were clear enough.

"I know." My throat felt tight. "I'll handle it."

"You better." He stepped into the hallway and then paused one more time. "And Mads? About last night. Thanks. For not giving up on me."

"You're my brother. What else was I supposed to do?"

He smiled. A real one this time. Then he was gone, his footsteps echoing down the corridor until they faded completely.

I stood in the doorway and listened to the morning sounds of the estate waking up. Servants moving through the halls. Voices drifting up from the kitchens. Somewhere below, a door slammed.

Normal sounds. Like nothing had changed.

But everything had changed. Aldric probably already knew I'd taken the book. He knew I was digging hard at him. That wasn't fucking good.

I closed the door and locked it. My hands were shaking.

The bundle of trash in my closet seemed to pulse with accusation. Evidence of what I'd done. Of what Wilhelm and I had discovered. I needed to get rid of it. Soon. Before anyone came snooping.

But first I needed to think. To plan.

Aldric would confront me. That much was certain. He'd want to know why I'd taken the book. Which I had to heavily deny.

To do that, I had to have something ready.

And I had to figure out what that ring was. Why he was keeping it hidden. What it might unlock or protect or reveal.

My magic stirred under my skin. Restless. Wanting to do something instead of just standing here spinning through worst-case scenarios.

"You're a fucking Blossom," I told myself. "What the hell is a maniacal old werewolf with no proof but a gut feeling going to do?"

Chapter 257: Gut feeling 2

PAULINE

Sleep didn't come.

I lay flat on my back, staring at the ceiling because there really was nothing better to do at this point. The sheets tangled around my legs. I kicked them off. Then pulled them back up. Then kicked them off again.

Aldric's voice kept replaying in my head. That smooth, condescending tone. The way he'd spoken to me like I was a child who'd gotten caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

"Don't ever move without my permission again."

Who the fuck did he think he was? I only had Valentine to blame for this.

My fingers curled into the sheets. I wanted to scream. I wanted to throw something. I wanted to reach through time and space and wrap my hands around his throat until that smug superiority drained out of his eyes.

But I couldn't do any of those things.

I was his piece. His fucking chess piece on a board I didn't even fully understand.

The thought made my stomach turn.

I rolled onto my side and stared at the wall. Time stopped making sense.

The healer had failed.

That single thought circled my mind like a vulture over carrion. The healer had failed. After all the money I paid for her to exist. After that giant ball of risk...

The Omega girl had walked away without a scratch.

Oh. The truth it was tormented me. I had orchestrated for a clean, and simple car accident that would look like nothing more than bad luck and mortal error. For fuck sake. Even Aldric had said two sentinels had died from it. The Omega should have been crushed in the wreckage. She should have been mangled beyond recognition. She should have been a closed casket funeral that her loved ones—if she had any left—would weep upon.

But no.

She'd walked away perfectly fine with not even a bruise.

And worse than that, she'd probably walked away with that face still looking exactly like her.

My jaw clenched so hard my teeth ached.

It wasn't the first time I'd used my healer. It wasn't the second or third either. We'd worked together for almost four years now. She'd handled things for me back in Nocturne territory. Sometimes small things. Sometimes necessary things. Problems that needed to disappear without raising questions.

She'd never failed before. Not once.

But this time. With this girl. With this fucking Omega who had the audacity to wear Athena's face...

It had been a failure.

A complete and utter failure.

I sat up and swung my legs over the edge of the bed. My bare feet touched the cold floor and I welcomed the shock of it. Anything to ground me in the present instead of the spiral my thoughts kept trying to pull me into.

Divine mockery. That's what it was. The universe or the Moon Goddess or whatever cosmic force controlled fate had decided to play a joke on me. A cruel, pointed joke that said no matter how far I ran, no matter how many bodies I buried, the past would always find a way to resurface.

And it would always somehow wear Athena's face.

I stood up and walked to the window. The curtains hung limp and heavy. I pushed them aside and looked out at Silver Creek in the dawn faded glory. The territory stretched out before me. Trees and buildings and sleeping wolves who had no idea what moved in the shadows around them.

My hand pressed against the glass. It was cool against my palm.

I'd thought about it constantly since that first meeting. The way the girl had looked at me. Those eyes. That face. The tilt of her head when she'd spoken. Every detail had been wrong and right at the same time. Wrong because it wasn't Athena. Right because it could have been.

The memory rose up unbidden. Sharp and clear despite the years that had passed since.

Two sentinels flanked her. One on each side with hands gripping her arms tight enough to leave bruises. She had a bag over her head. Some rough canvas thing they'd probably found in the storage shed. Her voice came through muffled but still intelligible.

"You fuckers!" She thrashed between them but they held firm. "Do you know who I am?"

I watched them drag her across the clearing. We were deep in the woods. Far enough from pack grounds that no one would hear. Far enough that even if someone came looking, they'd never find this place.

"Do you have any idea what he'll do to you when my Alpha finds out what you are doing?" Her voice pitched higher. Panic creeping in around the edges of the bravado. "He'll kill you. Both of you. He'll tear you apart."

The sentinels didn't respond. They'd been paid well for their silence. Paid well and threatened thoroughly. They knew what would happen if they spoke. They knew what I was capable of.

They stopped in front of me. One of them looked at me and gave a small nod.

I reached forward and yanked the bag off her head.

Athena blinked in the sudden light. Her hair was a mess. Her eyes were wild. She looked between the sentinels and then at me and I watched the recognition slam into her like a physical blow.

I smiled.

"Who are you exactly?" I asked. My voice came out light. Almost conversational. Like we were old friends meeting for tea instead of what this actually was. "Tell me, I want to know."

She stared at me. Her mouth opened and closed. No words came out.

I stepped closer. Close enough that I could smell the fear on her. Sharp and sour and intoxicating.

"Were you really about to use the fact that you're fucking my husband to somehow wriggle your way out of this?" I tilted my head. "Is that what you thought would save you?"

"Luna Pauline." Her voice came out small. So much smaller than it had been moments ago. "No. Forgive me."

The words hung in the air between us. Pathetic and weak. Exactly what I'd expected.

"For which one?" I asked. I folded my arms across my chest. "For seducing my husband? No? Fucking him? For letting rumors spread that there's a chance you'd be a second wife? Or just existing? Which one?"

She looked at the sentinels. Then back at me. Her throat worked as she swallowed.

"He came for me." The words tumbled out fast. Desperate. "I had no choice. I didn't want him. But I cannot deny him. He is Alpha. What he wants is mine to obey."

I laughed. The sound came out cold and sharp. It echoed through the trees around us.

"In the past," I said, "Omegas loyal to their Luna's social standing would mutilate and scar their bodies or take their lives so their Alpha's wandering eyes would stop. It's something you could have done."

"What?" Her eyes went wide.

"Did I say something wrong?" I examined my nails. They were perfectly manicured. Deep red polish that looked like dried blood in the dim light. "I'm sure I didn't. Or is that too big an ask?"

Her spine straightened. Some spark of defiance flared to life in her eyes.

"I might have been born designated a runt." Her voice came out stronger now. Steadier. "But that doesn't mean I have to spend all my life making up for it. Omegas are not just your slaves. There's a reason the goddess made us the way we were. For a pack to work, everyone needs a role."

Chapter 258: Gut feeling 3

PAULINE

I raised an eyebrow. "For such a forward stance, you could have fought back the first time he tried to take you." I took another step closer. "Do you pick and choose which ideology to stand on?"

She met my gaze. "It's clear you're threatened by me. To put on all this show." She gestured around us. At the trees. At the sentinels. At the clearing that had become her cage. "If you're going to get rid of me, do it quickly. I'm frankly bored of this game of yours."

The slap cracked through the clearing before I'd even consciously decided to do it. My palm connected with her cheek and her head snapped to the side. A red mark bloomed across her skin in the perfect shape of my hand.

The audacity of the low born.

"You think I don't want to kill you, bitch?" The words came out low and venomous. "I want to. Badly might I add."

She touched her cheek. Her fingers trembled slightly.

"I confirmed with my whore of a husband and what he said to me..." I leaned in close. Close enough that I could see the flecks of gold in her brown eyes. "Oh. It told me you need to be gotten rid of quick. You will not rise from the ranks of Omega to fucking Luna. We weren't made to walk the same shoes. And a small man with a cock for a brain will not be the reason that happens."

"Please." Her voice broke. The defiance crumbled like wet paper. "Please. I'll disappear. I'll leave the territory. I'll never be seen again. I swear it. I swear on the Moon Goddess. I have a family."

I reached out and stroked her hair. She flinched but didn't pull away. She couldn't pull away with the sentinels holding her.

"I assure you," I said softly. Gently. Like I was comforting a child. "You will disappear. You will never be seen again."

Her breath hitched.

"I was literally able to lure you from pack grounds pretending to be my husband." I continued stroking her hair. "You like the power he gives you. Perhaps even his penis too. I can't leave things to chance. If he puts a baby in you, a boy even from that matter. I'm fucked. I can't be fucked. I only have a daughter at the moment. Chance is a cruel set up. And fate does love making bitches of the strong and defiant."

My hand stilled on her head.

"I crawled here chipping my nails and scraping my knees." The words came out quiet. Almost thoughtful. "You have been great pain to me as a woman. And now you will be useful. You're going to suffer for a very long time. You will beg for death and chances are it won't come soon enough."

I nodded to the sentinels. They moved immediately.

Athena tried to run. She twisted between them and almost broke free. Almost. But they grabbed her and slammed her down onto the ground. She screamed. The sound pierced through the trees and sent birds scattering from their roosts.

"You can get rid of me!" Her voice came out ragged and stretched raw. "But I will haunt your narrative and your family till your blood dies out. You will never forget this face. You hear me! No matter how much time casts a spell on you. I will fucking haunt you!"

The sentinel shoved the bag back over her head. Her screams became muffled. Then distant as they dragged her away through the trees toward the waiting car.

I stood alone in the clearing and listened until the sounds faded completely into silence.

The memory released me and I found myself back in my chambers. Back in Silver Creek. Back in the present where Athena was long gone and yet somehow still here wearing a different name and a different life.

I pulled away from the window.

My phone sat on the nightstand. I picked it up and scrolled through my contacts. My thumb moved automatically. Muscle memory guiding me to the name I needed.

Valentine Blossom.

The head warlock of the Primrose coven. The man who'd taken Athena off my hands all those years ago. The man who'd promised she would suffer. Who'd promised she would disappear so thoroughly that not even magic could help her when he was done.

I opened a new message. My thumbs hovered over the keyboard.

What did I even want to know? That she was dead? That she'd suffered as promised? That whatever experiments he'd conducted had been thorough and brutal and final?

Or did I want confirmation that somehow, impossibly, she'd survived? That the girl wearing her face wasn't coincidence but something far worse?

I typed slowly. Each word deliberate.

"I know I never really asked. But whatever happened to the Omega I gave you? I'm not sure if you still remember. Her name was Athena."

My finger hovered over the send button. I read the message three times. Four times. Looking for any hint of weakness or desperation in the words.

It seemed neutral enough. Curious but not concerned. Interested but not invested.

I hit send.

The message disappeared into the void and showed delivered. The read receipts were however turned off because Valentine was paranoid like that. I'd get a response when he felt like responding and not a moment before.

I set the phone back down on the nightstand. My hand shook slightly. I clenched it into a fist until the trembling stopped.

"Mistress. Good morning."

The voice came from the doorway. Quiet and respectful. Exactly the tone Number Four had been trained to use.

I looked up and there she stood. Backlit by the hallway light. Her form was soft and blurry around the edges.

A tell that I hadn't slept well at all.

There was also the start of a pulsing headache behind my eyes just staring at her.

Number Four... The healer... and the girl who'd failed me.

My jaw tightened. Every muscle in my body went rigid with the effort it took not to lunge across the room and wrap my hands around her throat.

She was supposed to be competent. She was supposed to be reliable. She was supposed to have killed that girl and instead here we were. The target alive. The plan exposed. Aldric breathing down my neck about loose ends and consequences.

All because this incompetent bitch couldn't handle one simple assassination.

I stared at her standing in my doorway. This fucking disappointment. This waste of money, trust and carefully laid plans.

And I smiled.

"Good morning," I said. My voice came out sweet. Pleasant. The kind of tone that made people nervous because they knew something terrible was hiding underneath. "Come in. Close the door. We need to talk before you get your pills."

Chapter 259: Gut feeling 4

PAULINE

The girl closed the door. The soft click echoed in the silence of my chambers. She stood there with her back pressed against the wood like she wanted to disappear into it.

Good. She should be nervous.

I tilted my head as I faced her fully. My smile stayed in place.

"I got a call a few hours ago." The words came out conversational. Light even. "What I was told by that person, it didn't make me proud of you. Not like I was the night before."

She swallowed. The movement of her throat was visible even from across the room. "Oh." Her voice came out small. Uncertain. "Was it somehow discovered that it was not an accident?"

"I was careful," she added quickly. "I swear."

The swear made something twist in my chest. But I pushed it down.

"You were not proactive enough to confirm if the girl was actively dead."

Her eyes widened. The brown of them went glassy with panic. "No." She shook her head. The motion was jerky and desperate. "That girl wouldn't have survived that. She couldn't have."

I took a step toward her. Then another. My bare feet made no sound on the carpet.

"Did you check if she had stopped breathing?"

"Yes." The word came out rushed. "I always confirm. I know what disappointing you will cost."

The phrase hit me like a slap. I know what disappointing you will cost. Like I was some kind of fucking monster.

And her saying that almost made it seem like the Omega bitch resurrected from the fucking dead.

That made my mind tangle with older words. Different words from a different time. I will haunt your narrative and your family till your blood dies out.

Athena's voice. Athena's curse. Still echoing after all these years.

I pushed the thought out. Was I really thinking Athena was still haunting me from the fucking dead?

The rot of old guilt tried to surface. I shoved it back down where it belonged. That girl couldn't be Athena. ns I wasn't fucking being haunted. What happened had to happen.

I was simply protecting what was mine.

"You're lying."

Number Four flinched like I'd hit her.

"How the fuck would an Omega have survived that?" My voice rose. The sweetness burned away and left only venom. "Now they're emptying delicates. Investigating. Asking questions."

I closed the distance between us. She pressed harder against the door like she could phase through it if she just tried hard enough.

"You were reborn and remade for the sole purpose of being special." Each word came out sharp and pointed. "You are proficient in healing. You have magical protection built into your blood and have the use of innate small miracles."

I stopped inches from her face. Close enough to see the fine tremor that ran through her body. Close enough to smell the fear coming off her in waves.

"And you couldn't take out a simple Omega."

She opened her mouth and then closed it because no words came out.

"What is to say some of my enemies I sent you after didn't survive you and go into hiding?" The thought made my stomach turn. It was a slum chance that was even possible but I had to wonder. How many of my carefully laid plans had been compromised by this girl's incompetence? How many threats still walked around breathing when they should have been rotting in the ground?

"The only reason you are still even breathing right now is because I know thanks to your creator Valentine's ingenuity that you will not be found out by the delicates."

That much was true. Valentine had made his creations well. They didn't show up on most magical scans. They didn't leave much traces that could be followed back to their maker or their mistress. The delicates could investigate until they collapsed from exhaustion and they'd never connect Number Four to the attack.

It was a small comfort when everything else had gone to shit.

The girl's knees buckled. She dropped to the floor with a thud that probably hurt. Her hands reached for me. Grasping as she pleaded.

"I am so sorry, Luna Pauline." Her voice broke on my title. "I beg for your forgiveness."

I looked down at her kneeling form. This thing that I'd paid so much for. This weapon that had turned out to be dull and useless.

"I do not forgive easily."

She flinched.

"You are the reason I was humiliated." The words tasted bitter but true nonetheless. "I want my pound of flesh back from you."

I let the silence stretch. Let her hope build that maybe the punishment wouldn't be so bad. Then I smiled again.

"No pills for you today."

Her head snapped up. The color drained from her face until she looked corpse pale. "But... I will suffer." The words came out strangled and desperate. "You know what they did to us. What you paid to be done to us. The pills let life be bearable."

Was that pathetic plea supposed to work? Was it supposed to make me reconsider?

Because all I felt when I looked at her pathetic face was Aldric's insufferable tone when he'd told me the girl survived.

My hand moved before I'd fully decided. The slap cracked across Number Four's cheek and snapped her head to the side. The same motion I'd used on Athena all those years ago. The same satisfying sting in my palm.

"Do you think your life deserves to be bearable?"

She touched her reddening cheek but said nothing.

"You are given power to be useful to me." I grabbed her chin and forced her to look up at me. "I took you because you showed promise. Now you fail in taking a bitch's life and dare wag your tongue at me?"

Her eyes filled with tears. They spilled over and ran down her cheeks.

"I'll deny you for two days for that." The words came out cold. Final. "To give you some fresh perspective."

"No." The word burst out of her. "Please. No."

She grabbed my leg. Both hands wrapped around my calf and squeezed. Held on like I was the only thing keeping her from drowning.

I was. And the feeling... To have that much power over another... It was refreshing.

"The rot hurts." Her voice came out raw. Broken. "I cannot do two days. Please. I'll find a way to correct this. I'll kill the girl if given another chance. Just please don't take away the pills."

I looked down at her clinging to my leg. This pathetic creature that I'd paid good money for. This disappointment thinking her tears mattered.

"I do like you begging."

Hope flared in her eyes.

"But that ship has sailed." I peeled her hands off my leg. "The bitch gets to survive and you get to learn how to be better for me."

I stepped back and put distance between us.

"Leave."

I turned away from her, dismissing her with the motion. But the mirror on my dressing table gave me a perfect view of what happened next.

Number Four stood slowly. Her whole body trembled. She shook like she was caught in a seizure and her hand rose. I watched her fingers spread wide, reaching for my throat even though she stood too far away to touch me.

I felt it immediately. One of her small miracles activating as a cloying smell covered my nostrils. The power in her blood responding to her desperate need. My throat started to close. The air cut off mid breath.

But then something else happened.

Her fingers curved inward and wrapped around her own throat instead of mine. She choked on nothing, gasping for air that wouldn't come.

I turned and watched as she fell to her knees. Both hands clutched at her neck. Clawing. Fighting against the magic that was supposed to protect her but now turned inward like a snake eating its own tail.

I walked toward her slowly. Letting her suffer for a few seconds longer. Then I crouched down beside her gasping form.

"That is the first time you've actually attacked me."

Her eyes were wide and terrified. The whites showed all around the brown.

"But remember." I reached out and stroked her hair the way I'd stroked Athena's. "You were made specifically for me. Valentine was never going to allow one of his little creations to hold that power without checkpoints."

She tried to speak. Nothing came out but strangled wheezing sounds.

"I am that fucking check point. That means you cannot move against me." I said the lovely words that Valentine had given me when he'd handed over this creation.

Seeing the fail safe built into their very bones with my own eyes did bring pleasure to my soul.

The choking stopped. She gasped and sucked in air, still coughing occasionally until she retched.

"Three days without the pills for that." I stood and looked down at her. "Let the rot fucking cover you while you beg for death. Now out of my sight."

She looked up at me. And I saw it. The moment something broke inside her. The moment the fear became something else. Something harder, sharper and far more dangerous.

She raised her hand again.

The choking started immediately. Her own magic turned against her. Blood vessels burst in her eyes. Red bloomed across the whites.

She tried again.

Blood poured from her nose and ran down over her lips and dripped onto the carpet.

Again.

Her ears started bleeding. Bright red streams that looked black in the morning light.

"You really want me dead." I shook my head. Almost impressed by the determination. "You should have put this effort in with the girl I sent you after."

She swayed. The blood loss and lack of oxygen finally catching up. Her eyes rolled back and she collapsed forward onto the carpet.

I stood over her crumpled form and laughed. The sound was intended to hurt her psyche and I was sure it did.

"I would have said four days but that would most likely send you to the deep end." I nudged her with my foot. She didn't respond. "And you look like you've put yourself through enough hell already."

Three days would be sufficient. Three days of the rot eating away at whatever beautiful flesh she thought she had. Three days of suffering that would remind her exactly who held her leash.

"I will go have my bath." I stepped over her body. "Fix yourself and leave before I return."

The bathroom door closed behind me with a soft click. I turned on the taps and let the water run.

Chapter 260: Ok.

CIAN

The training ground sat far enough from the main house that the quiet felt absolute. This particular clearing had become the unofficial shifting space over the years. Far enough away that broken bones and torn muscle wouldn't disturb anyone trying to sleep.

I'd given up on sleep hours ago.

The grass was still wet with morning dew when I reached the clearing. My shoes squelched softly against the ground as I walked to the center of the space. The sky was just starting to lighten at the edges, that murky pre-dawn gray that made everything look washed out and unreal.

I needed this. I needed to let my wolf out before the day fully began and everything went to shit.

My fingers went to the buttons of my shirt. I worked them open one by one, then shrugged the fabric off my shoulders. The morning air was cold against my bare chest. Goosebumps rose across my skin immediately.

The sound of an engine cut through the silence.

I turned toward the noise. Even from this distance I could make out the shape of a red car moving down the long driveway. The color was distinctive enough. It was Madeline's brother's ride leaving.

Which meant Madeline had officially been severed from her coven. Years of fucking connection, gone. All because she'd chosen to help me instead of following their rules.

The weight of that settled heavy in my gut. One more person who'd sacrificed something important for my sake. One more debt I didn't know how to repay.

I turned back to the task at hand. My fingers found the button of my pants. I undid it, then the zipper. The pants fell to my ankles and I stepped out of them, kicking them aside with my shoes. My briefs followed a second later.

The cold bit at my exposed skin but I barely felt it. My focus had already shifted inward, reaching for the part of me that existed beneath mortal skin and mortal thoughts.

My wolf answered immediately.

It surged forward with a hunger that bordered on desperate. We'd been cooped up too long. Too many days of playing human, of walking on two legs and pretending everything was fine when nothing was fine at all.

The transformation started in my chest.

My ribcage exploded outward with a series of wet cracks that echoed across the clearing. Bones snapped and reformed, expanding beyond the limitations of human anatomy. My spine arched backward at an impossible angle. Each vertebra popped loose from its neighbor before realigning into something longer and stronger.

Pain lanced through every nerve ending. White-hot and overwhelming. My jaw unhinged with a sound like tearing fabric. The bones of my face pushed forward, elongating into a snout. My teeth fell out one by one, clattering against the lengthening bone before new ones erupted through my gums. Sharper. Longer. Made for tearing meat.

My shoulders dislocated. Both at once. The joints separated completely before the bones grew larger, the sockets deepening to accommodate them. Muscle mass built up in layers, each one wrapping around the expanding frame underneath.

My hands hit the ground. Fingers stretched and twisted. The knuckles cracked as they reformed. Claws pushed through the tips where fingernails used to be, erupting from the flesh in spurts of blood that quickly clotted. The same happened to my feet, with my bones lengthening and my joints reversing, the entire structure rebuilding itself into something designed for running.

Fur burst through my skin like a thousand needles piercing through flesh all at once. The sensation was both agonizing and satisfying in equal measure.

My internal organs shifted. Heart expanding, lungs growing larger, stomach restructuring itself to process raw meat instead of cooked food. Everything rearranging to fit the new form.

The last thing to change was my mind. Human thoughts scattered and reformed into something simpler. More direct. My wolf's consciousness merged with my own until we became one unified thing.

The transformation was complete.

I stood on four legs, shaking out my new form. My senses immediately sharpened. The world became clearer, more vivid. I could smell everything. The wet grass. The distant scent of coffee from the main house. The lingering exhaust from the red car that had driven away.

I ran.

My legs ate up the distance in powerful strides. The wind rushed past my ears, cool and clean. Every muscle in my body worked in perfect synchronization. This was what we were made for. Not sitting in offices or navigating pack politics alone.

This too.

The pure movement. The fucking freedom.

The ground blurred beneath my paws. I could hear my own breathing, steady and rhythmic. My heart pumped strong and fast, feeding oxygen to muscles that burned in the best possible way.

I leaped over a fallen log without breaking stride. The jump carried me higher than it should have, my wolf form stronger and more agile than my human body could ever be. I landed smoothly on the other side and kept running.

The world narrowed to just this. The feel of earth beneath my paws. The stretch and pull of muscle. The way my lungs expanded with each breath. Everything else fell away. Ronan. Gabriel. The trap we'd set. All of it disappeared into the rhythm of running.

I circled the clearing once. Then twice. The third time around I caught a new scent.

Someone was standing near my discarded clothes.

I slowed, changing direction to get a better angle. My wolf eyes picked out the figure easily even from a distance.

Ronan.

My pace quickened despite the exhaustion starting to creep into my legs. I needed to get to him.

The transformation back was just as brutal as the one going out.

I was still moving when it started. My spine compressed violently, vertebrae slamming back together into the shorter human configuration. My ribcage collapsed inward with a series of sickening crunches. The expanded lung capacity vanished in an instant, leaving me gasping for air that suddenly felt thin and insufficient.

My snout retracted. The bones of my face pulled backward, grinding against each other as they shortened. My jaw realigned with multiple pops. The wolf teeth fell out, replaced by my duller human ones pushing up through already healing gums.

Fur retracted back into my skin. Each hair follicle burned as it withdrew, leaving mostly smooth human flesh behind. My organs shifted again, shrinking and restructuring to fit the smaller frame.

My front legs became arms. The joints reversed with audible cracks. Paws reformed into hands, claws retracting into normal fingernails. The same happened to my back legs, the bones snapping and realigning until I was balanced on two feet instead of four.

I stumbled the last few steps, catching myself before I could fall. My human body felt weak and clumsy after the wolf form. Everything was slower, duller. My senses dimmed until the world became more muted and ordinary again.

Ronan walked toward me, my clothes draped over his arm. He held out my briefs first.

I took them and pulled them on, grateful for something to cover myself with. The morning air felt even colder against my human skin.

"You rarely shift unless you need to destress," Ronan said. His tone was casual but I could hear the question underneath it. "Is there something on your mind?"

The suspicion, sharp as it was unwelcome hit me like a physical thing. I hated that it was there. I hated that I couldn't look at my friend, my brother, without wondering if he'd betrayed me.

Had Garrett given him the card yet? The question circled in my head, demanding attention I couldn't give it. If Ronan had received it, would he mention it? Would he come to me with plenty of concerns about Gabriel?

Or would he stay silent and prove something was off?

He hadn't said anything yet. Which meant either Garrett hadn't made contact, or Ronan was choosing to hide it.

I didn't know which option was worse.

"Gee, it's not like my mate almost died," I said, reaching for my shirt. The fabric was cool against my still overheated skin. "I wonder what I could be stressed about."

"She's alive though." Ronan's voice was gentle, understanding even though I had been catty with my response.

I pulled the shirt over my head and tugged it down. "That doesn't change the fact that someone tried to kill her."

"Well, that's why I'm here." Ronan shifted his weight slightly. "The delicate is here with their handler."

I grabbed my pants and stepped into them. The denim felt restrictive after the freedom of fur and four legs. I buttoned them, then zipped them up.

"Let's get to figuring this bullshit out then."

My slippers were where I'd kicked them off. I shoved my feet into them and started walking toward the main house. Ronan fell into step beside me, matching my pace easily. The familiarity of it made my chest ache.

"Luna Fia was at the library late last night," Ronan said.

I glanced at him. "Oooookay??"

"I sort of followed her." He laughed, the sound light and easy. "I was worried. And I kind of lied and said you put me up to it."

My steps faltered. Just for a second. Just long enough for the information to sink in.

Huh... Ronan had been spying on Fia? And using me as a shield?

Why?

The question burned through my thoughts but I couldn't ask it. I couldn't show that level of suspicion without tipping my hand. If he was working with Gabriel, if he was a traitor, then letting him know I was onto him would ruin everything.

"She seemed to hate it," Ronan continued, oblivious to the calculations running through my head. "So if she brings it up in conversation, please keep up the lie? I would hate to be in her bad books."

I turned to face him. His expression was open, friendly. The same look he'd worn a thousand times before. Nothing about it suggested deception or malice.

But that was the thing about good liars it seemed. They looked you right in the eye while they stabbed you in the back.

I hated that I had to force a smile. "Sure. You're my friend. I know you'll do the same for me."

The words felt like a test. Like if I said them with enough conviction, they might become true again and erase the doubt that had taken root in my chest and was spreading like poison through every memory we shared.

"Of course," Ronan said. His smile was warm, genuine. "Always."