

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 318: How beastly

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FIA

Thorne came back with his arms full.

Two Hazmat suits, folded with the practiced efficiency of someone who kept things orderly out of genuine conviction rather than habit. A pair of heavy-grade gloves, thick enough that I could see the bulk of them from across the room. A pair of pincers. A blade, small and precise. And then he produced a ziplock bag from somewhere and set it on the counter beside everything else like it was the most ordinary collection of items a person had ever assembled at two in the morning.

He looked at me.

I looked at him.

"We're not wearing these inside the estate," I said.

"Agreed." He was already picking the things up, distributing them between us. He handed me a set of the gloves and the ziplock bag without ceremony.

"We'd have about thirty questions before we made it to the door."

"We put them on once we're clear of the main building. Far enough that no one wandering to the bathroom can look out a window and get curious."

"Sensible." He tucked the pincers under his arm and looked at me with an expression that was not quite approval and not quite reluctance but something balanced precisely in between. "Lead the way, then, Luna Fia."

We went out through a side entrance I had grown familiar to. The air outside hit immediately, cold and clean and smelling like earth and the particular sharpness that came before dawn. The grounds were still. The lights from the estate fell behind us in long yellow rectangles on the grass and then we were

past them, moving toward the tree line, and the dark swallowed the yellow and replaced it with silver.

We didn't speak until the estate was fully at our backs and the trees had closed around us enough that I felt the shift, that particular quiet that forests had at night. Like everything in them was listening.

"Here," I said.

We stopped and shook out the suits. Getting into a Hazmat suit in the dark with only ambient moonlight filtering through tree cover was not a graceful process. Thorne managed it with more dignity than I did. He had the practiced movements of someone who had done this before, or at least had thought about it enough that the doing of it wasn't awkward. I got my left arm in wrong twice and heard him politely not comment on it.

When we were both sealed in and the gloves were on and the visors were down, we kept walking. The suits made a soft sound with each step, a whisper of material against material. The forest floor was uneven beneath my feet and I picked my way through it carefully while also keeping my eyes moving. Left, right. Back the way we came. Up into the branches where things sometimes watched from.

Thorne walked beside me for a while without speaking. He was a man who understood the value of silence, which I had decided I appreciated about him. But I also felt him thinking. It had a weight to it.

"I can only think of one use for Mourning Moon," he said finally.

I glanced sideways at him through the visor. "Oh yeah? What's that?"

He turned his head and looked at me directly. "Luna Fia."

If he wanted something, I was going to give it to him.

"Even poison has its positive uses," I said.

"And you plan to use it for something positive."

"Of course."

He didn't respond immediately. A branch cracked somewhere to our left and we both turned toward it, but it was nothing. I did notice something small moving through the undergrowth. A bush rat most likely. I exhaled and faced forward again.

"Sometimes bloodshed is necessary," I said. "That's just a fact."

Thorne was quiet for a moment. Then, he continued. "Maren did tell me a few things. About Beta Ronan." He said it carefully, the way you said something when you wanted the other person to know you knew without making them feel cornered. "I imagine that must be terrifying. Having enemies that close. Alpha Cian must be distraught even given how close he is to Beta Ronan."

"Get to it."

He took a breath. "But this isn't the way. Even if I understand the impulse. Even if every part of me understands exactly why you are standing in this

forest in the middle of the night collecting something that could kill a man. This is not the way." He paused. "If even Alpha Cian hasn't blown hot over this. You cannot. No matter how frightened you are of what is happening."

I moved a low branch out of my path and let it swing back slowly. "The only reason Cian hasn't exploded yet is because of me."

Thorne said nothing, so I kept going.

"I didn't mind playing it right. I was all for it, actually. Moving carefully. Being patient. Letting the process work the way it was supposed to." My voice came out flat. I wasn't angry. I was just being honest with how exhausted I was. "I'd been completely committed to that approach right up until this evening." I stopped walking for a moment and looked up through the tree canopy at the sky, which was starting to lose its deepest black at the very edges. "There is so much I'm keeping from Cian right now. More than he knows. More than I want there to be. But I cannot wait for justice to take its course. Not when..."

I stopped.

The vision came back behind my eyes. The way it always did when I let my guard down even slightly. Cian's face. The particular stillness of him. The thing that was wrong in the picture in a way that went bone-deep.

I couldn't tell Thorne that. I couldn't say it out loud to another person because saying it out loud gave it a shape that felt too close to real.

Thorne let the silence sit for a moment before he spoke. "I understand how you feel."

"Do you?"

"More than you might think." His voice was genuine, not the placating kind of genuine but the real kind. "But this path is dangerous, Luna Fia. Murder is murder. Even for the right reasons. Even for the most right reasons a person has ever had. You could be tried for it. You could lose everything you are trying to protect."

"Only if I'm caught."

There was a pause. And then Thorne laughed. It was short and real and he pressed his lips together after like he hadn't meant to let it out. "Forgive me for how forward I am being. But trust me." He steadied himself and his voice went back to what it had been, careful and sure. "Justice prevails over evil. It does. It takes too long, always, and it costs too much, always, but it does prevail. Whatever fear you are carrying right now. Whatever is driving you out here at this hour. The justice system will not fail you. I promise you."

We walked for a moment more and I turned that over. The trees were thicker here. The ground under my feet had gone softer, damp from where the canopy held the moisture in.

"My birthday is a week away," I said.

He glanced at me.

"That's not the point," I said. "The point is that in my little time alive I have learned something that I think people who believe in justice often don't want to accept. And I have been that person. People with a strong sense of justice will almost never prevail over someone who has none. Someone who only cares about winning and the depravity of what they are willing to do to ensure that it happens." I watched where I was putting my feet. "The only times I have beaten my enemies... The only times I have even come close... It was

because I was willing to move the way they moved. Aldric has shown me who he is. Multiple times. He has been very thorough about it." My jaw tightened. "If I want to beat him, I have to be more willing to go lower than he expects. I can only win this if I want it harder than he does and become willing to do absolutely anything to make sure that I do."

Thorne was quiet for a long moment. "You make it sound like if you don't do something drastic right now, something horrible is going to happen."

"What if something horrible will happen." I said it without any lift in my voice. "And this is the only way I can make sure that horrible thing never ever happens."

That landed differently than I expected. I felt it in the way he walked for a moment, the slight change in his stride. His eyebrows had gone up even through the visor I could see it. "What does that mean?"

"Remember what you said." I turned my head toward him. "I'm allowed to refuse your questions."

"You have been quite receptive up until now. Why hold back?"

I opened my mouth.

And then I saw it.

Small, and low to the ground, growing up from between the roots of an old tree that had split at the base and grown in two directions. Five petals on each bloom. Pale lilac at the edges, bleeding inward toward a center that was almost violet, almost dark enough to look like a bruise in the right light.

Mourning Moon.

"Found one," I said.

I walked toward it.

"Luna Fia," Thorne said behind me, "we are not done talking."

"I am." I reached the plant and crouched in front of it. The gloves were thick and clumsy but I moved slowly, careful with it, not wanting to rush and get it wrong. "I'm not going to answer all your questions. But know that I am doing this for Cian. To protect him." I looked up briefly and met Thorne's eyes through both our visors. "Like I know you would."

He held my gaze. Something moved through his expression that was not agreement and was not surrender. More like the face of a man making peace with something he could not change.

I held out my hand.

He exhaled. It was a hard exhale, the kind that came from somewhere deep, the kind that meant a decision had been made that the person making it was not happy about. And then he reached out and put the blade into my palm.

I clipped the flower at the stem. Clean and quick. I turned the bag open with one hand, slipped the stem inside, and pressed the seal shut. The small purple bloom sat inside the clear plastic and looked almost pretty. Almost harmless.

I stood up and looked at Thorne.

"Well," I said. "Let's get back before Cian notices I'm missing."