

To ruin an Omega

#Chapter 331: Push - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 331: Push

Chapter 331: Push

FIA

I pushed my chair back before I could stop myself.

The scrape of wood against stone was louder than I meant it to be, but no one called after me. Cian had already slipped out of the dining room, easy and unhurried, like he had not just told a table full of people that a woman vanished from the estate before dawn.

Not that anyone aside from Aldric seemed genuinely disturbed about it.

I caught sight of his back as he turned down the corridor, and I followed.

He was halfway through the second turn when I reached him.

"Wait."

He stopped without looking annoyed, which somehow unsettled me more. When he turned, the warmth from breakfast was still on his face, that soft almost amused expression he wore when he wanted people to feel at ease. It looked arranged now, like something he had put on carefully before stepping back into the house.

"You could have told me," I said, lowering my voice so it would not carry back through the doors. "You did not have to let me find out like that."

His mouth tilted at one corner. Not quite a smile. Not quite an apology. "I know."

That was it. No explanation.

I glanced back down the hallway. I could sense the doors were shut, and the voices I could make out were muffled into a dull hum. No footsteps seemed to have followed us. No one was watching. Only then did I let out a breath and faced him again.

"So did she really leave?" I asked. "Or did you do something?"

The question felt dangerous the second it left my mouth, but I could not swallow it back.

"Do not worry about it."

It was too quick and far too smooth. It slid over the surface of the truth without touching it. He did not deny it. He did not confirm it either. He just left me standing there with the weight of it.

He studied me for a moment, head tilted slightly as if I were something he was trying to understand. "Did you see how frightened Aldric looked?"

There was something in his voice. Satisfaction. A quiet kind of pleasure.

"He is going to start making mistakes now," Cian went on. "Push the wrong people. If I have played this right, Valentine will be next."

Valentine. That man?

The name hit me so hard I felt it in my throat. My chest tightened before I could stop it, fear rising sharp and fast, and I knew he saw it. I was not shielding. I had not expected to need to. The panic spilled out of me anyway, raw and unfiltered.

"Valentine?" I heard how thin my voice sounded and hated it. "Why would he be involved in this?"

I almost said more. Almost asked what he planned to do. I stopped myself because I could feel my face betraying me, I could feel the way my eyes must have widened. I hated that too. Hated that he could read me so easily when I had spent so long since recent revelations learning how not to be read at all.

He stepped closer.

His fingers brushed my jaw, light and almost careful, like he was soothing something fragile. The gentleness did not match the sharpness in his eyes.

"What is wrong?" he asked quietly. "Why are you afraid?"

I forced myself to breathe through it. To think of something reasonable, something that did not sound like I cared too much.

"I know what your uncle is like," I said. The words came uneven, but I kept going. "I know how he reacts when he feels cornered. If another witch gets dragged into this, what do you think will happen?"

"I want Valentine dragged into it."

He did not hesitate.

I stared at him.

"He either stands with me," Cian said, each word measured, steady, "or his daughter dies."

The corridor felt smaller after that. The walls closer. The air thicker.

"Do you mean that?" I asked.

There was a part of me that needed him to laugh. To say he was exaggerating. To tell me it was strategy, not intent.

I did want someone dead. But I wasn't sure why. In whatever reality I could imagine, I couldn't see him killing Madeline.

Aldric on the other hand was a 'need'.

"I hope it does not come to that," he replied. "But there is no line I would not cross to protect my family. You."

He let his hand fall away from my face as if that settled the matter.

There you go, his expression seemed to say.

I swallowed, trying to slow the rush of thoughts tumbling over one another. Protect my family. The words sounded noble on the surface. They always did. But protection could look like anything if you stretched it far enough.

"Where is she?" I asked, because I needed to focus on something solid. "Is she still on the grounds, or did you move her?"

His smile came slowly this time, curling at the edges in a way that made my stomach tighten.

"I will tell you," he said. "If you tell me something first."

I already knew I would not like whatever came next.

"I think I have been generous," he continued lightly. "and you on the other hand, you have been very quiet about yourself. About what you are hiding."

My pulse thudded in my ears. He was not guessing. He was circling.

"What secrets?" I asked, trying to sound confused instead of cornered.

He just looked at me, patient.

The corridor stretched behind him, empty and silent, and for a moment I had the strange sense that I was standing at the edge of something I could not step back from. If I told him anything real, I would not be able to take it back. If I refused, he would know that alone was an answer.

"I think I have given enough," he said softly.

The warmth from breakfast was gone now. What stood in front of me felt sharper, clearer, stripped of performance.

I held his gaze and tried to decide which was worse, the secrets I kept or the ones he was willing to create.

I did not shield. I made myself keep my emotions in check, locked down as tightly as I could manage. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

"I saw you last night." His voice stayed even, almost conversational. "You left the room when you thought I was sleeping. After saying the most ominous thing I have ever heard."

Heat prickled at the back of my neck. "You heard that?"

"Yeah." He crossed his arms, leaning his weight against the wall behind him. "I also know, deep in my heart, that you did not go for air."

"Maybe I did."

"You didn't." The words were soft but unyielding. "I saw you enter the infirmary. I know Thorne was on seat. I also know he would know a lot about what you're keeping from me. Because you trust him and Maren. But I am also his Alpha and he cannot refuse me. Not like that." He paused, letting that sink in. "I was going to go over there and force his hand before you came here to accost me. And I just decided, you know what? Let us just hash it out here. What are you keeping from me, Fia? Just spill it. You are my mate. We shouldn't have secrets. Not these kind."

I held his gaze for as long as I could. Then I looked away, staring at a spot on the wall just past his shoulder. My throat felt tight. "You would not understand."

"Why would not I?"

"You'll get in my head." The words came out sharper than I meant them to. "Convince me to stop it. I mean, Thorne has already tried. But he does not know what is coming."

Cian's eyebrow lifted. "What is coming?"

I felt the trap close around me. My pulse kicked up, panic flooding through me again. "I knew it," he said, softer now. "That reaction you gave at the pool, you saw something."

"That is not it." The denial was automatic, desperate.

"What could it be then?"

I was cornered. Completely and utterly cornered. He was not going to let this go. I could feel it in the way he watched me, patient and relentless all at once. I had two choices. I could tell him about the vision, about watching him die at Aldric's hand, about the future pressing down on me like a weight I could not carry alone. Or I could give him something else. Something equally uncomfortable but farther from the truth I could not afford to share.

I took a breath. Forgive me, mother-in-law.

"Remember what I said about Lady Selene?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"It is true."

"I know. I believed you. I never doubted you."

I swallowed. "I am not just an Omega anymore, Cian. And I wasn't just lucky that the goddess decided to show me mercy that night."

The words hung between us. He did not move. Did not interrupt. He just waited.

"When that delicate was blinded," I continued, forcing the words out, "I felt her pain. I connected to her and I—"

"What?"

"I healed her."

His expression shifted. Confusion first, then something sharper. "What? That makes no sense. She was blinded when she left here. I felt guilty."

"I am sorry."

"Why was that a secret?" His voice rose slightly, not loud enough to carry but enough that I felt the weight of it. "Why would that be a secret?"

I looked down at my hands. "Because the delicate girl drew something. Something she said you would have wanted from her."

I saw the moment it clicked. The way his eyes widened just a fraction, the way his entire body stilled.

"Who did she draw?" His voice had gone very quiet.

I met his gaze and held it. "Valentine."

The silence stretched out. I could feel my heart hammering against my ribs, could feel the fear still churning in my chest. I had thrown him off the scent of the vision, but I had given him something else instead. Something that would raise questions I was not prepared to answer.

Cian did not move. He just stood there, staring at me like I had said something in a language he was still translating.

"Valentine," he repeated, testing the name.

I nodded.

He ran a hand through his hair, exhaled slowly. "The delicate drew Valentine."

"Yes."

"And you healed her."

"Yes."

"So she can see again."

"Yes."

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he let out a short, sharp breath that might have been a laugh if it had carried any humor. "Goddess," he said quietly. "You just gave me more problems than solutions."

I said nothing. There was nothing to say.

He pushed off the wall, took a step closer. "Where is it now? The drawing?"

I hesitated. "We have it. Your mother has it."

Chapter 332: New perspective

FIA

"What—"

I clamped my hand over his mouth before the word could echo down the corridor. His eyes went wide, shock bleeding through the surprise.

"If you won't be quiet, we can't talk here anymore," I hissed.

I grabbed his hand to pull him somewhere more private, but he yanked it back. The movement was sharp enough that I stumbled half a step.

"My mother knows?" he said.

It might have sounded like a question. But I knew damn well that wasn't a question.

I swallowed. I hated this. Hated that I had to throw the Grand Luna under anything, even if it was to save myself from a different truth. "Yes. She knows."

"And she told you to keep it from me."

"She implored me to keep it from you," I corrected, though the distinction felt paper-thin.

He scoffed. The sound was bitter and disbelieving. "And you agreed to it."

"Yes."

"What?" He stared at me like I had grown a second head. "Why?"

I paused. The words sat heavy on my tongue before I let them out. "Before your new perspective today, you didn't look like you could take it."

His jaw tightened.

"She said it," I continued. "I agreed. I agreed even harder when you implied it at the pool. Cian, I could see you breaking and to thrust that into you, it didn't seem fair."

"This is my pack." His voice rose slightly, frustration cracking through. "I'm Alpha. I'm supposed to know everything in and out. At least I'm supposed to try to. And you didn't think I should know that..." He stopped. Took a breath. "That Valentine was responsible for your accident?"

He combed both hands through his hair, gripping the strands like he needed something to hold onto. "I need to talk to my mother. This is insane."

I put my hand over his chest. His heart was pounding so hard I could feel it hammering against my palm. "This is why we kept it from you. You're about to do it again. Blow hot."

"Because this changes my plan entirely." He looked around, checking the empty corridor, then leaned in close. His voice dropped to a whisper. "I was going to help Valentine if he took my hand. Madeline has done a lot of horrible shit. But I understand her. I understood why she did what she did at the end of the day even if I hated her and her fucking guts for it. This... This however means she lied to me. Even with everything she spilled. She must have known her father tried to kill you. She didn't mention that. She didn't fucking think to mention it."

I wondered... Did the girl even know?

Still, I couldn't fight her case. There were more important things to think about.

He took a deep breath. It shuddered on the way out.

"Aldric is so obsessed with taking you out, he's using his witch hand now," he said. "This has to be cut as quickly as possible. No matter which enemy gets the short end of the stick."

Guilt twisted in my chest. "I'm sorry for keeping secrets."

"It's fine." The words came too quick to be entirely true. "Just... just let's not keep secrets from each other again. Got it?"

I wanted to nod. I wanted to agree. But instead I heard myself ask, "Can you even handle more?"

He blinked. "What?"

"What I just revealed alone had your blood rushing again."

"Of course I can handle more." He straightened, squaring his shoulders like he could physically brace himself. "Is there more?"

The vision sat on the tip of my tongue. Aldric's hand doing the deed. The pool of blood red. The way his eyes had looked in those final moments.

But his eyes were already glazed now. His heart still beat too fast beneath my hand. The only reason he hadn't imploded completely was because I had pulled him back from the edge. One mention of Valentine and he already looked like he was rewriting his entire strategy in his head.

If I gave him another secret right when he was just starting to compartmentalize this one, it would be disastrous.

I shook my head. "No. Nothing else."

The lie tasted sour.

I wasn't even sure he believed it. But he let it go and that had to count.

"Good." He reached up and placed a kiss on my forehead. The gesture was gentle and automatic. "Just enjoy the day. Pretend like everything is normal. Maybe even keep my mother company. I'll do well to keep my play entertaining and you will be right there just as the curtain of this madness closes."

Then he turned and walked away.

I watched his back disappear down the corridor. Watched the way his shoulders stayed tense even as he tried to move with that easy confidence he wore like armor.

The guilt sat heavier than before.

I wiped at my eyes. My fingers came away wet. I hadn't even realized I was crying.

The infirmary was quiet when I pushed through the door. Maren stood near one of the beds, organizing supplies with the kind of methodical focus that meant she was either very busy or very much not thinking about something else. Thorne on the other hand was deeper in the room, his back to me.

"Fia." Maren looked up. Her greeting was warm but her eyes searched my face.

Elder Thorne turned. "Good morning."

"Can I get another hazmat suit?" The words came out steadier than I felt. "I need to get to work."

Thorne's expression tightened. He didn't say anything. He probably thought some reflection would make me change my mind. If anything, it hardened my resolve. After the longest second ever, he just sighed and headed deeper into the infirmary where the supplies were kept.

Maren stared at me.

I tapped my foot against the floor, doing my best to ignore her. But her gaze didn't waver. It pressed against me like a physical weight.

"Damn," I said finally. "You know you can just say it, Maren. It's not like it's going to change my mind anyway."

"I didn't say anything."

"I can read the room. I know Thorne has spilled to you and he wants to convince you to appeal to my morality. But my mind is set. This is the way to go."

Maren set down the bandages she'd been holding. "It can't be the way to go."

I turned to face her properly. "Do you know one of the reasons why Omegas are so hated? Aside from the fact that people love having dominion over another living form they deem lesser than them?"

She held my gaze. "The long and sad history of assisting coups and power changes."

"Exactly." I took a step closer. "Poison has always had its use. I'm sure even you know how Omegas are treated. Then and now. Nothing much has changed. I would know. If it's bad enough that they can gang up to help an opposition take you out because of the promise of better treatment, then you know that person had it coming."

I gestured vaguely in the direction of the wing where Aldric's quarters sat. "Look at that man. Think about that evil man and tell me he doesn't deserve the karma he's about to get."

Maren walked closer. She glanced back at Thorne, who was still occupied, then lowered her voice. "I'm not like Thorne. I understand your views and why this needs to be done. But why does it have to be you?"

I frowned. "What?"

"I know I'm about to sound cruel and callous." She kept her voice quiet, careful. "But discovery is still a thing. And as much as you and I and a few more have seen Aldric for what he is, he's still beloved. Even with the royal werewolf family. An Omega who rose quickly up the ranks and a beloved Alpha who has done nothing wrong ever..." She paused. "Do you see what I'm painting?"

The implication hit me cold and sharp. "What would you suggest then?"

"Someone loyal can do it for you."

I recoiled. The suggestion made my stomach turn. "You would have me dispose of a life because it's deemed lesser than mine?"

"Now more than ever, yes." Maren didn't flinch. She met my disgust head-on. "You're different. The blood you have flowing in your veins is no Omega. I saw what you did. You're a healer. Nothing like me or Thorne. Or even Elder Moira. So yes. Those lives are lesser than yours."

"No."

The word came out harder than I meant it. I shook my head, trying to dislodge the very idea from the air between us.

"And besides," I continued, "I want to do this myself. I've touched Aldric's madness and I know how deep it runs. I'm more than willing to fall just as deep if not deeper." I looked her in the eye. "Plenty of people can't do this. Plus he has spies and allies around. This is a sword I have to fall on."

Thorne returned with the hazmat suit folded over his arm. He held it out without a word.

I took it. The material was cool and slick under my fingers.

"I'm grateful you two care," I said, looking between them. "You have no idea how relieving it is. But like I said, my mind is made up."

Maren's expression didn't change. She just watched me with that same steady, searching look.

Thorne looked tired but since Maren has failed. He knew he didn't have a shot anymore.

I tucked the suit under my arm and sighed.

Maren spoke again. "Be careful, Fia."

I have her a curt smile. "I will."

The lie was getting easier every time I told it.

Then I turned back to Thorne. "Where is the mourning moon? I need to begin."

Chapter 333: Cactus love

ALDRIC

I slapped the door behind me hard enough to feel the impact travel up my arm. The sound was sharp and final and exactly what I needed. I stood there for a second, breathing, my palm still flat against the wood.

Then I pulled my phone out and dialed Madeline again.

It rang. It kept ringing. Then it went to voicemail. Again.

"You think this is a game?" I said into the phone. My voice was low. Controlled. I was good at that. "You think you can just walk away from me? From this? You know what happens when people try to make moves without my express permission. You know

exactly what happens. So pick up the fucking phone. Pick it up now. Or I will make you regret every single breath you take from this moment forward."

I ended the call.

My hand was shaking. I looked at it. I made it stop.

I dialed again.

Same thing. Ring. Ring. Ring. Voicemail.

"Madeline." I kept my tone even this time. Almost pleasant. "I am calling your father next. And when I do, I am going to tell him exactly how his daughter has decided to become a liability. You know what that means. You know what I will do to him. So whatever little fantasy you are living in right now, whatever you think this is, end it. Call me back. You have minutes. Not hours. Minutes."

I hung up.

I looked at the phone in my hand and I wanted to throw it. I wanted to watch it shatter against the wall and hear the crack of the screen splitting apart. But I needed it. I fucking needed it.

I scrolled to Valentine's name then and immediately hit call.

It rang twice. Then a third time. Then I heard a click and his voice came through, thick with sleep and irritation.

"Oh," he said. "I wonder what threat this is about now."

"It seems your daughter has grown wings," I said. My voice was sharp, yet it still managed to sound clipped. "Or maybe she is just now tired of it all and decided becoming unfaithful is the way to go. Because she has disappeared from here."

There was a pause. Then Valentine laughed.

It was not a polite laugh. It was the kind of laugh that said he thought I was fucking with him. That he thought this was some kind of joke.

"Is that a joke?" he said.

"You think I make jokes? You should know me better than that warlock."

The laughter stopped.

"If she is with you or heading towards you," I continued, "call her back now. Or I will not waste time punishing you."

"Do not be rash." His voice had shifted. It was awake now. Focused. "She is not here."

"Then where the fuck is she?"

"I do not know. But Madeline knows what is at stake. She would never pull something so stupid."

"I do not think she does," I said. I turned and paced toward the window. The light was too bright. It hurt my eyes. "I do not think she does at all. Because if she did, she wouldn't have made a move so stupid and reckless against me. No fucking way!"

"I will call her," Valentine said quickly. "I will speak sense into her."

"You better. You have an hour. I want responses. Stat. Or else. Well... you know what else."

"Now come on, man. Do not be rash and—"

I cut the call.

I stood there staring at the phone. My chest felt tight. I dialed Madeline again.

It rang. It went to voicemail.

I pulled the phone back and looked at it. My arm tensed. I could throw it. I could send it straight into the wall and let it break into a hundred pieces. But I needed it. I still fucking needed it.

I lowered my arm. I shoved the phone into my pocket and pressed both palms flat against the desk. I leaned into it. I made myself breathe.

Something had to have happened. That was the only way this made any sense. Something had moved her out of reach and no one at that fucking table had acted like it mattered. No one except me.

The door opened.

I turned fast.

Ronan stepped inside. His face was drawn with concern and he moved toward me without hesitation.

"Are you alright, Father?"

My eyes widened. "Are you insane?" I crossed the room toward him in three strides. "Why would you come in here in broad daylight? And why would you call me that here?"

He stopped. His expression shifted. "I... I was... I was just worried."

"You think I need you barging in here at the start of the fucking day? You think that is smart? Get out. Leave. Now."

His face changed. The concern drained out of it and something else took its place. Something wounded. Something I did not have time for.

But I was supposed to. Because apparently, it was the fatherly thing to do. And I knew a thing or two about vindictive wounded kids.

"I am sorry," he said. His voice was flat. "I did not mean to offend you."

He turned and started for the door.

"Wait." The word came out harder than I meant it to. "Wait."

He stopped. He did not turn around.

"I am sorry." I ran a hand through my hair. "I am sorry. I am just..."

"I know. I was doing too much." He then opened the door and walked out.

I took a step forward. "Ronan."

But he was already halfway gone. The door swung shut behind him and I heard his footsteps recede down the hall. Then I heard them stop. I heard a soft exchange of voices. I heard the footsteps start again, faster this time, moving away.

I stood there.

Then the door opened again.

Elara stepped inside. Her face was tight with confusion and something else. Something I could not read.

"Did something happen?" she asked. "Beta Ronan looked sick."

I swallowed. "He just came to tell me something."

"He looked upset."

"Goddess, just tell me why are you here?" I said.

She blinked. "I was worried. You seemed on edge at breakfast. I noticed."

She took a brief pause and then made eye contact. It was so unsettling to see in real time. Reminded me of her mother.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No."

"Are you sure? Because—"

"I called Valentine," I said. I turned away from her and moved back toward the desk. "He said Madeline is not home."

Elara was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "She might have gone partying."

I turned. "What?"

"I was just making a guess. We went clubbing a few times. She might have—"

"Are you even her friend?" The words came out sharp. Too sharp. "That makes no sense at all."

I knew it would cut. But I didn't have it in me to soften my words and stroke weak mental fortitude.

She flinched. "I was just making a guess."

I closed my eyes. I was doing a lot of damage and quick. First, Ronan . Now her.

"Sorry. I am just off this morning."

I moved toward her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Can you try calling her?"

"Of course."

She pulled out her phone and dialed. She held it to her ear. I watched her face. I watched the seconds tick by. Then she lowered the phone.

"I guess she is busy."

I moved around the room. I ran a hand through my hair. I did it again. I could not stand still. I could not think straight. Everything felt like it was slipping and I could not get a grip on any of it.

"Okay," I said. "Thanks. You can go. I need some time alone."

"Are you sure?" She took a step toward me. "You do not look very good, Father. Perhaps we should—"

"Fucking get out of my sight, you imbecile!"

The words came out like a whip. Sharp and loud and brutal. I had not meant to say them. I had not meant to say them like that. But they were out now and there was no taking them back.

Elara froze.

Her whole body went rigid. Her face crumpled. Her eyes filled with tears and she just stood there, shaking, staring at me like I had slapped her.

"Oh... I just wanted to comfort you." Her voice broke. "I do not know why you are being mean."

I opened my mouth. I did not know what to say. I did not know how to fix it.

"Mom did say to watch out for your temper. I never did see it before. This must be it. I guess she wasn't as bad and bitter as you portrayed her."

Before I could even counter that, she turned, like Ronan had, and she walked out. The door clicked shut behind her.

I stood in the middle of the room.

I looked at the desk. I looked at the walls. I looked at the window with the too bright light coming through it.

I pulled my phone out and dialed Madeline again.

It rang.

And rang.

And went to voicemail.

I held the phone in my hand. I stared at it. I felt something inside me crack. Just a little. Just enough.

I dialed again.

Same thing.

I dialed again.

Again.

I stopped counting after the fifth time. I just kept dialing. I kept listening to the rings. I kept hearing her voicemail. I kept leaving messages. Threats. Promises. Warnings. I did not know what I was saying anymore. I just kept talking. I kept calling.

She did not pick up.

That was when I had absolutely enough.

I threw the phone onto the desk. It skidded across the surface and stopped just before the edge.

I sat down.

I put my head in my hands.

I could not think. I could not piece it together. I could not figure out where it had gone wrong. Madeline did not just leave. She did not have the freedom. She did not have the means. I had made sure of that. I had locked every door. I had sealed every exit.

And yet she was gone.

No. I had to know for sure.

I had to see that room.

Chapter 334: SOS 1

CIAN

I opened the door to my study and shut it behind me with enough force that the lock caught on its own. The click was quiet but just as final. I stood there for a second, my hand still on the brass handle, letting the silence of the room settle over me like a second skin.

Then I moved.

The desk was where it always was. Heavy oak, dark enough to swallow light, positioned at an angle that gave me a view of both the door and the window. I had sat behind it a thousand times. I had signed documents there. Made decisions that changed lives. But today I wasn't interested in paperwork.

I pulled the drawer open. The middle one, second from the left. The wood slid smooth and silent on its tracks. Inside were the usual things. Pens. A letter opener I never used. A few folded documents I hadn't gotten around to filing. And beneath all of that, tucked

into the corner where no one would think to look twice, was a small panel built flush into the bottom of the drawer.

I pressed my thumb against it.

It warmed under my touch. Then it clicked. A soft mechanical sound, barely audible, and the panel lifted. Beneath it was a compartment. Narrow but deep and just wide enough for what I had put there.

Madeline's phone was there.

I picked it up. The screen was dark and cold in my hand. I slipped it into my pocket without looking at it. Then I reached for the pin I kept on the inside lip of the drawer. Small thing. Silver. Sharp enough to do what I needed it to do.

I pressed the tip into my palm and dragged it across the skin just hard enough to break through. The pain was bright and immediate but I didn't flinch. Blood welled up in the cut, a thin line of red that pooled in the center of my hand before it started to drip.

I closed the drawer. The glass panel sealed itself again with another soft click.

I walked toward the bookshelf on the far wall. It was tall. Floor to ceiling. Filled with books I had read and books I never would. The spines were leather and cloth and some were so old the titles had faded into illegibility. But I wasn't looking for a book.

I stopped in front of the third shelf from the bottom. Right where the corner met the wall. There was a spot there. No mark. No indication. Just a place where the wood was slightly smoother than the rest. I pressed my bleeding palm flat against it.

The blood soaked into the wall.

It practically drank it. The red spread from where my hand touched, crawling outward in thin tendrils that began to spin. They moved with purpose, curling and intersecting, forming shapes that looked almost like letters but weren't. Runes. Old ones. The kind that didn't belong to any written language I had ever studied but that I understood all the same because they were part of this estate.

The patterns glowed faint and red. Then they pulsed once. Then twice.

The wall shimmered.

It didn't open. It didn't slide or swing or fold. It just changed. It was solid one moment. Translucent the next. I could see through it now. I could see the darkness on the other side, the beginning of a staircase that led down into the earth beneath Skollrend.

I stepped forward.

The wall resisted for half a second, like pushing through a membrane, and then I was through. I felt the shift behind me. The wall solidified again. Anyone looking at it now would see nothing but books and stone. No door. No seam. Just a wall.

The stairs were old.

Older than the estate. Older than my father's rule. Older than his father's. They were carved from stone that had never seen sunlight, worn smooth in places by generations of feet that had walked this path before mine. The air smelled different down here. It was cold and damp. Like the inside of a grave that had been sealed for too long.

I descended.

There were passages under Skollrend. Plenty of them. Most of them had been built for practical reasons. Quick escapes if the estate was ever under siege. Hidden routes for moving supplies or people back then without being seen. My father had shown me some of them when I was young. He had told me their locations. Their uses. Their limits.

It was later on in life that he showed me this one.

Because this passage wasn't like the others. This one had been built with magic. Not just stone and mortar. Blood magic. Dark magic. The kind that bound itself to the ruling bloodline and recognized no one else.

The walls were warded. I could feel them even now, the hum of protective spells layered so thick they made the air vibrate. They were designed to repel most forms of attack. Most forms of intrusion. Fire wouldn't burn here. Blades wouldn't cut. Spells would shatter before they reached their target.

And there was a cloaking spell woven into the foundation itself. Anyone who stepped into this passage without Alpha blood would find themselves turned around. Confused. They would walk in circles until they gave up or until the passage decided to spit them out somewhere else entirely.

But I was ruling Alpha blood. The only ruling Alpha left in this house that knew this part of the secret passages existed.

My father had kept it secret. His father before him had done the same. It was tradition. A failsafe. A place to hide if everything else fell apart. A place to plan. To wait. To strike from when the time was right.

And right now, it was the perfect place to keep her.

The stairs ended in a long corridor. Narrow. Low-ceilinged. The stone here was darker, almost black, and the wards were so concentrated I could see them if I looked closely enough. Faint lines of light that pulsed in rhythm with my heartbeat.

I walked until I reached the threshold.

It looked like nothing. Just more corridor. But I could feel the cloaking spell humming in front of me. A barrier that separated the passage from the room beyond. I took a breath and stepped through.

The spell parted around me. It recognized my blood. It let me pass.

And there she was.

Madeline.

She was sitting in a chair in the center of the room. Her wrists were bound behind her, ropes wrapped tight enough that I could see the red marks on her skin even from where I stood with my better eyesight. Her ankles were tied to the legs of the chair. Her hair was a mess. Her face was pale. Tear-streaked. Her eyes were wide and red-rimmed and when she saw me, something in her expression broke.

Chapter 335: SOS 2

CIAN

"Cian," she said when she finally noticed me. Her voice cracked. "What the fuck."

I stopped a few feet away from her. I didn't say anything at first. I just looked at her. Took in the state of her. The way her chest was heaving. The way her hands were shaking behind her back.

"I'm sorry," I said finally. "But this is the only way I knew to end it."

Her mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. "What?"

"It's clear you'll protect your monster of a father more than anyone else."

"That's why I made that pact with you." Her voice rose. Desperate. "So you could trust me."

"Well, I don't."

The words came out flat. Final. I watched them land. Watched her flinch like I had struck her.

"You didn't tell me your father was the one who tried to kill Fia."

Her face went white. "What?"

I pulled her phone from my pocket and held it up. "The delicate I hired saw it. So there is no point denying it."

"No." She shook her head so hard her hair whipped across her face. "My father would never. He was not the one. I swear to you."

"I would have thought so too." I turned the phone over in my hand. "But it makes sense the more I think about it. He is a slave to my uncle just as you, isn't he? The delicate must have known better than to reveal her hand when she was in the most unsafe place she could be. My pack."

Madeline stared at me. Her breathing was shallow. Fast. "What do you plan to do now? Why am I fucking here?"

I laughed. Not because it was funny. Just because the question was so absurd I didn't know how else to respond.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I assure you. It's started already. You need to see how deranged my uncle is being right now losing you. He's losing his mind. Calling. Texting. Threatening." I paused. "You must be his most important pawn."

Madeline scoffed. "I doubt it."

"No?"

"Your uncle just doesn't like not being in control." Her voice was hoarse and just as bitter. "Now that I'm out of sight, he's terrified at the endless possibilities. That is his greatest flaw for someone who thinks he is such a mastermind."

She swallowed. I watched her throat work. Watched the fear creep back into her eyes.

"But," she said. She looked at me. Really looked at me. "He will destroy my family if he thinks I'm gone. So Cian, I am begging you, have mercy on me."

I nodded. "That's the main idea."

I unlocked her phone. The screen lit up. I scrolled through the notifications. I saw thirty-seven missed calls, twenty-three voicemails. I selected one of the old ones and held the phone up so she could hear.

Aldric's voice filled the room. Loud, angry and goddamn frantic.

"You think this is a game? You think you can just walk away from me? From this? You know what happens when people try to make moves without my express permission. You know exactly what happens. So pick up the fucking phone. Pick it up now. Or I will make you regret every single breath you take from this moment forward."

The message ended.

Madeline's eyes were wet. Her jaw was clenched so tight I thought she might crack a tooth.

"Soon enough," I said, "he'll call your father. If he hasn't already."

I scrolled down and found another voicemail. This one was not as old. From about twenty minutes ago. I pressed play.

Valentine's voice came through. Different from Aldric's. Quieter. But no less desperate.

"Madeline, please. Please pick up. I do not know what you are doing. I do not know what you are thinking. But you need to call me back. Right now. Do you understand? This is not a request. This is not a suggestion. Call me. Do not do this. This family needs you."

I cut it off halfway through and slipped the phone back into my pocket.

"Aren't I good?" I said.

Madeline started to cry. Not the quiet kind. The kind that shook her whole body. The kind that made her gasp for air between sobs.

"Would you hurt me like this, Cian?" she said.

"You hurt me first." I took a step closer. "You twisted the blade several times. How I retaliate to that would never be fair."

"I'm sorry."

"Those are words anybody can say." I crouched down so I was eye level with her. "Right now, the enemies have eaten deep like moths of a tapestry. I cannot afford to be kind even if I did consider it for you before because of hard times. Until I learned what your father did."

She looked at me. Her eyes were red and desperate and pleading. "He did not. Cian's trust me."

"You're wasting your breath. I assured her."

"Now," I continued, "your family's survival depends entirely on whose side your father chooses."

I pulled the phone back out. I opened the messaging app. I typed one word.

Help.

I held the screen up so she could see it. "I'm sure this should push your father enough to see this is not by your will. And like any good father, or masquerading good one, the next thing he would do is call me."

"What then?"

I didn't answer. I pressed send first.

The message went through. One word. No context. Just enough to make Valentine's blood run cold.

"Pray to your goddess that he stands by my side," I said. "Because the messages and mail that Aldric and him have sent are more than implicating enough."

I stood up. I slipped the phone back into my pocket and looked down at her.

"I'll be saving them and ensuring others get them. What do they call it now? A dead man switch." I smiled. It felt wrong on my face. "The Royal werewolf family and the court of Hekate's maidens would love this, I'm sure. But this only becomes an issue if I'm betrayed or brutally murdered, of course."

Madeline stared at me. She didn't say anything. She just stared.

I turned and walked back toward the threshold. Back toward the corridor. Back toward the stairs that would take me up into the light.

Behind me, I heard her start to cry again.

I didn't stop. I didn't look back.

I just kept walking.