

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 341: Drive - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 341: Drive

Chapter 341: Drive

ALDRIC

I stepped into the passage.

The air hit me first. Cold and stale like the inside of a tomb. I pulled out my phone and turned the flashlight back on. The beam cut through the darkness and showed me stone walls on either side. They were rough just as I remembered. Though the jaggedness that screamed unfinished was more prominent to me now. The useless fuck who had built the place hadn't cared about making it pretty to look at. They seemingly only cared about making it functional.

I moved forward. The floor sloped downward. Each step took me deeper into the passage and I could feel the temperature dropping with every foot I descended. My footsteps echoed off the stone and came back to me in strange distorted waves.

The beam of light swept across the floor and that was when I saw them again.

Footprints.

Clear as day in the layer of dust that coated everything down here. They were fresh. Recent. The edges were still sharp and hadn't been worn down by time or air currents.

I followed them.

The passage curved to the left and I followed it. The walls closed in tighter here and I had to turn my shoulders slightly to fit through. The footprints kept going. Stead and purposeful. Whoever had made them knew exactly where they were going.

Then something else caught the light.

I stopped and pointed the beam at the object on the floor. It was small. Dark. Partially hidden against the base of the wall where it met the floor.

A shoe.

I crouched down and picked it up. The leather was soft and it looked semi expensive. The heel was high and thin. I turned it over in my hand and looked at the sole. It was clean, barely worn. This wasn't some old forgotten thing that had been down here for years. This was new.

And it looked like it would belong to my missing girl.

Interesting indeed.

I looked back at the footprints behind me. Then I looked at the ones ahead. I held the shoe up to the beam of light and studied the sole again.

The shoe in my hand had a smooth sole with just a small maker's mark near the arch. But the prints in the dust ahead of me had that geometric pattern. Those sharp edges and clean lines I had seen upstairs.

If I was even to give grace, given that the pattern was different and the shoe's sole was clean. There was the issue of size.

My hand tightened around the shoe.

The size of the prints that had led me here were a man's shoe. Those were a man's prints.

I stood up slowly. My eyes moved from the shoe in my hand to the tracks stretching out in front of me. My brain was working. Turning over the pieces. Trying to fit them together into something that made sense.

Someone had wanted me to think Madeline left of her own volition. Someone who had been careless enough to let one of her shoes drop here.

I turned around.

My feet carried me back up the passage faster than I had come down. The beam of light bounced off the walls as I moved. I didn't care about being quiet anymore. I didn't care about being careful. I just needed to get out.

The panel was still open when I reached it. I shoved it wider and stepped back into the wardrobe. The light from the bedroom was almost blinding after the darkness of the passage. I pushed the panel closed behind me and heard it click back into place. Then I walked out of the wardrobe and crossed the room. My hands pulled the wardrobe doors shut and I stepped back.

The room looked exactly the same as it had before. Clean, as well as empty. But now, all of it just seemed perfectly staged.

Now I knew better.

There was only one explanation. Only one reason someone would go through this much trouble.

I had been compromised.

Someone knew. Someone suspected. Someone was testing me.

Cian's face flashed through my mind. The way he had looked at the table earlier. The way his eyes had tracked my every movement. The way he had watched me like he was waiting for me to slip up.

And then there was the sentinel that Ronan had mentioned. Garrett. The one who claimed to have seen Madeline leave. The only one who had seen it. It was not lost on me now that he was the one Ronan had said was deadly loyal to Cian.

My jaw clenched.

It was the only rational answer. The only explanation that fit. Cian had figured me out. Or he suspected enough to set this trap. And I had maybe walked right into it.

Fuck.

I turned and walked out of the room. I didn't look back. I didn't close the door gently or try to make it look like I had never been there. I just walked off fast. Down the hallway and toward my own room.

My hands were shaking by the time I got there. I shut the door behind me and locked it. Then I crossed to the dresser and pulled open the bottom drawer. My fingers found the hidden catch on the back panel and pressed. The false bottom popped up with a soft click.

The blood ring sat there. The red stone gleaming even in the dim light of my room. I picked it up and slipped it onto my finger. The metal was cold and heavy. It settled into place like it belonged there.

My eyes moved to the other object in the compartment. The thin silver chain necklace with the key hanging from it. It was small and unassuming. Most people wouldn't look twice at it. But I knew what it opened.

My hand hovered over the necklace. I could take it right now. I could leave. Get in my car and drive back to my own estate and lock myself behind walls that I controlled. Walls where I knew every secret and every passage and every person who walked through them.

But why was I terrified? Why was I so terrified?

Gabriel was my insurance. My get out of jail free card. The only reason no matter what happened, I would still be breathing and not rotting in some shallow hell.

If things went bad here, if Cian decided to move against me, I could use Gabriel. I would have a second chance and I could use that to threaten, bargain and fucking survive.

My fingers touched the chain.

Then I stopped.

I pulled my hand back and stared at the key. My chest was tight. My breathing was too fast again. I could feel my thoughts spiraling. Spinning out into a hundred different scenarios and possibilities. Each one worse than the last.

But wait.

I forced myself to take a breath. Then another. I made myself think.

Did Cian actually know? Or was I just paranoid? What evidence did he really have?

Yes.

Why would Cian distrust me in the first place? I had given him no reason. I had been careful. I had been smart. I had played my role perfectly.

So why was I so terrified?

I looked down at the ring on my finger. The red stone caught the light and threw it back at me in sharp fragments. And then a memory came. Unbidden and unwanted.

I was twelve years old. Maybe thirteen. It was hard to remember exactly. The details blurred together after so many years. Mostly because it was a memory I wanted to forget completely.

I was in father's study. now Cian's study and I distinctively remember the dark wood, the leather chairs and the smell of old books and even older whiskey.

I was standing in front of his desk. He was sitting behind it. My mother was in the chair to his left.

They had called me in to talk. About my future. About my prospects. About what I was going to do with my life now that it was becoming clear I wasn't like my brothers.

Cian's father and my eldest brother had just been named heir.m at seventeen. It was claimed that he showed the most promise. But that was low from the pit of hell. He wasn't already proving himself worthy of the title. He was just born first. Gabriel on the other hand was a sword that could be used and I could understand. He was fifteen and making his own mark. Building alliances and winning favor mostly.

And then there was me. The third son. The spare of the spare.

My father had looked at me with something like disappointment. It stung. Because it felt like I didn't even deserve his anger. All he had was this resigned acceptance that I was never going to be what he wanted.

But my mother. Her face was different. She had that look. That soft pitying expression that made my skin crawl.

She leaned forward in her chair and put her hand on the edge of the desk. Her voice was gentle when she spoke. It was infuriating even being babied.

"Aldric, sweetheart, you have to understand. Not everyone is meant to leave their mark on the world. And that is okay. Really. It is."

I had just stared at her. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to respond.

She smiled. It was supposed to be reassuring. It made me want to punch something. Her face mostly.

"You don't have the drive that your brothers have. You never did. And I think that is fine. I think you can live a perfectly good life without all that pressure. Without all those expectations."

My father had nodded. Like he agreed. Like they had discussed this beforehand and decided together that I was a lost cause.

"You are the third child," my mother continued. "You don't have the burden of being heir. You don't have to prove anything. You can just live. Simply. Quietly. And I am glad for that. I am glad you won't have to carry what your brothers carry."

She had meant it kindly. With her bird brain, I knew that. She thought she was giving me permission to be mediocre. She thought she was freeing me from obligation.

But all I heard was that she didn't believe in me. That she had looked at me and seen nothing. No potential. No future. Just a third son who would fade into the background and be forgotten.

I had never had drive until that day. Until those words.

The memory cut off.

I blinked and I was back in my room. Standing in front of my open drawer with the blood ring on my finger and the key hanging from its chain in the secret compartment.

Why was I even thinking about that woman? Why was I letting her voice into my head after all this time? She was pathetic and weak. A glorified baby maker who had died. She had died years ago and honestly, good riddance.

A knock sounded at the door.

I turned toward it. My hand moved automatically to close the secret compartment. The false bottom clicked back into place. I shut the drawer and straightened up.

"Who is it?"

The voice that came through the door was calm.

"Sentinel Garrett."

My heart stopped. Then it started again. Faster than before.

I walked to the door. My hand went to the lock first and I clicked it several times and then the handle. I pulled it open.

"Come in."

Chapter 342: The Future 1

FIA

Thorne disappeared into the back again and returned with a sealed zip-locked bag. The mourning moon sat inside, its petals a deep, unsettling purple that seemed to drink in the light rather than reflect it.

"You have to remember this thing is very toxic," Thorne said. His voice carried a weight that made me pay attention. It felt like he was trying to tell me I still had a choice and I shouldn't make the wrong one. "Be safe."

"I know what I am doing," I assured him.

"We have a sealed room for handling hazardous materials. I'm sure you remember it. You'll need to work in there."

He gestured for me to follow, and I did, the hazmat suit still tucked under one arm and the bag held carefully in my other hand. The flower barely moved inside its containment, but I swore I could feel something emanating from it anyway. A wrongness that prickled against my senses.

The sealed room was at the far end of the infirmary, past the recovery beds and through a heavy door that hissed when Thorne pushed it open. Inside, the space was clinical

and sparse. White walls, a single metal table in the center, and what looked like an industrial ventilation system built into the ceiling. There were glass containers of various sizes lined up on shelves, along with basic tools. Mortar and pestle. Measuring instruments. A small heating element.

"The ventilation system can be activated with that switch." Thorne pointed to a red lever near the door. "When you're done, pull it. It will cycle the air completely before you exit."

I nodded.

He hesitated in the doorway. His mouth opened like he wanted to say something else, then closed again. Finally, he just stepped back and let the door seal shut behind him.

The room felt smaller once I was alone.

I set the bag down on the metal table and pulled on the hazmat suit. The material was thick and awkward, the hood muffling sound as I zipped it up.

I had gotten better at putting it on though. The gloves came next. I flexed my fingers, getting used to the loss of dexterity.

I finished off by putting on the head covering and the breathing apparatus.

Then I opened the bag.

The smell hit me first. Sweet and cloying, but underneath it was something bitter. Even with the breathing mask to protect from the spores, something about it still made my nose wrinkle and my eyes water regardless of the protective gear. I blinked hard and focused.

The mourning moon looked worse up close. The petals were wilting at the edges, turning black where they curled inward. The center of the flower was open, exposing the stamen and the cluster of spores that clung there like dust. Dark purple, almost black. When I moved the bag, they shifted slightly, and I could see the faint shimmer of them catching the light.

I reached for one of the glass containers and carefully tipped the flower out onto the table. It landed with barely a sound, but a small puff of spores lifted into the air. I froze, watching them drift. They moved slowly, almost lazily, before settling back down.

My heart pounded.

I picked up the mortar and pestle and got to work.

First, the petals. I plucked them off one by one, careful not to disturb the center too much. They were soft under my gloved fingers, almost slimy. I placed them into the

mortar and began to grind. The motion was rhythmic. Steady. The petals broke down quickly, releasing more of that sickly sweet smell. It turned into a paste that thick and purple dark.

Next, the nectar. I tilted the flower over a small vial and let the liquid drip out. It was viscous, clinging to the inside of the bloom before finally sliding free. It was only a few drops, but it was enough. The color was lighter than the petals, a strange violet that seemed to glow faintly in the sterile light of the room.

Then came the spores.

I hesitated. This was the most dangerous part. The spores were what made the mourning moon the most lethal. Thorne's warning echoed in my head, but I pushed it aside and carefully tapped the center of the flower over the mortar. The spores fell like ash, dusting the petal paste below. More of them lifted into the air, and I held my breath even though the suit was supposed to protect me.

I ground them in. The paste turned darker, the texture changing. It became less viscous and more liquid as the spores mixed with the nectar and petals. I added the drops of nectar next, watching as the mixture thinned and turned a deep, vibrant purple.

It looked wrong. Beautiful in the way poisonous things often were, but wrong.

I poured the liquid into a small glass bottle, sealing it with a cork stopper. My hands were shaking. Just a little, but enough that I had to grip the bottle tighter to keep from dropping it.

The bottle sat on the table, glowing faintly in the light. I stared at it. This was it. This was what would end Aldric's life.

I turned on the faucet built into the corner of the room and rinsed the outside of the bottle. The water ran clear, but I scrubbed at the glass anyway, paranoid that even a single spore might be clinging to the surface.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

When I was satisfied, I hit the lever and heard the sound of air puffing in and out.

When I was sure, it was semi safe, I then turned to the door and knocked.

A moment later, Maren's face appeared in the small window. I held up the bottle, and she nodded.

The door hissed open.

"I need to wash it one more time," I said. My voice was muffled through the hood. "I'm sure its okay. But I'm paranoid at this point. So just to be safe."

Maren looked at the bottle, then at me. "Give me a second."

She disappeared, and I stood there in the doorway, holding the poison like it was something fragile. Something that might break if I squeezed too hard.

Maren came back with a pair of thick gloves. She pulled them on and held out her hand. "Let me take it."

I handed it over carefully. She took it without hesitation, her expression unreadable.

Then she looked at me expecting me to come out.

"The air needs to cycle more," I said, stepping back into the room. "I'll clean up in here first."

Maren nodded and stepped back. The door sealed shut again.

I turned to the ventilation system and pulled the red lever again. Immediately, the sound of rushing air filled the room. It was loud, almost deafening, and I could feel the pressure shift as the system pulled whatever spore contaminated air might still be in out and replaced it with fresh. The process took longer. Minutes stretched out, and I used the time to gather the remnants of the flower and seal them back in the bag. The tools went into a separate container marked for hazardous waste.

When the ventilation finally stopped, I moved to the corner of the room where a large bucket sat. The solution inside was harsh and chemical, meant to neutralize any residue. I peeled off the hazmat suit piece by piece, dunking each part into the bucket. The gloves. The hood. The body of the suit. Everything went in, soaking in the solution.

Only when I was down to my regular clothes did I got the lever one more time before I then stepped out of the room.

The main area of the infirmary felt too bright after the sealed room. I blinked against the light, my eyes adjusting.

And then I saw her.

My mother-in-law, the Grand Luna stood near the counter, holding the purple bottle up to the light. She turned it slowly, watching the liquid inside catch and shimmer.

My heart stuttered. Everything in me went cold and sharp.

"What the hell is going on?"

The words came out louder than I meant them to. Harsher. But I couldn't pull them back.

Morrigan turned then. Her expression was calm. Far too calm for my liking. She looked at me with a measured gaze.

As if she was trying to determine what to say next.

"Fia," she finally said. Her voice was even. "What is this?"

I couldn't speak. My mouth opened, but nothing came out. My mind raced, scrambling for an explanation, for something that would make this make sense.

Maren stood off to the side, her face pale. She wasn't looking at me. She was staring at the floor like she wanted it to swallow her whole.

The Grand Luna held the bottle up again. "This is poison, isn't it?"

I still couldn't answer.

"They wouldn't say but this is mourning moon," she continued. "Isn't it?"

Her eyes locked onto mine when I didn't speak. "There is only one thing that is coming to my mind. Thorne wouldn't say why he wanted me here. But I think I get it now. He wanted me to stop this. Fia...who is this for?"

The silence stretched between us. Every second felt like an eternity.

"It's for Aldric," I said finally. The truth spilled out before I could stop it.

Chapter 343: The Future 2

FIA

The Grand Luna's words lingered between us, thin and suffocating, like something that did not want to dissolve.

"Considering they've already told you that much," I said. My voice sounded steadier than I felt, which almost made it worse. "There's nothing left to hide."

I crossed the room before I could second guess myself. My legs felt light and heavy at the same time. She still held the bottle, her fingers curved around the neck of it, and when I reached for it she did not resist. I did not have to tug or insist. She simply let it

go, like she had already decided I would need it more than she did. The glass was colder than I expected. It bit into my palm even though my hands were warm.

"I know the next order of business would be to convince me not to do it," I said, lifting my eyes to hers. Holding her gaze felt like holding a blade. "But I would be lying to you if I told you there was a chance you could change my mind."

She did not answer immediately. Instead, she turned her head slightly and looked toward the counter where Maren and Thorne stood as though someone had pressed pause on them. They had not moved since the conversation shifted, their silence loud in the room.

"Would you excuse us?" Morrigan asked.

They bowed. Maren's movement was tight, strained, as if she wanted to argue but knew better. Thorne's bow was smoother, practiced, the kind you give when you have learned that loyalty sometimes means swallowing your thoughts. Neither of them met my eyes. The door shut behind them with a quiet click that echoed far too loudly in the stillness that followed.

When Morrigan faced me again, something had changed. The sharpness I had braced myself for was gone. There was no steel in her expression now. There was something softer, something almost weary, as if she had already begun mourning something she did not yet understand.

"I would like to think that I know you well," she said. "I believe you wouldn't just descend to violence without cause."

That landed deeper than any accusation could have. My throat tightened around a response I had not prepared. I swallowed and felt the burn of it. The bottle seemed heavier all of a sudden, like it had absorbed the weight of everything I was about to say.

"I should apologize first," I said.

Her brows drew together slightly. "About what?"

"Cian knows about Valentine."

The air shifted. I saw it in her face before she spoke. The color drained from her skin so quickly it frightened me. Her throat moved when she swallowed.

"Oh," she said, softer now. "You told him."

I nodded. There was no point pretending otherwise. "It was either that or..." The rest caught somewhere between my ribs and my mouth. I tried again. "It was either that or the other thing. And I couldn't tell him the other thing."

She stepped toward me slowly, each movement deliberate, as if approaching a wounded animal that might bolt. "What other thing?" Her voice was not harsh. It was careful. "Talk to me. I want to know why you believe this is the option you have."

I had not meant to cry. I had promised myself I would not. But the tears came anyway, sudden and humiliating, blurring the edges of the room. I blinked hard, hoping to force them back, but they burned stubbornly at the corners of my eyes and slipped down before I could stop them.

"Something horrible is going to happen," I said. My voice cracked in the middle, betraying me. "I cannot just wait and pray and hope that it doesn't happen."

Her shoulders stiffened. "What happens?"

I drew in a breath that felt too thin to fill my lungs. "I see him die." The words tore out of me, rough and unsteady. "I see Cian die by the hands of that monster."

For a second she did not react at all. Then the blood drained from her face entirely. She looked almost blue beneath the candlelight.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It was a vision." I tightened my grip on the bottle until my knuckles ached. I needed the pressure. Needed something solid, something real. "And with everything that's been happening lately, with all of it spiraling the way it has, it would be insane to think that wasn't a message from the goddess."

I waited for anger. For reprimand. I had hidden this from her. From all of them. I had carried it alone, convinced that speaking it aloud would make it more real, more inevitable. She had every right to be furious with me for that.

But she did not raise her voice.

Instead, she reached forward and gently pried the bottle from my hand.

Her fingers brushed mine in the process. They were warmer than the glass had been.

"You saw this how?" she asked quietly.

"The pool," I said. The memory came back with painful clarity. The way the air had felt thick in the vision. The smell of iron. "I had a vision when I touched him by the pool."

The word hung there, heavy and obscene.

She studied my face like she was searching for cracks in the story. Not because she doubted me, I realized, but because she wanted to understand how deep this went.

"And you believe killing Aldric first is the only way to prevent it," she said.

"Yes." The answer came without hesitation. It had been the only solid thing in my mind now. "If he dies, he cannot be the one who takes Cian from me. From us."

The silence that followed was different from the one before. It was no longer tense. It was thick with thought.

"You think the goddess would show you a fixed end?" she asked after a moment.

"I don't know," I admitted. That was the truth I had been avoiding. "But I know what I saw. I know how real it felt. And I am not willing to gamble with his life on the chance that it was only a warning instead of a prophecy."

Chapter 344: The Future 3

FIA

My voice trembled again, and I hated it. I hated how small I sounded when the fear came through.

She stepped closer until there was barely any space between us. Close enough that I could see the fine lines at the corners of her eyes. Close enough to notice that even she looked tired.

"You love him," she said.

It was not a question.

"Yes."

The simplicity of it made something inside me crack wider. I loved him. Enough to become something ugly if it meant he would live.

Morrigan exhaled slowly. "And you think you are the only one who sees the threat."

"I think I am the only one who has seen him die," I said.

Her hand lifted as if she meant to touch my face, then hesitated before settling on my shoulder instead. The gesture grounded me more than the bottle ever had.

"You should have told me," she said softly.

"I know." The shame of it burned hotter than the tears had. "I was afraid that if I said it aloud, you would look at me like I was mad. Or worse, that you would believe me."

She gave a faint, humorless smile. "You think I have lived as long as I have without learning to take visions seriously? Plus, I have seen what you can do. Nothing you can say will sound insane anymore."

That almost made me laugh, but the sound died in my throat.

"But protecting my son is not all I need to do now," she continued. "I have to protect you as well. If you do this, if you take this path, there will be consequences."

"I know."

"You say that now," she said, her eyes searching mine. "But knowing and living with it are not the same."

My chest tightened. I thought of blood on my hands. Of the way Cian would look at me if he ever found out the lengths I had gone to in order to save him when and if punishment came for me.

"I would rather he hate me and live," I said quietly, "than love me and die."

The words felt like a confession.

She closed her eyes briefly, as if absorbing that. When she opened them again, there was no anger in them. Only sorrow. And something that looked dangerously close to understanding.

"You are asking me to stand aside," she said.

"I am asking you not to stop me."

That was the truth of it. I did not expect her blessing. I just needed her not to be my obstacle.

She studied me for a long time. Long enough that my breathing began to feel too loud in my own ears.

Finally, she nodded once, slow and reluctant.

"I will not pretend I agree with you," she said. "But I see why you believe you have no choice. I mean... after all his sins, there is a possibility that that monster will hunt my son and kill him."

"I'm sorry." The words felt inadequate. But I could feel that creeping fear in her voice. "But this is also partly why I couldn't tell him. Why I couldn't tell you either. It's a scary thing to know someone you love could die... will die. I have been there and it is such a dark place and—"

Morrigan pulled me into her arms.

I melted into the embrace, my body sagging against hers as she said, "That must have frightening. Holding that on your shoulders."

Tears formed around my eyes again, hot and insistent.

"But no one should ever have to shoulder that themselves," she whispered.

She broke the hug then, stepping back. She looked down at the purple vial now in her hands, turning it slowly in the light.

"But you cannot be the one to do it."

My eyes widened. "What does that mean?"

I reached for it, but Morrigan pulled it away, holding it just out of reach.

"You are the future," she said firmly. "I am not."

"What? No!" I grabbed at it again, but she held it tight, her grip surprisingly strong.

"You know I hate that bastard," Morrigan said. Her voice was low, tight with emotion. "He used me. He probably laughed behind my back, knowing despite everything he has done to me... to this family, I would hold his hand like a lifeline." Her voice cracked. She paused, composing herself. "Even after what he had done to his own brother... My husband. Goddess rest his soul."

She looked at me then, and I saw something fierce burning in her eyes.

"He deserves death if he will do the same thing to my son. But I will be the one to do it." She lifted her chin. "I'm old anyway. If it bounces back on me because of traditional archaic laws, I can take it."

"No." The word came out sharp. "Cian would never forgive himself. I will never forgive myself."

Morrigan looked at me steadily. "And what makes you think that you are the expendable one?" She let the question hang there for a moment. "No matter which of us it is, it would hurt my boy."

She shifted the bottle to her other hand, her expression hardening.

"If you do it, it becomes an Omega's revenge or madness. If I do it, it becomes a Luna who has a rough day." Her words were clinical now, calculated. "At the end of the day, most of the elder circle anywhere will still see you as an omega to the bone whose only

redeeming factor was that you married classes higher than they believe you deserve. But excuses will be made for a Luna."

She stepped closer, her voice dropping.

"Let me be the one to do it. I'll have easier access. Since he thinks he still has me in his corner, I have an advantage over you." Her mouth curved into something that wasn't quite a smile. "He will not see this coming from me."

I hesitated. Every part of me wanted to argue. To take the bottle back and do this myself. To protect Morrigan from this burden the way I had wanted to protect Cian from the truth.

But she was right.

She was right about all of it.

I nodded slowly. "Okay."

Chapter 345: What Justice?

ALDRIC

"Come in."

The door opened and Garrett stepped inside. He was tall. Broader in the shoulders than most of the other sentinels I had seen around the estate. Though he was young and has a decent looking face, it was still weathered in that way that came from years of outdoor work and probably a few too many fights. His eyes were his most redeeming features. I disliked them so much too. Because they looked sharp and alert. They swept the room in one quick motion before settling on me.

I stepped back and gestured toward the chair near the window. My hand was steady. My expression was neutral. Everything about me screamed casual concern.

"Sentinel Garrett. Thank you for coming."

He nodded once. "You requested my presence. Of course I would come."

"I did." I moved to lean against the dresser. My arms crossed over my chest and I let out a breath that sounded tired. Worried even. "I apologize if I'm being paranoid. I just can't shake this feeling."

Garrett didn't sit. He stood near the door with his hands at his sides. Professional, as he waited.

I continued. "Our witch guest left suddenly today. Madeline. I'm the reason she's here in the first place. I vouched for her safety when I brought her into this estate. And now she's gone and I've been calling her phone all morning. Nothing. She won't pick up."

I paused and ran my hand through my hair. The gesture was meant to look frustrated. Agitated.

"Something doesn't sit right with me. The way she left. All of it."

I sighed and shook my head. The picture of a concerned older acquaintance who was worried about his guest.

"The Alpha isn't concerned about it. I understand that. Their relationship was turbulent at best. But she's still a witch. And that species currently has it out for him because of his involvement in another witch's murder. Not much can be done about that I suppose. It could also be seen as pound of flesh being gotten back. But a Supreme's daughter?" I looked at Garrett directly. "I worry."

Garrett's expression didn't change. He just nodded slowly. "How can I be of help?"

"I was told you were at the gate when she left."

"I was."

"Can you tell me what you saw?"

Garrett's jaw shifted slightly. He was thinking. Choosing his words.

"She left in a car. A Mercedes. Silver. One of the sentinels drove her."

"Who drove it?"

"Sentinel Carl."

I nodded and kept my face thoughtful. Concerned. "When did the car come back?"

"I'm not sure about that." Garrett's voice was even. And because of that it felt practiced. "That part is murky. But I believe it was about forty minutes later."

Forty minutes. That lined up with what Ronan had told me earlier. The timeline was consistent. Nothing out of place there.

I watched Garrett's face. There was no fracture in his story. No hesitation. No tells that would indicate he was lying or uncertain. He spoke like someone reciting facts.

"What time did she leave exactly?"

Garrett shifted his weight. "I apologize. I'm not sure of the exact time. All I know is that it was dawn. Early. Very early."

"Okay." I nodded and pushed off the dresser. "Thanks. That will be all."

Garrett looked me up and down. His eyes traveled from my face to my chest to my hands and back up again. There was something in his gaze. Something assessing.

"I guess that means I can go."

"Yes."

He turned toward the door. His movements were controlled. Deliberate. He reached for the handle and I watched him. My mind was working. Turning over everything he had said.

The answers felt rehearsed. Too smooth. Too clean. A lot like he had practiced them beforehand. As if someone had told him exactly what to say and how to say it.

I moved.

My feet carried me across the room in three quick strides. While I was silent with my steps, I was fast too. I raised my hand and reached toward the back of his head.

"Hey."

Garrett turned.

His eyes went wide when he saw how close I was. His hand shot down to his holster. His fingers wrapped around the grip of his gun and his whole body tensed like he was about to draw.

The look on his face was pure terror. Just for a second. A flash of fear that he couldn't hide.

Then as quickly as it registered, he masked it.

Bingo.

I stopped and raised both hands in a placating gesture. My expression shifted to surprised and most importantly innocence.

"Woah. Just because you're a sentinel doesn't mean you should be trigger happy."

Garrett's hand stayed on his gun. His breathing was faster now and he was trying his best to still it. I could hear it. I could see the way his chest rose and fell.

I smiled and gestured toward his head. "I have quite the compulsive nature. The way your hair is sticking out bothers me. I apologize for startling you."

Garrett's face shifted. The fear melted away and he forced out a laugh. It sounded strained and very nervous.

A pathetic attempt to settle things if you asked me.

"Reflex." He said.

"Oh, I bet."

I dropped my hands and stepped back. I gave him space. Room to breathe.

"Well, that is all done, you can go now."

Garrett nodded. He turned back to the door and pulled it open. Then he stepped out into the hallway and closed it behind him.

I stood there and listened.

His footsteps moved away. Swift at first. Then even faster. Faster than they should have been. And underneath that sound was another one.

His heartbeat.

I could still hear it through the door. Pounding. Racing. Thundering in his chest like a war drum.

Sentinels were trained. They were disciplined. They didn't panic. They didn't startle. They certainly didn't reach for their weapons unless they were facing an enemy.

But Garrett had.

He had looked at me. Seen me close to him. And his immediate instinct had been to draw his gun and shoot.

That was all the confirmation I needed.

I turned away from the door and walked back to the dresser. My hand went to my pocket and pulled out my phone. I unlocked it and opened my contacts. Ronan's name was at the top of the recent calls list.

My thumb hovered over it.

One call. That was all it would take. I could tell him to prepare for a coup. I could warn him that Cian was making a move. That Garrett has revealed it all without saying a word and that we needed to act first before they did.

Ronan would listen. He would mobilize my people. We could strike before the sun went down. Take out Cian and anyone loyal to him before they had a chance to come after me.

My finger moved toward the call button.

Then it stopped.

My eyes dropped to my hand. To the blood ring sitting on my finger. The red stone gleamed in the light from the window. Dark and deep like a pool of blood.

I stared at it.

Gabriel's face flashed through my mind. Not the way he looked now. But the way he had looked when we were younger. When we were still figuring out where we stood with each other. Before the betrayals. Before the games.

He was my insurance. My safety net. The one card I had left to play if everything went to hell.

But if I didn't use him. If I called Ronan and started a war. Then what?

I would survive. Probably. I might even win. But I would burn through every resource I had. Every pussy ally. Plenty of my bargaining chips too. Chances were that I could also face the court of the Alpha King. I couldn't do that. End up used up. Wasted on a fight that I didn't even know for certain I needed to have.

Because what did I actually know?

Garrett was scared of me. That was clear. But was that because Cian had ordered him to play me? Or was it because he genuinely believed Madeline had left and he was just nervous about being questioned?

The shoe in the passage. The footprints. They pointed to something. A game. A game I would have played too if I were in that position.

Maybe Cian did know. Maybe he had figured me out and this was his way of toying with me. Seeing how I would react.

Or maybe I was just paranoid. Maybe I was seeing threats where there were none. Maybe my mother's voice was still in my head telling me I wasn't good enough and I was overcompensating by imagining enemies everywhere.

I closed my eyes and took a breath.

No.

I couldn't act on maybes. I couldn't burn my best asset on a hunch.

I needed to be smart and careful. I needed to think this through.

My thumb moved away from Ronan's name and then I slowly lowered the phone as I stared at the screen. My reflection looked back at me. Distorted and warped in the black glass.

Ronan would hate me for this. If he survived. If he figured out what I had done.

But that didn't matter. I had to be safe. That was what mattered the most.

I slipped the phone back into my pocket and turned toward the window. The grounds stretched out below me. Green and perfect. Peaceful.

Everything looked fine.

But underneath it all was rot, decay and most likely a betrayal waiting to happen.

And I was going to make sure I was the last one standing when it did.

I'd allow the defiance. Briefly. I was curious to see what was going to happen.