

# **To ruin an Omega #Chapter 371: When it rains, it pours 2 - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 371: When it rains, it pours 2**

*Chapter 371: When it rains, it pours 2*

**CIAN**

"It was not me." She took a shaky breath. "But it was my idea."

I waited.

"I could not..." She sighed and looked up at me with guilt written all over her face. "I am sorry. I am sorry for making a move without informing you. But..."

"But what?"

"I kept something from you and in hindsight, it felt necessary. The right thing to do. But now I wonder if it was myopic and will ruin your plans."

My chest tightened.

"What did you do, Fia?"

"Your mother helped me poison Aldric."

The words came out in a rush and I felt my voice rise before I could stop it.

"What?"

The sound carried and I forced myself to regain control. I could hear the crowd inside the room. They were loud. Which could only mean Aldric had entered the room from the other door.

I looked back at Fia and lowered my voice to barely above a whisper.

"With what?"

"Mourning moon."

My eyes widened.

I had not expected that. Mourning moon was not a poison you used lightly. It was slow and it was painful and it was almost always fatal if left untreated. I looked at Fia and

tried to reconcile the woman in front of me with the kind of ruthlessness it took to choose that particular poison.

Was she that terrified of Aldric?

I pushed the thought aside and tried to think. If Aldric had been poisoned and it was already set in stone, news of his death should have reached me by now. But I hadn't gotten any. So that would mean that he was still alive. The crowd's noise from inside the room further confirmed that. But that would also mean that he would have figured it out. And if he had figured it out, he would use the trial to get the poison out of him. He would paint my mother and me as conspirators. He would attempt to use that to gain sympathy.

I looked back at Fia.

"Why?"

She took a shaky breath and her hand moved to her stomach. It was not a gesture I associated with her. She held it there for a moment and then looked up at me with tears in her eyes.

"What I am about to say will make you mad at me and you are right to be mad. But I had my reasons to keep it from you."

I waited.

She took a long breath.

"That day at the pool, I did see something."

My heart stopped.

I had known it. I had suspected it from the moment she had looked at me with that strange expression on her face. But hearing her confirm it was different.

I kept my face calm. I did not want her to freak out and stop talking.

"What did you see?"

"I got a vision." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "A vision where Aldric kills you."

The world tilted slightly.

"That is why I cannot let that man live," she continued. Her voice was stronger now. More certain. "He cannot survive this no matter what. And I know what must be going through your mind right now is why I kept it from you and how selfish it is. But you said

you could not handle much anymore and even your mother implied that all of it was getting too much. I understood what that felt like and I could not have you break when you needed to be strong so I just..."

She was running out of breath.

I pulled her into my arms and held her tightly.

"It is fine. It is alright. Everything will be fine."

And it was true. I was angry. I was furious that she had kept this from me. That she had carried this weight alone. That she had made a decision like this without telling me. But I understood. Because I would have done the same thing.

She hugged me back and I felt her trembling against me.

"What about my mother?" I asked quietly.

"She ingested some of the poison to sell it to Aldric. She is resting now."

I pulled back and looked at her.

"That is not good."

She looked surprised by that. "Why?"

"If Aldric is still alive, he would have probably figured it out," I said. My mind was racing now. "His first goal will be to use the trial to get the poison out of him and if he can somehow push the agenda that this pack's ruler and his mother are against him, he will gain sympathy."

Fia turned and motioned to Maren. Maren walked over quickly.

"The grand Luna needs to be here," Fia said.

"She is still resting, remember." Maren looked between us with a worried expression. "Wolfsbane root takes a toll on the body considering it is actually part poison itself."

"White moss should be able to strengthen her."

Maren shook her head.

"That is not healthy especially not with the strain on her body."

"I know." Fia's voice was firm. "Better than anyone. But we need her here and strong. It is necessary."

Maren looked at me. Then back at Fia. Then she nodded.

"I will get it done."

She walked away quickly.

Fia sighed and turned back to me.

"That settles it I guess. We should get in before it starts to feel strange why we aren't present yet."

She started toward the door but I grabbed her arm gently.

"Wait."

She looked at me with those beautiful eyes and I felt my chest tighten. She looked so pretty. Even with worry written all over her face. Even with the weight of everything pressing down on her. I could not wait for all of this to be over.

"Was it my plan that really made you finally spill?"

She smiled.

It was small and it was tired but it was genuine.

"I just need you to survive Aldric badly."

She reached up and cupped my face with her hand. Her skin was warm against mine.

"After this, we will have a lot to talk about and celebrate."

I felt something shift inside her. Joy. Pure as it was bright and most certainly unexpected. It radiated from her and I found myself smiling back at her.

I could not wait to know what she wanted to talk about.

"We should head in," she said softly.

"Right."

I took her hand and we walked toward the hall together.

*Chapter 372: One Hour*

**ALDRIC**

The head elder's voice cut through the murmuring crowd.

"Alpha Aldric Donlon. You have heard the charges brought against you. How do you answer them?"

I stood with my hands loose at my sides. The healing Madeline had performed still sat warm in my chest. My nails had returned to their normal color. The tremor was gone. I felt steady again. Strong enough to do what needed to be done.

"Not guilty," I said. My voice carried clearly through the hall. "To every single charge."

Elder Callum nodded once.

"Then you will be given the opportunity to defend yourself against the testimony brought forward." He gestured toward the gallery. "We will begin with the witnesses who have come forward."

I watched him shuffle through the papers in front of him. He was moving slower than necessary. Drawing it out. Making a show of the process. I knew what he was doing. He was buying time. Trying to figure out which way the wind was blowing before he committed too hard in any direction.

Smart man.

But not smart enough.

"The court calls Madeline Blossom to the stand."

The name landed in the room like a stone dropped into still water. Ripples moved outward. Heads turned. People shifted in their seats.

I looked toward the gallery.

Madeline stood. She smoothed the front of her dress with hands that did not shake. Then she walked toward the center of the hall where a single chair had been placed for witnesses.

She sat down and folded her hands in her lap.

Elder Callum looked at her.

"Miss Blossom. You have come forward with testimony against the accused. Please state your relationship to Alpha Aldric Donlon."

"I have none," she said. Her voice was calm. "I know him only through his nephew, Alpha Cian Donlon, whom I was once engaged to marry."

Callum nodded.

"And what testimony do you bring before this circle?"

Madeline reached into the small bag she had brought with her and pulled out her phone. She held it up so the elders could see it clearly.

"I have proof," she said. "Voice messages sent to me by Alpha Aldric Donlon. Messages that show a pattern of threats and coercion."

The room went quiet.

Elder Callum leaned forward slightly.

"The court will hear them."

Madeline tapped the screen. Then she held the phone out toward the circle.

My voice filled the hall.

"Pick it up right now. Or I swear to you. I will ruin you. I will ruin everything attached to you. You know I mean that."

The recording ended.

I kept my face still. I did not move. I did not react. I simply stood there and let the room absorb what they had just heard.

Madeline tapped the screen again.

Another recording played.

"You think this is a game? 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 second recording ended.

The murmuring in the room grew louder. I could feel the shift happening. The weight of opinion moving in a direction I did not like.

Madeline played a third.

"Madeline. 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."

The hall erupted into noise.

People were no longer trying to keep their voices down. The whispers had become open discussion. I heard fragments of it from every direction.

"He threatened her father."

"That does not sound like someone innocent."

"Why would he send those if he had nothing to hide?"

Elder Callum raised his hand and the noise subsided slowly.

He looked at Madeline.

"Miss Blossom. Can you explain the context of these messages?"

"These were threats," she said simply. "And there were worse ones that I could not record. I was afraid for my safety."

She paused and looked directly at the elders.

"For anyone who might be confused, these messages were sent because Alpha Aldric wanted to use me to put a wedge between Alpha Cian and his bride, Luna Fia. He wanted me to exploit the history Cian and I shared. He wanted me to convince Cian somehow to let go of the Alpha seat."

She stopped again. Then she added quietly.

"And not because he was particularly interested in playing fairy godfather. But simply because he wanted the Alpha seat for himself."

I felt something cold settle in my chest.

She had framed it well. Too well.

The room was watching her now with full attention. She had their sympathy. She had their belief. She looked like a victim standing in front of them. Small and brave and telling the truth despite the cost.

I almost admired it.

I let the silence sit for a moment longer than was comfortable. Then I laughed.

It was not loud. It was not mocking. It was just enough to shift the energy in the room back toward me.

Every head turned.

I looked at Madeline.

"Forgive me," I said. My voice was calm and reasonable. "But if I am this big bad you are painting me as, what could I possibly have to lord over your head? Or even your father's head? What power could I hold over you that would make you obey threats like that?"

I paused and let the question hang in the air.

"Tell the court."

Madeline went very still.

I watched her face. Watched the shift that happened behind her eyes. She knew exactly what I was doing. She knew the trap I had just laid in front of her.

If she told the truth about her father, about the fleshcraft, about the experiments he had conducted for years, then she would destroy him. She would bring her own family down in the process of bringing me down.

And she could not do that.

I could see it written all over her face.

The elders were watching her now. Waiting for an answer.

Elder Callum leaned forward.

"Miss Blossom?"

Madeline's jaw tightened.

Then she spoke.

"Because you said yourself that if I loved Cian, then I would have to do it."

Her voice was steady now. Stronger than it had been a moment ago.

"You said it was either I use the love we once shared to get him off the Alpha seat and he would get to live, or you would get tired of playing the nice guy and just instigate a coup and seize power. And that would mean killing them all."

The room went silent again.

I felt the shift happening. The sympathetic looks turning back toward her. The doubt creeping back into the faces of people who had been wavering.

She was good.

Better than I had given her credit for.

But she still did not have the hammer to hit the nail on the head. She could paint me as a villain all she wanted. She could play recordings and tell stories about threats and coercion. But without concrete proof of what I had over her, it was just her word against mine.

And I was an Alpha. She was just a witch. A different spevie. I would be given grace again and again before they would fully completely buy her tall tales.

Then her eyes darkened.

Something changed in her expression. A decision being made in real time.

"I remember him telling me that Cian was like his father," she said. Her voice had gone quieter now. More deliberate. "Too weak to rule Skollrend. But he was the better choice."

She looked directly at me.

"He wanted the Alpha seat for his direct lineage as well. That was why Ronan worked for him."

My stomach tightened.

"Beta Ronan Ashworth is not just a traitor," she continued. "He worked with Aldric Donlon because he stood to benefit a lot from the treachery. He is Aldric's biological son after all."

The hall exploded.

The noise was immediate and overwhelming. People were shouting now. Not whispering. Not murmuring. Shouting.

I stood there and felt the ground shift beneath me.

She had done it. Hammered the nail and hard.

She had taken the one piece of information that would turn this from a trial about crimes into a trial about character. About bloodline. About legitimacy.

It was an emotional appeal. A brilliant one.

And it made me look even more unreliable in the public's eye especially when it was one that could be proven.

I turned slowly and looked at Cian.

He was sitting in the gallery with his hands folded in his lap. His expression was calm. Composed.

And he was smirking.

Just slightly. Just enough that I could see it from where I stood.

It could not have been her idea.

This sounded like him.

This was the kind of move Cian would make. Strategic and calculated. Using information at exactly the right moment to maximum effect.

It could only be the boy I partly raised.

Cian.

He had known. He must have already known about Ronan's parentage and he had waited until this exact moment to use it. He had given Madeline the ammunition she needed to destroy me in front of this room.

Our eyes met across the hall.

He did not look away.

Neither did I.

Elder Callum was calling for order but the noise was too loud now. People were not listening. They were too busy processing what they had just heard.

The fact that Ronan could be my son was a big deal.

The Beta who had stood beside Cian for years was actually my blood.

And I had used him to betray the pack.

The optics of it were devastating.

It was sad to see too because it meant that a coup was the only way to go now.

Finally the noise began to die down. Elder Callum raised his hand again and this time people obeyed.

He looked at the circle. The other elders were leaning toward each other. Speaking in low urgent tones. I could see Pryce shaking his head. Saoirse looked uncomfortable.

Callum turned back to face the hall.

"The court will be shortly adjourned," he said. His voice was firm. "We require time to verify the authenticity of the voice messages presented. And we will conduct a DNA test to confirm the claim made regarding Beta Ronan Ashworth's parentage."

He stood.

The other elders followed suit.

"This hearing will resume in one hour."

The gavel came down.

People began moving immediately. The noise rose again. Conversations breaking out in every direction.

I stood there in the center of it all and watched Cian rise from his seat.

He looked at me one more time.

Then he turned and walked out of the hall with Fia beside him.

I felt my hands curl into fists at my sides.

*One hour.*

They had one hour to run their tests and confirm what Madeline had just dropped in the middle of this trial.

And when they came back, the room would know for certain that Ronan was my son.

That I had fathered a child in secret.

That I had used that child to undermine my own nephew.

I looked toward the doors where the sentinels were already moving to escort me back to the holding area.

*One hour.*

That was all the time I had left to figure out if it was time to just do completely away with this farce of a trial and just intigate the coup.

*Chapter 373: One way or another 1*

## **ALDRIC**

The sentinels moved in the moment the gavel came down.

Two of them flanked me on either side. Their hands closed around my arms with enough pressure to make it clear they were not taking chances. A third positioned himself behind Ronan and did the same.

We were walked out through the side door while the hall continued to erupt behind us. I could still hear the voices. The shocked exclamations. The arguments breaking out between people who had been sitting quietly moments before.

They thought they had me.

They thought Madeline's little performance and that bastard Cian's strategic reveal had sealed my fate.

They were wrong.

The corridor outside the hall was cooler. Quieter. The stone walls absorbed sound in a way that made every footstep echo. I kept my face neutral and my breathing even. The sentinels did not need to see anything that resembled panic.

Panic was for people who had run out of options.

I still had options. Plenty.

We reached the stairwell that led down to the holding cells. The descent was steep and the air grew colder with each step. Damp crept in from somewhere below. The kind of damp that settled into your bones if you stayed down here long enough.

Ronan walked ahead of me. His shoulders were tight. His head was down. He had not said a word even before Madeline dropped that bomb in the middle of the trial.

I wanted to reach for him. To say something that would pull him back from whatever edge he was standing on. This was afterall Teagan's fault.

But the sentinels were too close. And the walls had ears.

We reached the cell and the door was already open. One of the sentinels shoved me inside. Not hard enough to make me stumble but hard enough to make a point. That they longer had an iota of respect for me.

Ronan followed without resistance.

The door slammed shut behind us.

The key turned in the lock with a heavy metallic click that seemed to settle into the silence like punctuation.

One of the sentinels looked at me through the bars.

"One hour," he said. "Then you're back up there."

I nodded once. Because I added him to mental list of bastards I intend to either gut or behead.

They turned and walked away. Their boots echoed down the corridor until the sound faded completely.

Then it was just the two of us. Oh. I forgot Teagan. Three of us.

Ronan moved to the far wall and pressed his back against it. He slid down until he was sitting on the floor with his knees pulled up and his head resting against the stone.

I watched him for a moment.

Then I walked to the bench and sat down.

My hands were still in chains. The iron was cold against my wrists. I flexed my fingers and felt the bite of the metal when I moved too far in any direction.

One hour.

That was all the time they needed to confirm what everyone in that room already believed now.

The DNA test would come back positive. The voice messages would be verified as authentic. And when the trial resumed, I would be standing in front of a room full of people who would have to get it in their thick skull if they had not already that I was guilty.

I needed to move first.

I looked toward the bars and counted the seconds in my head.

Thirty.

Forty.

Fifty.

Then I heard them.

Footsteps coming down the corridor. Multiple sets. Deliberate and measured.

I stood slowly and moved toward the bars.

Three figures came into view.

Elder Thorne walked in front. He was carrying a small leather case in one hand. The kind healers used to transport medical supplies. Behind him came Elder Pryce. His face was composed but I could see the tension in the way he held his shoulders.

A guard followed both of them. Young. Nervous. His hand rested on the hilt of his weapon like he was expecting trouble.

Thorne stopped in front of the cell and set the case down on the ground. He opened it carefully and pulled out a vial and a thin needle.

"Beta Ronan," he said. His voice was calm and professional. "I need you to bring your hands out slowly so I can draw blood."

Ronan looked up from where he was sitting.

For a moment he did not move.

Then he pushed himself to his feet and crossed the cell. He stopped at the bars and extended both hands through the gap.

His mother was against it.

"What for?" She demanded. "What could his blood be needed for?"

No one paid her rabid mouth any mind.

Thorne worked quickly. He tied a strip of cloth around Ronan's upper arm and tapped the vein in the crook of his elbow until it rose to the surface. Then he slid the needle in with practiced precision.

Blood filled the vial in a steady stream.

I watched the whole process and then shifted my attention to Pryce.

He was standing slightly behind Thorne. Close enough to observe but far enough back that it did not look deliberate.

Our eyes met.

I moved closer to the bars. Close enough that my hands could rest against the cold iron.

Then I started tapping.

My fingers moved in a rhythm that looked casual. Random. Like I was just drumming them against the metal because I had nothing better to do.

But it was not random.

Pryce's eyes flicked down to my hands. Then back to my face.

He understood.

I tapped again.

Three short. Three long. Three short.

Then I spelled it out slowly.

C. A. L. L. U. M.

I paused and tapped again.

L. O. Y. A. L. T. Y.

Pryce shifted his weight slightly. His hand moved to the edge of his coat. He brushed the fabric with his fingers in a way that looked absentminded.

But it was not.

He was tapping back.

C. A. R. E. F. U. L.

I kept my face still and waited.

He tapped again. Slower this time.

I. F. F. O. U. N. D. A. L. L. Y. H. E. L. L. B. R. E. A. K. S.

I understood what he was saying.

Callum was playing it safe. He was hedging his bets. If he came out too strongly in my favor and the trial turned against me, he would go down with me. And Callum had not survived two decades in the elder's circle by making reckless choices.

I tapped back.

S. A. O. I. R. S. E.

Pryce's fingers moved against his coat again.

W. I. N. N. E. R. S.

I felt my jaw tighten.

Of course.

Saoirse always backed the winning side. She had built her entire career on reading rooms and aligning herself with whoever came out on top. Right now she was watching. Waiting to see which way the wind blew before she committed. Even if me going down, she lost a lot financially.

Which meant I had two votes I could count on. Maybe.

And one more that I would only get if I looked like I was winning.

That was not enough.

Thorne finished drawing blood and pulled the needle free. He pressed a small piece of cloth against the puncture wound and tied it off quickly.

"Done," he said.

Ronan pulled his hands back through the bars and returned to the far wall without a word. His mother quickly rushed to hound him in the name of being worried. But he simply ignored her presence. Not that it did much to deter her.

Thorne capped the vial and placed it carefully back into the case. Then he stood and looked at the guard.

"We should get this to the lab immediately."

The guard nodded.

Thorne picked up the case and turned toward the corridor.

I moved my hands again. Faster this time.

N. E. X. T. T. R. I. A. L. E. X. P. O. S. E. S. M. E.

Pryce's eyes stayed on me.

I kept going.

B. E. F. O. R. E. J. U. D. G. M. E. N. T. E. N. E. M. I. E. S. D. E. A. D.

Pryce went very still.

His hand stopped moving against his coat.

For a long moment he just looked at me. Then his fingers started again.

C. O. U. P.

He paused.

S. E. R. I. O. U. S.

I tapped back immediately.

Y. E. S.

There was another pause.

Then I added.

W. I. T. H. M. E.

Pryce's jaw worked. I could see him thinking. Calculating. Weighing the risk against the reward.

Finally his hand moved again.

K. N. O. W. W. H. A. T. D. O. I. N. G.

I tapped once more.

Y. E. S.

Thorne's voice cut through the silence.

"Elder Pryce. We need to go."

Pryce turned his head slightly but his eyes stayed on mine for just a fraction of a second longer.

Then he looked away and moved toward the corridor.

"Of course," he said. "Let's get this done. We are time bound."

*Chapter 374: One way or another 2*

## **ALDRIC**

He walked past Thorne and the guard without looking back.

But just before he disappeared around the corner, his hand moved one last time. A single tap against the side of his leg.

It was an acknowledgment and confirmed that he was going to be by my side no matter what.

Then he was gone.

The guard followed. Thorne went last. The sound of their footsteps faded down the corridor and then there was nothing but silence again.

I stood at the bars and let my hands drop to my sides.

The chains rattled softly.

Behind me Ronan shifted against the wall.

"What was that?" he asked quietly.

I turned and looked at him.

"Insurance."

He frowned.

"What does that mean?"

I walked back to the bench and sat down. The cold stone pressed against my back through my shirt.

"It means that when we go back up there, we will not be going quietly."

Ronan stared at me.

"You are planning something."

"I am always planning something."

"Is the coup finally coming on," he said. The word came out flat. "Is that it?"

I looked at him.

"Like I have said... Only if they force my hand."

"They are going to find me and you guilty," Ronan said. His voice was quiet now. Almost resigned. "The DNA test will confirm what Madeline said. And when it does, they will convict both of us."

"Maybe."

"Not maybe. They will."

I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes.

"Then we make sure they do not get the chance."

Ronan was quiet for a long time.

When he finally spoke again, his voice was barely above a whisper.

"What if I do not want this?"

I opened my eyes and looked at him.

"What?"

"What if I do not want a coup," he said. "What if I just want this to be over?"

I studied his face. The doubt was still there. Sitting in his eyes like something that had taken root and refused to leave.

Madeline had done more damage than I realized. And Teagan's little confession in the cell had not helped.

But I knew even Teagan would not like this. She gave me a look that would have taken me out if looks could kill.

Teagan let out a quiet breath in front of her son.

"You sound tired," she said.

Ronan did not look at her. I am sure he hated that he had to even acknowledge her presence at all. "You would be too."

"I am," she replied simply. "But I am not stupid enough to confuse being tired with being finished."

That got his attention.

He turned his head slightly, just enough to look at her.

"And what does that mean?"

"It means you are standing here talking about endings like you do not have a choice left," she said. Her voice stayed even, but there was something hard underneath it now. "You do."

Ronan let out a dry laugh. "Do I?"

"Yes," she said. "You just do not like what it requires."

Silence stretched between them.

I watched her carefully. Teagan was not reckless. She chose her words. Every single one. She gave me a dirty look one more time and I realized this was going to be about tossing me under the bus again.

Ronan shook his head. "They are going to convict us. That is not something I can talk my way out of."

"No," she said. "You cannot talk your way out of it."

He frowned.

She held his gaze now, steady, unflinching.

"But you can walk out of it."

His expression shifted. Confusion, then suspicion.

"What are you saying?"

Teagan tilted her head slightly. "I am saying you are acting like you and him are the same."

Her eyes flicked to me for a fraction of a second before returning to Ronan.

"You are not."

Ronan went still.

"You worked with him," she continued. "Yes. You made choices. Yes. But do not stand there and pretend you are the one who built this whole thing. You only wanted a father figure and that sick fuck manipulated you. You are not alright. Mental health matters does it not? There are salad words you can use to get some pity. If you help in Aldric's persecution, mercy will be granted I am sure. I will get the guards to bring Cian back here... It will be alright... Just..."

"That is enough, Teagan." I cut her off.

I then stood and forced myself into the space between us. I stopped in front of him, blocking her access from him and then I crouched down so Rona and I were at eye level.

"You are my son," I said quietly. "And I will not let them destroy you. No matter what you want. No matter what you think you deserve. I will burn this entire pack to the ground before I let them take you from me."

Ronan's eyes searched mine.

"You mean that."

"I have never meant anything more in my life."

He looked away.

I reached out and gripped his shoulder.

"When we go back up there, you stay close to me. You do exactly what I tell you to do. And when the moment comes, when you get a weapon in your hands again, you do not hesitate."

He did not respond.

I squeezed his shoulder once and then stood.

The hour was running out.

Soon they would come for us again. They would drag us back up to that hall and put us in front of that circle and read out the results of their tests.

And when they did, I would be ready.

Pryce would be ready.

And Cian would learn that cornering a wolf did not make it weak.

It made it dangerous.

Behind me, Teagan let out a sharp breath.

"You see?" she said.

I ignored her.

"This is what he does," she continued. Her voice did not rise, but it cut clean. "He makes it sound like love so you do not question it."

Ronan's fingers curled slightly at his sides.

"He tells you he will protect you," she said. "But listen to what that protection actually looks like. Violence and lots of blood. A path of darkness and with no way back."

"Silence, Teagan." I retorted.

"No," she said.

That word sat in the room, firm and unmoving.

"He is not saving you," she said, her eyes fixed on Ronan. "He is making sure you go down with him."

Ronan's breathing shifted again, turning slow and uneven. "You still have a choice," she added, quieter now. "But not if you keep letting him decide what you deserve."

I squeezed his shoulder once and then stood.

Rona's eyes flicked around and went to Teagan first.

There was something there, something fractured. Not quite anger. Not quite regret. Just enough hesitation to make it dangerous.

"You always do this," he said quietly.

Teagan stilled.

"You make it sound simple. Like it is just a matter of choosing the right thing and everything else will fall into place."

Her lips parted slightly, but she did not interrupt.

Ronan let out a breath that sounded almost like a laugh, but there was no humor in it.

"It is not simple," he continued. "It has never been simple."

His gaze shifted then. Back to me. And this time, it did not waver.

"You think I do not know what he is?" he asked her.

Teagan's expression tightened.

"You think I have not seen it?" he went on. "The way he pushes. The way he decides. The way everything bends around what he wants."

I said nothing.

Ronan's voice dropped. "I know."

That hung there for a second. Long enough to matter.

Teagan took a small step forward to reach him but he pulled away by just a fraction. "Then you know this does not end well for you."

Ronan's jaw clenched.

"Maybe it does not," he said.

"Ronan—"

"But at least it ends on my terms."

That stopped her completely.

He straightened slightly. "I am not pretending he is innocent," he said. "I am not pretending any of this is clean. But neither am I."

His eyes flicked to me briefly, then back to her.

"But I am not walking into that room and tearing him down so I can still be kept there and beg for mercy like that is any better."

Teagan shook her head slowly. "It is not about begging. It is about surviving."

"And doing it your way?" he asked.

She held his gaze. "Doing it alive."

Ronan went quiet again.

Then he smiled. "I know what you are trying to do," he said. "I do. Saving me to redeem yourself of your own sins."

His voice softened, just slightly.

"But you are too late." he added.

Teagan's face fell, just a fraction.

Ronan turned fully toward me then.

And this time, there was no hesitation left in him.

No doubt. Just decision.

"I will always choose my father's hand over yours," he said. "Anytime. You should know that before all."

*Chapter 375: The Reunion*

## **CIAN**

The infirmary felt too small for the number of people packed inside it.

My mother sat on the edge of one of the cots with her hands folded in her lap. She was trying to look composed, but I could see the tremor in her fingers. The way her shoulders stayed just a little too rigid. There was a slight pallor in her cheeks that had not been there this morning.

Fia stood beside her with one hand resting lightly on my mother's shoulder.

Maren moved between them both with quick, efficient steps. She checked my mother's pulse. Then she pressed the back of her hand against her forehead.

"How do you feel?" Maren asked.

"Fine," my mother said.

Her voice came out steady, but I knew better. I had known her my entire life. I could hear the lie underneath.

Maren frowned.

"You should still be resting now. The white moss is keeping you upright but it will not last long. Your body needs time to process what you put it through."

"I understand."

"Do you?" Maren asked quietly. "With respect, my lady, the white moss is only delaying the strain. If you push yourself too soon, your body will give out when it matters most."

My mother met her eyes.

"I will not collapse."

Maren looked like she wanted to argue, but she held her tongue. She stepped back and crossed her arms over her chest.

I moved closer and crouched down in front of my mother so I could see her face more clearly.

"Maren is right. You do look pale. I feel selfish pushing you like this."

"I am fine, Cian."

"Well... that is what you keep saying."

She reached out and touched my cheek. Her hand was warm against my skin.

"I promise you. I am fine."

I did not believe her but I nodded anyway.

Fia shifted beside us. Her hand left my mother's shoulder and she turned toward the door.

"Someone is coming," she said quietly.

I stood and looked toward the entrance.

She was right. Footsteps echoed down the hall outside. Multiple sets and they were getting closer.

My mother moved immediately. She stood from the cot and smoothed the front of her dress. Fia stepped beside her and the three of us positioned ourselves near the center of the room.

Maren moved to stand with us.

We waited.

The door opened, and Thorne walked in first. He was carrying a small leather case in one hand. Behind him came Elder Pryce. The older man's expression was carefully neutral but his eyes swept the room with the kind of attention that missed nothing.

Thorne stopped a few feet inside the infirmary and nodded to us.

"Alpha Cian. Grand Luna Morrigan. Luna Fia."

I nodded back.

"Elder Thorne. Elder Pryce."

Thorne held up the case.

"We got it," he said. "A fresh sample of Beta Ronan's blood."

Elder Pryce stepped forward slightly. "I will stay to ensure there is no hanky panky."

His tone was polite but the implication underneath was clear. He did not trust us to run the test without oversight.

It was the rule anyway. So I had no issue with it.

I kept my face neutral.

"That is no problem at all."

Maren moved toward the elder and gestured for him to follow her.

"This way," she said. "We have everything set up in the back."

Thorne and Elderr Pryce followed her deeper into the infirmary. Elder Pryce walked slower. For some reason, his sight was fixated on me. But his fixation did not last as he reached the corner. His boots clicked softly against the stone floor as they disappeared through the doorway that led to the smaller examination room.

The door closed behind them.

I turned back to my mother.

She had sat down again. The brief burst of energy she had summoned to stand and look presentable had already faded. She leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes.

I crossed the room quickly and pressed my hand against her forehead.

She was warm. Not feverish exactly but warmer than she should have been.

"You are burning up."

"I am fine," she whispered.

"You keep saying that."

She opened her eyes and looked at me.

"What you did was reckless," I said quietly. My voice came out harder than I meant it to. "More than reckless."

"I know."

"You could have died."

"I know. But I had to do it. I had to be the one to put that monster down, regardless of how it could have gone." She sighed. "I did know I was in no real danger, considering my daughter-in-law is a talented healer herself. I do wish the bastard had just died in his cell, though. The small moves he seems to be able to pull even now unsettles me."

I pulled my hand back and sat down beside her on the cot. "You should have just waited for me to make my moves."

"You do not know what we feared was going to happen."

"Fia told me," I said. "Eventually. She told me everything."

My mother's lips curved into a faint smile as she looked at Fia, then back at me.

"Good. She should have told you sooner. But I understand why she did not."

I looked at her.

"You really thought poisoning him was the only option?"

"I thought it was the safest option." Her voice was quiet. "For Fia. For you. For this pack. For everyone who stands to lose if that man walks free. Or survives this."

She reached over and took my hand in hers. Her fingers were cold now. The warmth from before had faded.

"It seems the goddess is by our side today though," she said softly. "I have a feeling this is the moment when we win over that monster."

Now that... I did believe. I had made all the moves for it to happen. For Skollrend and me to finally have some fucking peace.

Though I also wanted to feel the certainty my mother seemed to carry in her voice.

But all I could think about was how close we had come to losing her. How easily Aldric could have turned the tables. How much still hung in the balance.

I squeezed her hand gently.

"I hope you are right."

She smiled.

"I always am."

Fia moved closer and sat down on my mother's other side. She did not say anything. She just sat there with us while the sounds from the back room drifted faintly through the closed door.

The minutes stretched.

I tried not to think about what was happening in that examination room. Tried not to imagine Elder Pryce standing over Maren and Thorne while they worked. Watching every move. Questioning every step.

Maren would certainly be pissed about having her work questioned.

Then there was a knock on the door. Loud and urgent.

All three of us turned.

The door opened before I could respond.

A sentinel stepped inside. He was young. Maybe in his mid-twenties. His face was flushed and his breathing was uneven like he had been running.

He bowed quickly to all three of us.

Then his eyes found mine.

I could see the shock written all over his face. The disbelief. There was uncertainty about whether he was supposed to be delivering this news at all.

"Alpha Cian," he said. "There is someone you have to see."

I stood slowly.

"Who?"

He hesitated.

"A Blossom family member by the name Wilhelm came into pack territory not too long ago. And he came with someone."

My chest tightened.

Wilhelm? Madeline's brother? Was he here already?

The sentinel shifted his weight.

"It is best you come," he said.

I turned back to Fia and my mother.

"Keep watch over business here."

They both nodded.

I followed the sentinel out of the infirmary and into the hallway.

People were everywhere.

Servants. Guards. Pack members who had lingered after the trial was adjourned. They all turned to look at me when I passed. I could hear the whispers starting before I was even out of earshot.

"Did you hear?"

"Someone came with Wilhelm Blossom."

"Who could it be?"

"I heard it was him. The uncle. The one we thought was the traitor or even dead."

The sentinel walked quickly. I matched his pace. We turned down the main corridor and headed toward the lounge.

More people gathered near the doors. They pressed against the walls and craned their necks to see inside. A few of them stepped back when they saw me coming.

The sentinel pushed through the crowd and opened the door.

I stepped inside.

The lounge was quieter than the hallway but the tension was thicker. It sat in the air like something solid.

Valentine stood near the window. His hands were clasped behind his back and his expression was unreadable.

Madeline sat in one of the chairs near the fireplace. Her face was pale and her eyes looked especially tired.

And then there was someone else.

A man I had not seen in years. A man I had wrongfully hated for many years

He sat slumped in the chair across from Madeline. His hair was a mess. Long and tangled and streaked with gray I did not remember being there before. His face looked dirty. Smudged with grime and exhaustion. The only thing remotely fresh on him was his shirt. It was clean and white and looked like it had been given to him recently.

I stared.

I could not help it.

Because the man sitting in that chair was supposed to be a villain. A monster. Someone who had tried to destroy my family and paid for it by exiling himself into obscurity.

But looking at him now, all I saw was someone who had been broken.

His eyes lifted.

They found mine across the room.

And then he spoke.

"Cian..."

His voice cracked on my name. Like he had not used it in a very long time. Like saying it out loud cost him something.

I felt my throat tighten.

"Uncle Gabriel."

The room went completely silent.

Valentine shifted near the window but he did not speak. Madeline looked down at her hands. Wilhelm who I eventually noticed, stood near the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest and his face carefully blank.

Gabriel pushed himself up from the chair. His movements were slow and unsteady. Like his body was not used to standing anymore.

He took one step toward me. Then another.

I did not move.

I just stood there and watched him cross the room.

When he stopped in front of me, he was close enough that I could see the lines etched deep into his face. The way his hands shook slightly at his sides. The hollow look in his eyes that spoke of years spent in darkness.

"You have grown," he said quietly.

I did not know what to say to that.

He reached out like he wanted to touch my shoulder. Then he stopped himself and let his hand fall back to his side.

"I did not think I would ever see you again."

Something in my chest twisted.

For years, I had held onto one version of him. The traitor. The man who chose power over blood. The name we did not speak unless it was with anger.

That was the man I was supposed to be looking at.

But this... this was not him. It had never been him.

My jaw tightened. I could feel the war inside me, old and falsely born resentment clawing against something heavier, something I did not want to name.

"You let him take you," I said, my voice quieter than I intended. "Why would you let that monster take you and sully your name?"

Gabriel swallowed. His gaze dropped for a second before he forced himself to meet my eyes again.

"I guess I was not as strong as I believed I was. Family does make you hesitate and make excuses."

I knew that all too well. All the time I should have suspected Aldric but I simply did not.

Silence stretched between us again, thick and suffocating. I became aware of everything at once, the faint shift of Valentine's weight, the way Madeline's fingers curled into her skirt, Wilhelm's stillness by the door.

All of them watching and waiting.

I looked at Gabriel again. Really looked this time. At the tremor in his hands. At the way he held himself like a man bracing for a blow that had not come yet.

Like he expected me to hate him.

Maybe I should have.

Maybe I did.

But it did not feel like enough.

Something in me gave way before I could stop it.

I stepped forward.

Gabriel's breath hitched, just barely, like he did not trust what was happening.

Neither did I.

But I closed the distance anyway.

And then I pulled him into me.

My arms wrapped around him hard, tight enough that I felt the sharp edges of bone beneath his clothes, tight enough that it almost hurt.

For a second, he went completely still.

Like he did not know what to do with it.

Then his hands came up, slow at first, before gripping the back of my shirt like he was afraid I might disappear if he did not hold on.

"I am glad you are alive, Uncle Gabriel."

*Chapter 376: The Beginning of the end*

## **CIAN**

Gabriel's hands stayed gripped on the back of my shirt for a moment longer. Then he pulled back slowly and looked up at me.

His eyes were wet.

"I have waited years for this," he said. His voice was rough. "It was hard. But I had to keep myself alive because I knew... I hoped that a day like this would come when I would be able to get revenge. I did imagine a more violent interaction. But the court will do. It is the same thing at this point. I've waited years to stand in front of that circle and expose him for what he really is."

I nodded.

"Then you will get your chance."

"Now," he said. "I want to testify now. He has allies. I am sure, and my presence here would be dangerous to them."

I glanced toward the window. The light was still good. The hour had not passed yet. But it was close.

"It is safe here, and the trial will resume soon," I said. "When it does, you will be called. But I assure you, your life is not in danger. Valentine was the one who figured out you were imprisoned and saved you. He has a need for you to be alive. As well. He will do anything to protect you."

"Good."

Gabriel stepped back and wiped at his face with the back of his hand. The motion left a streak of dirt across his cheek.

I looked at him more carefully now. At the state of his clothes. The grime under his nails. The way his hair hung in tangled strands around his face.

"You should clean up first," I said. "Get dressed properly. We can have someone bring you fresh clothes. Something that fits."

Gabriel shook his head immediately.

"No."

I frowned.

"Uncle—"

"No," he repeated. His voice was firmer this time. "They need to see this. They need to see what was done to me."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he kept going.

"If I walk in there clean and composed, they will question whether I was truly imprisoned. They will wonder if this is theater. If this is some scheme Valentine cooked up to discredit Aldric." He gestured down at himself. At the dirt and the exhaustion written into every line of his body. "But if they see me like this, they will know. They will know it is real."

I stared at him.

He was right.

Aldric had spent years building a reputation. Polished. Controlled. The kind of man who never let anyone see him sweat. Who always looked like he had everything under control.

Gabriel walking into that hall looking broken would be the clearest evidence that Aldric's cool headed nature and his empathy had always been a lie. Some wolves did have a hard time believing a witch. But they would have to listen to the voice of a wolf.

Gabriel would be able to change the mind of even the most stubborn blind believer.

"Alright," I said quietly. "If that is what you want."

"It is."

I nodded once.

Gabriel looked at me for a long moment. Then he reached out and gripped my shoulder.

"There are things I need to tell you," he said. "Things about Aldric. Things he has done. Deals he has made. People he has manipulated. Just in case... Just in case anything happens."

My chest tightened.

"What kind of things?"

"Everything." His voice dropped lower. "I know about the arrangements he made with members of the elder's circle. I know who he has in his pocket. I know what he promised them in exchange for their loyalty."

He paused.

"I know about Elder Saoirse. The secret he has been holding over her head for years. The one that'll probably keep her voting whichever way benefits him most."

I felt my pulse quicken.

"What secret?"

Gabriel didn't answer immediately. His grip on my shoulder tightened instead.

"If I tell you now," he said quietly, "you will react."

I frowned. "Of course I will—"

"And someone will notice," he cut in. "A guard. A servant. One of his people. It doesn't take much. A look. A word in the wrong place."

I stilled.

"He's spent years building eyes and ears in this place," Gabriel went on. "If that secret reaches him before I speak it in that room, he won't wait for the trial."

A cold weight settled in my stomach.

"What does that mean?"

"It means Saoirse disappears," he said flatly. "Or worse, she walks into that chamber already prepared with a version of the truth that buries mine before I open my mouth."

Silence stretched between us.

"And if that happens," he added, quieter now, "I become a bitter man grasping at lies to save himself. The Circle won't hear me. They'll dismiss me before I finish the first sentence."

I clenched my jaw.

"So you're saying—"

"I'm saying timing is the only thing that makes this matter," Gabriel said. "In that chamber, in front of witnesses, with no room to maneuver... he can't control it. Not completely."

His eyes held mine.

"That is the only moment Saoirse is forced to answer honestly."

The urge to push didn't fade. It sat there, sharp and insistent.

But I understood now.

This wasn't just information.

It was leverage.

And used too early, it wouldn't just lose its power.

It would be erased.

Even Valentine was able to maneuver the pact we had. Who knew who was in the walls listening?

"What else?" I asked.

Gabriel's expression darkened.

"Elder Pryce. He is not just an ally. He is Aldric's creature. Has been for over a decade. Every vote Pryce has cast in that circle has been at Aldric's direction. Every decision he has influenced has served Aldric's interests."

My jaw tightened.

I had suspected Pryce was compromised. But hearing it confirmed made something cold settle in my stomach.

"And there is more," Gabriel continued. His voice had gone quieter now. "Things that go even deeper than politics. Crimes that were never investigated because Aldric made sure the right people looked the other way."

He stopped.

His eyes searched mine.

"There are deaths on his hands, Cian. Deaths that were ruled accidents. Deaths that were never questioned because the people who should have been asking questions were already working for him. Intentionally or unintentionally."

My breath caught.

"Whose deaths?"

Gabriel's face twisted into something that looked like grief.

"People you knew. People you loved."

The words hit me like a fist to the chest.

I stared at him. Something in me already suspected.

"Who?" I asked, even though I suspected he would not answer.

I did tend to be reactive when it got too much.

He shook his head slowly.

I felt my hands curl into fists at my sides.

"Uncle—"

Uncle Gabriel shook his head.

"If I tell you now," he said quietly, "you won't let this trial finish."

I stilled.

"You'll go to him," he continued. "You'll look him in the eye knowing what he did... and you won't walk away from that. You will simply not be able to do it. You will kill him."

The truth of it sat between us, heavy and undeniable. It was like I already knew what he was hinting at, and my jaw tightened.

"And the moment you kill him," Gabriel went on, "everything he's buried stays buried with him."

Silence stretched.

"The Circle never hears it," he said. "His allies walk free. The people who helped him, who covered for him, who benefited from it... they disappear back into the shadows like they were never part of it at all."

My chest rose and fell slowly.

I hated this.

I hated that he was right.

Gabriel stepped closer.

"I know what I'm asking of you," he said, softer now. "I know what it costs. But if you want all of it to come out, if you want every name dragged into the light... then you have to let this play out."

My hands trembled.

"After," he said. "When it's done. When he can't hide behind anything anymore... I will tell you everything. Better than I could even tell the circle."

I wanted to argue. I wanted to demand he tell me right now and confirm the sick feeling I had in my guts. But the look on his face stopped me.

He was barely holding himself together.

Whatever it was, whatever he was carrying, it was costing him something to keep it inside and as much as I wanted to confirm what I suspected, I had to keep calm.

I took a slow breath and let it out.

"Alright," I said. "But you tell me. Before the day ends. You tell me everything."

"I will."

Gabriel's hand dropped from my shoulder.

He looked around the room. At Valentine standing near the window. At Madeline still sitting by the fireplace. At Wilhelm, near the door.

Then he looked back at me.

"I am ready," he said. "Whenever the trial resumes, I am ready."

I nodded.

"Then we should head back. The hour is almost up. They will be calling us soon."

Gabriel straightened as much as his body would allow. He rolled his shoulders back and lifted his chin.

For just a moment, I saw a glimpse of the man he used to be. The uncle I remembered from childhood. Strong, certain and unafraid.

Then the moment passed and he was just a broken man again.

But that was enough.

That would be enough to destroy Aldric.

I turned toward the door.

"Valentine. Wilhelm. You should come as well. The circle will want to hear how Gabriel was found. How he was brought here."

Valentine inclined his head.

"Of course."

Wilhelm pushed off from the wall.

"Lead the way."

I walked to the door and pulled it open.

The hallway outside was still crowded. People turned to look when I stepped out. Their eyes went wide when they saw Gabriel behind me.

The whispers started immediately.

*"Is that him?"*

*"That is Gabriel Donlon. Is he not the traitor?"*

*"He looks terrible."*

*"What happened to him?"*

I ignored them and started walking. Gabriel stayed close behind me. Valentine and the others followed.

The walk back to the great hall felt longer than it should have. Every step seemed to stretch. Every face we passed turned to stare.

By the time we reached the doors, the entire estate seemed to know.

Gabriel Donlon had returned.

And he was about to testify against his own brother instead of being executed on the spot.

I stopped at the entrance and looked back at my uncle.

"Are you sure about this?"

He met my eyes without hesitation.

"I have never been more sure of anything in my life."

I nodded once.

Then I pushed the doors open and we walked inside.

The great hall fell silent the moment we entered.

Every head turned.

Every eye locked onto Gabriel.

I heard someone gasp. Then another. The silence broke into a wave of noise that rolled through the room like thunder.

Elder Callum stood from his seat at the front. His face had gone pale.

"Gabriel Donlon," he said. His voice carried across the hall. "Is that truly you?"

Gabriel stepped forward.

He did not try to hide the dirt on his face. He did not try to stand straighter or look more composed.

He just stood there and let them see him.

"It is," he said. His voice was steady and clear. "And I have come to testify against Aldric."

The hall erupted.

People were shouting now. Demanding to know where he had been. How and why he was being treated humanely instead of being dragged across asphalt, punched in the head and belly with wolfsbane bullets and executed.

Elder Callum raised his hand for silence but it took several moments before the noise died down.

When it finally did, he looked at Gabriel with an expression I could not read.

"You were believed to be in self-imposed exile," Callum said carefully. "Or dead for the crimes you committed against this pack and your own house."

"I was neither," Gabriel replied. "I am no traitor of this pack either. If anything, I was a prisoner. I was imprisoned. Beneath my own brother, Aldric Donlon's estate. For years."

The hall went silent again.

Every eye turned toward the area where Aldric would be brought back in soon.

I looked at the doors.

They would be bringing him up any moment now.

And when they did, he would walk into a room that had already turned against him.

Because Gabriel was here.

And Gabriel was ready to burn everything down.

*Chapter 377: Bite 1*

## **ALDRIC**

The guards came for us exactly when I expected them to.

The cell door swung open, and two sentinels stepped inside. They did not bother with formalities anymore. One of them grabbed my arm and hauled me to my feet. The other did the same to Ronan.

The chains stayed on.

We were walked out of the cell and into the corridor. The stone walls felt colder than they had before. The dampness had settled deeper into the air.

Ronan's mother shook the bars as Ronan disappeared from her line of sight.

I looked back to see Teagan pressed against the far wall with her hands clasped in front of the bars. Her face was red and swollen from crying.

"Ronan," she screamed and her voice cracked upon doing so. "Please. Please listen to me."

The sentinel holding Ronan tried to push him forward faster so nobody would have to hear her grating voice. But it carried anyway.

"You do not have to do this," she said. Her words came out in a rush. "You do not have to protect him. Just tell them the truth. Tell them everything. Everything he made you do. Everything he convinced you to believe. Save yourself."

Ronan kept his eyes forward.

He did not look at her.

"Ronan, please." Tears streamed down her face now. "I am begging you. Do not throw your life away for him. He does not deserve it. He never deserved it."

Ronan's jaw tightened but he still did not look at her.

The sentinel pushed him further and dragged him down the corridor.

Teagan let out a broken sob behind us.

I did not turn around.

We were halfway to the stairs when the sentinel holding me spoke.

His voice was low. Quiet enough that it would not carry far.

"You really are a snake of a man."

I kept my face neutral.

"You really did those things to your blood," he continued. His grip on my arm tightened. "Even your brother was not spared."

The words hit me like cold water.

Gabriel.

Gabriel was here.

I felt my pulse quicken but I kept my expression still. I did not react. I did not give this man the satisfaction of seeing anything shift in my face.

But my mind was already moving.

Gabriel was actually here. I thought he would be smart enough to run for the hills knowing what I was capable of. But he was here. And he was going to testify.

This was going to be fun.

I looked down at my hand. At the blood red ring on my finger.

I turned my hand slightly so the ring caught the light.

Then I smiled.

I hid it quickly. I ducked my head and let my hair fall forward just enough to cover my face.

But the smile was there.

Because if Gabriel was here, if he was really standing in that hall ready to speak, then I still had him exactly where I needed him.

We reached the great hall and the doors were already open.

The noise hit me first. Voices layered over each other in waves. People shouting. Arguing. The sentinels pushed us through and the crowd turned to look.

I scanned the room quickly.

The elder's circle was already seated. Callum in the center. Pryce on the left. Saoirse beside him. The others filled in the remaining chairs.

Cian sat in the gallery with Fia beside him. His mother was there too. Sitting upright and looking far more composed than she should have been.

And then I saw him.

Gabriel.

He stood near the front of the hall. His hair was a mess. His face was streaked with dirt. His clothes were filthy except for the shirt.

The shirt was new.

Clean, proper, and freshly pressed.

I felt something settle in my chest.

He had changed his shirt.

Instead of talking about the risk he posed to everybody here, he had hidden it by covering up with a shirt. Oh, I fucking had him.

Our eyes met across the hall.

Gabriel's face was hard. Controlled. He was trying not to react. Trying to look strong and unshaken.

But I saw the flicker.

The brief moment where his composure cracked and something else showed through.

Fear.

He was afraid of me.

Even now. Even after everything. Even standing in front of a room full of people who were supposed to protect him.

He was still afraid.

I smiled.

Just slightly. Just enough that he would see it.

Gabriel's jaw tightened and he looked away.

The sentinels dragged us to the center of the hall and stopped. They positioned us in front of the elder's circle and stepped back.

Elder Callum stood and the room immediately went quiet.

"This hearing will now reconvene," he said. His voice carried easily through the hall. "We have completed the requested tests. The results are ready to be presented."

He gestured to Elder Thorne.

Thorne stood and held up a piece of paper. He cleared his throat.

"The DNA test confirms paternity," he said. "Beta Ronan Ashworth is the biological son of Alpha Aldric Donlon."

The hall erupted.

People were shouting now. Not whispering... Not murmuring... The vile animals were shouting like the worst thing in the world just happened.

"I knew it."

"This is a disgrace."

"Does that mean he actually did it?"

"How could he do that to his own nephew?"

"And the Beta. All this time he was lying to us. What sort of monsters are these people?"

Elder Callum raised his hand and the noise subsided slowly.

Roth, the pack's lead technician continued from where Thorne stopped.

"The voice messages presented by Miss Madeline Blossom have also been verified as authentic. Analysis confirms they were sent from Alpha Aldric Donlon's personal device and have not been altered or tampered with."

More noise came from the sheep. Louder this time.

I kept my face still and waited.

Callum let the noise run its course. Then he raised his hand again.

"The evidence presented is concerning," he said carefully. "However, the court must note that the voice messages, while authentic, remain circumstantial in nature. They demonstrate a pattern of behavior but do not directly prove the charges of treason or conspiracy."

I looked at him.

Callum was playing both sides.

I could see it clearly now. Gabriel's presence had shifted the room. The momentum had turned against me in ways that even Callum could not ignore. But he was still trying to leave himself room to maneuver. Still trying to protect his own position. Just in case.

That was why he was ruling in my favor just enough to cover himself if things went sideways.

I could not help it.

I smiled at him.

Callum's eyes flicked toward me for just a fraction of a second. Then he looked away.

Saoirse leaned forward in her chair. She looked relieved. Like she had been holding her breath and could finally exhale.

She thought this was over.

She thought the trial was going to end with reasonable doubt and a split verdict and everyone walking away without having to commit too hard in either direction.

Foolish woman.

Gabriel stepped forward.

"Well," he said. His voice cut through the noise cleanly. "I have testimony to give."

The room went silent.

Callum turned toward him.

"Of course, Alpha Gabriel," he said. There was respect in his tone now. The kind of respect people gave to ghosts who had returned from the dead. "Please take the stage."

Gabriel walked to the center of the hall.

He did not try to clean himself up. He did not try to hide the dirt or the exhaustion. He just stood there and let everyone see him.

Beside me, Ronan shifted.

He looked at Gabriel. Then at me.

"What is going on?" he whispered.

"Be calm," I said quietly.

Gabriel's eyes swept the room. Then they landed on me.

*Chapter 378: Bite 2*

## **ALDRIC**

"My brother here is a master manipulator and a scary werewolf," he said. His voice was steady and clear. "This mostly started for me when our brother died and the Alpha seat of Skollrend was up for grabs."

I kept my face neutral.

Gabriel continued.

"My brother placed himself as someone who was not interested in the Alpha seat. He convinced me that our nephew here was not ready to hold that kind of power. I was convinced. And I did try to run against Cian."

He paused.

"But I saw that I was wrong. My nephew had fire in him. He had matured. He wanted the seat to honor his father, my late brother, and he had plans for the pack. It occurred to me that I only wanted this because I had this archaic idea that I knew better. Because I was older."

Gabriel's voice softened slightly.

"I thought even my brother over there, Aldric, had his priorities right. He was not pathetically hungry for this like I was. So I withdrew."

He looked at me.

"But then I realized quickly how wrong I was. My brother was hungry. Far hungrier for power than I ever could be."

The room was completely silent now.

"He lashed out," Gabriel said. "He said things. Strange things. Like how he had put the idea in my head to oppose Cian when he contested for the seat."

Gabriel's jaw tightened.

"His goal was that the enmity between us would grow so much that it started to chasm. And if we did not decide to kill each other, the elders would just determine we were not good fits for the pack. And the seat would go to him."

I felt my hands curl into fists behind my back.

Gabriel stepped closer.

"You see, my brother has a problem. Aside from being power hungry, he likes being loved. It is what prevented the world from seeing the extent of his monstrosity for a long while now. He is capable of bribery, blackmail, and even murder."

He paused.

"So when I did not follow the script, he locked me up."

Gabriel turned to face the crowd.

"A lot of you, before this moment and even now, believed me to be a traitor. And I am certain that even now, many still do. But that is the story my dear brother sold you while he imprisoned me. He made me the villain."

The hall erupted again.

People were shouting questions. Demanding proof. Some were already convinced. Others looked skeptical.

Elder Callum raised his hand.

"Those are vile things to have happen to you if they are true," he said carefully. "But how can any of this be proven? How did you even get free?"

Wilhelm stepped forward from the gallery.

I had not noticed him before but he was there now. Standing beside Valentine.

"We are practitioners and we have our means," Wilhelm said. His voice was calm. Matter of fact. "My sister suspected something from what Aldric said in his own pride, drunk in his own power. We had to find out."

I turned my attention to him.

"My estate is brimming with security and servants," I said. My voice was steady. Reasonable. "I doubt they just let you in."

I looked at Wilhelm directly.

"None of this can be true. But what happened? Did your kind use your cruel spells on them?"

I let the words hang in the air for a moment.

"Witches toying with the bodies and autonomy of wolves. A tale as old as time."

I could feel the shift immediately.

The room had been turning against me. But now I had given them something else to think about. Something older. Deeper. A wound that had never fully healed.

People started whispering.

"They used magic on innocent wolves just doing their job?"

"Those accords and laws are useless. These monsters can never really change."

"Witches cannot just force their way into werewolf stronghold like that."

Elder Callum leaned forward.

"The Alpha has a point," he said carefully.

Wilhelm's jaw tightened.

"We did use force when they resisted," he admitted. "But that was only because we knew they were blindly allied to Aldric and posed a risk to the prisoner."

I turned away from him and looked at Cian.

Then I addressed the court directly.

"I have my secrets," I said. My voice was calm. Measured. "Like my secret son, which is my shame. But none of the rest are me at all."

I looked at Cian.

"You have to see that this is a game that Skollrend's enemy number one, Gabriel, is playing. I am not the enemy. He is working with these witches to destabilize us."

The words were not for Cian.

Cian knew better now. I could see it in his eyes. He had already made up his mind about me a long time ago. All he needed right now was to hear the word ahead.

But the others had not.

The ones who were still wavering. The ones who wanted to believe that an Alpha like myself could not have done these things. The ones who needed a villain they could understand.

I was still giving them Gabriel.

And it was working.

The whispers grew louder.

Gabriel's face twisted with fury.

"I believe kin slaying is worse," he said. His voice rose. "So let us keep the conversation on you. After all, you killed Cian's father."

The words landed in the hall like a bomb.

Everything stopped.

The whispers. The movement. The breathing.

Everything.

I felt my blood go cold.

Gabriel stared at me from across the hall. His face was hard and just as unforgiving.

"You killed our own brother," he said. "And you made it look like an accident."

The silence stretched.

I could feel every eye in the room on me.

Cian had gone completely still in his seat.

Ronan was staring at me with wide eyes.

Even the elders looked shocked.

I opened my mouth.

But no words came out.

Because Gabriel had just done the one thing I could not defend against.

*Chapter 379: Ouroboros*

## **ALDRIC**

The silence dragged on, thick enough to feel.

Every eye in the hall settled on me, unblinking, expectant.

Cian sat rigid in his chair, his face drained of color. His hands clutched the armrests so tightly the tendons stood out, his knuckles stark and bloodless. He looked like he might snap if he moved.

Gabriel remained at the center of the hall, his chest rising and falling hard, as though the words he had just spoken had taken something out of him. The accusation still hung in the air, sharp and undeniable, meant to ruin me beyond repair.

And I had nothing to counter it.

Because it was true.

I had killed my brother.

I had arranged his death, dressed it up as an accident, and let rogues carry out the part no one could trace back to me. Involving the Alpha King had only made it cleaner and safer for me. It shifted attention and built a story that people accepted without question.

No one had looked deeper.

Until now.

Still, I was not about to let Gabriel have this.

Not here. Not like this.

I straightened, slow and deliberate, and let my gaze move across the room, meeting faces one by one.

Then I tapped my fingers lightly against my leg.

Three short. Three long. Three short.

That was the signal.

Pryce would catch it. The others would too. They had all agreed on what it meant.

It was time.

For a moment, nothing changed.

The silence held. No one moved.

Then Pryce rose to his feet.

The scrape of his chair against the stone floor cut through the room, loud and jarring. Heads turned toward him at once.

He slipped a hand inside his coat.

When it emerged, there was a gun in his grip.

The hall broke apart.

Voices rose into screams. Chairs dragged harshly across the floor. People lurched back, pushing away from him, from the sudden threat that had taken shape in the center of the room.

Pryce lifted the gun and aimed it toward the gallery where Cian sat. Fia moved instantly, stepping in front of him, her body a shield. The sight of it made something twist in Cian's expression, something sharp and almost repulsed, as he shifted himself back into the line of fire.

And then Pryce hesitated.

He didn't fire.

Instead, he looked around.

His gaze moved across the hall, searching, waiting for movement, for anyone to rise with him.

No one did.

Not a single person.

The confusion came first, plain on his face. Then it sharpened into something closer to panic.

"What the fuck?" he said.

His voice carried, unsteady.

He turned slowly, scanning the room again, as if he had missed something the first time.

"What the fuck?" he repeated.

I felt my chest tighten.

My eyes swept the hall, faster now, searching for the others. The ones who were meant to stand. The ones who had sworn themselves to me. The ones who had taken what I offered and promised they would act when the moment came.

None of them moved.

They remained in their seats, hands folded, expressions carefully blank, as though they had never seen the signal, never heard it, never been part of anything at all.

Something cold settled deep in my stomach.

"Did you bastards not hear me?" I said.

The words came out louder than I intended, edged with something harder than control.

"Stand up and fight."

No one stood.

I turned toward them fully now, toward the faces I knew too well. The men and women who owed me, who had accepted my money, my favors, my silence, and given me their word in return.

"My nephew already knows there are more traitors in this room," I said. My voice rose despite myself. "Stand with me and fight, you spineless losers."

Still nothing.

Gabriel's voice broke through the quiet.

"That was easy."

I looked at him.

He was smiling.

Not with triumph. Not with cruelty either. If I noticed anything, it was just a calm, steady certainty he had plastered on, as if this outcome had never been in doubt.

"The fear of using the Alpha King and getting away with it is the beginning of wisdom, is it not?" he said. His tone remained even. "No one will stand by you. I am sure they are that smart."

I stared at him.

Of course. My own sealed protection had come back to bite me hard. Gabriel's mention about Cian's father's death would lead to questions and a reopening of the case at an international level. If the Alpha King realized he had been manipulated by me and given an unjust verdict. Heads would roll.

So the backstabbing was actually a smart move. They had chosen survival over loyalty.

But it was at my own expense. And I could not have that. I felt my hands curl into fists.

Gabriel stepped closer.

"No one is coming for you, Aldric," he said quietly. "You are alone."

I turned back to him.

"You bastard."

He gave a small shrug.

"Nothing personal."

A strangled sound came from Pryce.

I looked over. He was still on his feet, the gun hanging in his hand, but his arm trembled now. The color had drained from his face, leaving him ashen.

"Fuck," he muttered. "Fuck. I fucked up. Please, spare my family, Alpha Cian. They did not know. They had no idea."

He turned the gun.

The movement was slow and deliberate.

He raised it to his head and pressed the barrel against his temple.

"Pryce, no—"

The shot cut me off.

It cracked through the hall, deafening the whole space. Even the echo clung to the air long after the sound itself should have died.

Pryce's body gave out beneath him.

He dropped hard to the floor. Blood spread beneath him at once, dark and quick, seeping across the stone.

The hall dissolved into chaos.

People shouted, voices rising into sharp, panicked screams. Chairs scraped and overturned as they pushed back, desperate to put distance between themselves and the body lying at the center of it all.

I did not move.

Pryce was dead.

He had chosen it, chosen to end it himself rather than face what came next.

Beside me, Ronan let out a broken sound.

"Goddess," he whispered. "We are fucked."

He turned toward me, his face drained, his eyes wide with something close to disbelief.

"What did you do, father?"

I said nothing.

There was nothing left to say.

Everything had fallen apart.

The coup had failed before it could even begin. The people who had sworn themselves to me had stayed in their seats, and the only loyal one, Pryce, now lay dead on the floor.

And Gabriel was still there, still breathing, still ready to speak.

Something inside me gave way.

It felt like a thread snapping, something that had been holding everything together, finally breaking under the weight.

*I cannot lose now.*

The thought repeated, relentless.

*I cannot. I cannot. I cannot.*

My body moved before the thought finished forming.

The shift began in my chest, a heat that spread outward, sharp and consuming. It moved through my limbs, through bone and muscle. I felt everything change at once, bones cracking and reshaping, muscles pulling tighter, thicker.

I stopped before it completed.

So it only came through halfway. But that was enough to make me stronger. Enough to make me faster.

The sentinels reacted at once.

Three of them stepped forward with their guns raised.

"Revert now," one of them shouted. "Revert, or we will shoot."

I lowered my gaze to my hands.

The chains were still locked around my wrists.

I pulled.

The metal groaned under the strain, a sharp, protesting sound as it bent and twisted.

Then it gave.

The chains snapped.

The broken lengths fell to the ground with a heavy clang.

The sentinels fired.

The shots came fast, one after another. I moved before they could land cleanly, twisting out of the line of fire. One bullet grazed my shoulder, another struck my side, shallow, painful, but not enough to slow me.

I ignored it and, with everything in me, drove forward.

Gabriel still stood in the center of the hall. He had stepped back at the first shot, but it had not been enough.

He was weak.

Starvation and dehydration had stripped him down to almost nothing. His body could not respond the way it once had. He could not shift in time. He could not defend himself.

I hit him before he could react.

My hands closed around his throat as I dragged him back against me. He was lighter than I expected, his weight giving too easily. I could feel his ribs beneath my grip, the sharp outline of bone through skin.

I pulled him tight and turned, positioning him between myself and the sentinels.

"Back off," I said.

My voice came out rough, distorted by the shift still clinging to me.

The sentinels stopped.

Their guns remained raised, steady, but they did not fire.

Gabriel struggled weakly in my grip. His hands came up and clawed at my arms but he did not have the strength to do any real damage.

I tightened my hold, and he stopped struggling.

"This is not how I go out," I said. My voice was louder now. Steadier. "This is not where I end. I am indomitable."

Gabriel let out a choked laugh.

"No," he rasped. "You are a weak wolf who cannot stand on business and die with honor. Your head rolls today anyway, whether you choose to let it roll with dignity or not."

The sentinels had begun to move.

They circled slowly, measured in every step, their formation tightening without ever breaking. Their guns remained fixed on me, steady, unshaking, but none of them pulled the trigger.

They could not.

Not while Gabriel stood between us.

I tightened my hold on him and dragged him closer, forcing his back flush against my chest. Then I dipped my head, bringing my mouth close to his ear.

"I still have the ring," I whispered.

Gabriel went rigid in my grip. Completely still, as if even the smallest movement might betray him.

"And you are still my little bitch," I continued, my voice low, controlled. "Because I know you did not tell them. *Some kind of hero you are.*"

I felt the tension ripple through him, sharp and immediate, his body locking as the words settled in.

Then I moved.

My hand rose, the one bearing the ring. The blood-red stone caught the light, glinting for a brief second.

Then my claws dragged across his throat.

The resistance lasted only a moment.

The cut opened clean and deep.

Blood burst from the wound at once, hot and forceful, spraying across my hand and soaking into the front of his shirt. It came in a thick rush, spilling over my fingers, running down his chest in heavy streams that darkened the fabric almost instantly.

Gabriel's body jerked in my hold.

A wet, choking sound forced its way out of him, uneven and broken, as the air he tried to draw in tangled with the blood flooding his throat. His hands came up weakly, instinctively, grasping at nothing, at me, at the space in front of him, as if he could hold himself together.

The sentinels froze completely.

For a fraction of a second, the entire hall seemed to stop with them.

I held him for a moment longer. Then I shoved my hand into the flow of blood. I pressed the ring against the wound. Let the blood soak into the stone. Let it coat the metal band.

The hall erupted into chaos.

People were screaming now. Really screaming. Not just shocked exclamations. Full-throated terror.

The sentinels were shouting.

"Drop him!"

"Let him go now!"

I ignored them.

I kept my hand pressed against Gabriel's throat. Kept the ring submerged in the blood.

I intended to rise above this. No matter what.

*Chapter 380: No one mourns the cruel 1*

## **CIAN**

Fia moved before I could fully process what was happening, before my mind could even catch up to what my eyes were seeing.

One moment, she was beside me, close enough that I could feel her presence without looking. The next, she had stepped in front of me, placing herself directly between me and Pryce's gun.

Her body became a barrier, rigid and unyielding, as though she believed she could stop a bullet with nothing but her own flesh.

My hand reacted before I could think. I reached out, caught her arm, and yanked her back with enough force that she stumbled, her balance breaking as she was forced to catch herself against the chair to keep from falling.

"What are you doing?" The words came out sharper than I intended, edged with something I didn't bother to soften.

I didn't wait for an answer. I pushed her behind me and stepped forward, reclaiming the space she had taken, placing myself back in the line of fire where I belonged.

I didn't look at Pryce.

I looked at her.

At Fia.

The color had drained from her face so completely it made something twist low in my chest, and her eyes, wide and fixed on me, carried a kind of intensity that went beyond panic. Whatever she was feeling poured off her in waves, heavy and suffocating, strong enough that it unsettled me in a way I couldn't ignore.

Fear.

But not the simple kind, not the instinctive reaction to a weapon being pointed in your direction, not the kind that makes a person flinch or duck or freeze in place.

This was something else entirely.

This was fear rooted in certainty, the kind that comes from knowing rather than guessing, from seeing something that hasn't happened yet but feels inevitable. It carried the weight of something already decided, something she believed she could not change, no matter how desperately she tried.

My chest tightened as the realization settled in.

She thought I was going to die.

She thought this was the moment it happened.

I opened my mouth, ready to say something, anything, to pull her out of that space, to tell her I was fine, that nothing was going to happen, that she didn't need to look at me like that.

Pryce's voice cut through the room before I could speak.

"What the fuck?"

I turned toward him.

He was looking around the hall now, his gaze darting from face to face as if searching for something, or someone. His gun was still raised, but his arm had started to shake, the tremor growing more obvious by the second, and the color had drained from his face until he looked almost sick.

He was waiting.

Waiting for someone to stand with him, to back him up, to make this something other than a mistake he had made alone.

No one moved.

The realization hit him all at once, and I saw it unfold in real time, in the way his expression faltered, in the way his shoulders dropped as whatever resolve he had clung to slipped out from under him, in the way his grip on the gun weakened even as his hand trembled harder.

"Fuck," he said under his breath, the word breaking apart as it left him. "Fuck. I fucked up. Please, spare my family, Alpha Cian. They did not know. They had no idea."

He turned the gun toward himself.

I stepped forward immediately, instinct overriding everything else.

"Pry—"

The shot rang out before I could reach him.

The sound was deafening, sharp enough to cut through everything else, and it echoed through the hall in a way that made it feel like it had lodged somewhere inside my chest.

Pryce's body dropped where he stood.

Blood spread beneath him almost instantly, dark and thick as it seeped across the stone floor, moving faster than my mind could keep up with.

The hall erupted.

People shouted, voices rising over one another in panic, chairs scraping as bodies moved, as everyone tried to put distance between themselves and what had just happened.

For a moment, I didn't move.

It wasn't long, barely a second, but it was enough.

Then something else caught my attention.

Aldric.

He was shifting.

Not fully, not completely, but enough to make the change visible. I heard the cracks before I fully saw them, the sound of bone shifting under skin, of his body forcing itself into something stronger, something harder. His muscles thickened, stretching against his clothes, and the chains around his wrists strained under the sudden pressure, metal groaning as it fought to hold.

Then they snapped.

The sound was sharp, final.

The sentinels reacted instantly, shouting over one another as they raised their guns, the air tightening with the anticipation of what came next.

Aldric didn't hesitate.

He moved.

Fast, far faster than he should have been able to, closing the distance before anyone could properly adjust. The first shots rang out, bullets grazing him as they tore through fabric and skin, but none of them landed cleanly enough to slow him down, none of them did anything that mattered.

He hit Gabriel with force.

My uncle barely had time to react before Aldric's hands were on him, fingers locking around his throat as he dragged him backward, positioning him between himself and the sentinels.

Using him.

The sentinels froze, their weapons still raised, but their fingers stalled on the triggers.

They couldn't shoot.

Not without hitting Gabriel.

I started toward them, but the distance felt wrong, too long, as if the space between us had stretched in a way that worked against me, my steps suddenly not fast enough to matter.

Aldric leaned in, saying something to Gabriel. I couldn't hear the words over the noise, over the chaos building around us, but I saw the effect of them.

Gabriel's expression shifted.

His body went rigid.

Then Aldric moved his hand, or his claws rather.

His claws cut across Gabriel's throat in a single, decisive motion.

Blood sprayed.

Gabriel's body jerked violently, a wet, choking sound forcing its way out of him as the reality of what had just happened settled in too late to change anything.

"No!"

The word tore out of me, raw and useless.

It didn't matter.

Aldric held him there for a moment longer, his hand pressed against the wound as blood poured over it, his fingers disappearing beneath the surface as though it belonged there.

Then he let go.

Uncle Gabriel's body dropped to the floor with a heavy impact, blood already spreading around him in a widening pool.

The sentinels opened fire.

This time, they didn't hesitate. Bullets slammed into Aldric's body, striking his shoulder, his leg, his side, each hit forcing a reaction, each impact jerking him slightly, but none of it was enough to stop him.

He turned.

And he ran. Straight toward the window.

Two more shots hit him before he reached it, his body jolting with each impact, but he didn't slow, didn't falter, didn't give them anything that would make it easier to bring him down.

He crashed through the glass.

The sound of shattering filled the hall. Shards exploded outward in a glittering spray.

Then he was gone.

Sentinels immediately surrounded Ronan. Their guns were trained on him. Making sure he did not follow suit.

Ronan stood there with his hands raised. His face was white. He was not going anywhere.

I turned toward the window just as more sentinels pushed past it, already in motion, their bodies cutting through the opening one after the other as they ran for the exit and disappeared into the open air beyond, fully committed to the chase before anyone could call them back.

"I have to join them," I said, the decision settling into place with a weight that left no room for hesitation, my body already shifting forward to follow.

I barely made it a step before a hand closed around my arm and stopped me in place, the grip firm enough to anchor me where I stood despite the urgency pressing at my back.

Fia.

She held on tightly, her fingers digging in as though she thought she could keep me there if she refused to let go, and when I turned to face her, the sight of her expression hit harder than anything else in the room.

Her eyes were wide, bright with unshed tears, and the fear in them hadn't lessened, hadn't softened; if anything, it had deepened into something more desperate, more certain, something that made it clear she wasn't reacting to what was happening around us, but to something she believed was about to.

"You cannot," she said, her voice unsteady despite the urgency behind it, each word carrying the strain of someone trying to hold onto control that was already slipping. "The vision. My vision. It could be now."

Behind her, Maren and Thorne had already reached Gabriel, both of them dropping to their knees at his side, their hands moving quickly, pressing against his throat, trying to stop the blood that refused to slow, no matter how much pressure they applied, their focus absolute as the chaos around them continued to build.

I dragged my gaze back to Fia, forcing myself to stay present with her even as every instinct in me pulled toward the door, toward the hunt already unfolding beyond the walls.

"I promise you," I said, steadying my voice with intention, making sure there was no space for doubt in it, "that bastard will not be the one to take me down."