

To ruin an Omega

Chapter 406: King Lear and Cordelia 1

ALDRIC

I turned the corner and stopped.

The hallway stretched empty in both directions. Quiet. Exactly what I needed.

I unlocked Elara's phone and pulled up the contacts.

My memory had always been sharp. Precise. Even now, wearing Gabriel's weaker body, that part of me remained intact.

From memory alone, I keyed in the delicate's handler's number.

I had only dealt with him once. Briefly. Through intermediaries, mostly.

But I remembered his number.

I pressed call, and it rang twice before someone picked up.

"Hello?"

The voice was rough and just as cautious.

"Is this Mateo Ruiz?" I asked.

There was a pause at first, then the rough voice said, "Who is asking?"

"Someone who needs information," I said. "You handle a delicate. I hear she is strong."

There was another pause, and it was longer this time.

"Yes," he said finally. "But she is not in service now. She happens to be blinded and that, in some way, apparently made her abilities epileptic. We have other strong contender delicacies if you need—"

"I will drop the act," I cut in.

My tone shifted. I barely had the time to play my usual games of feeling and fishing. I had to be harder and more direct.

"I scratch your back, and you scratch mine. Your delicate lies to you. She can see."

The silence that followed was taut as a stretched rubber band waiting to pop when you least expected it to. Not me, though.

Then his voice came back sharper.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Your salvation," I said simply. I let that sit for a second before continuing forward.
"Confirm it, and then you owe me one."

He let out a harsh breath.

"I do not believe you one bit."

"Then do not," I replied. "But assuming I am telling the truth, ask me what would I want in return?"

He hesitated. "What would you want?"

"I just want the delicate to answer the questions that I have. That is all."

The line went quiet again.

Then he spoke. His voice was tight now. He was trying his best to act above it and be controlled. He was none of those things. A weakling through and through.

"If this bitch..." He stopped mid-sentence. "Give me a minute."

I heard shuffling, followed by movement, and then voices in the background.

It sounded like arguing.

His voice rose. Sharp and angry. I could not make out the exact words, but the tone was clear.

Then I heard a woman scream.

"I am sorry!"

Her voice was high and quite panicked. Which told me that my gamble had paid off well.

"Oh, your goal was to keep pretending to be useless so you would be abandoned right? Right?"

Mateo's voice came through clearer now. Loud enough that I could hear every word.

"Well, that is over. Take the phone and answer the man's questions."

There was more shuffling, and it only ended when a different voice came on the line.

It was softer and shaking. "Hello."

I smiled.

"Hello, delicate."

She did not respond.

"What you did was not very kind," I continued. "And I must assure you that you picked the wrong side to side with because it is only hell from here for you."

I paused.

"But I can help you. I can alleviate your suffering. But you need to give me what I need."

Her breathing came through the speaker. Uneven and frightened.

"Who are you?" she asked. "And what do you need?"

"When your services were asked of in Skollrend, what did you see?"

She hesitated.

"I..."

"And please do not lie to me, or we are done here, and you can go back to living your personal hell."

She let out a shaky breath.

"I saw a woman, and it blinded me as I said."

I frowned.

"We paid you extra in regards to checking what happened at the scene of the accident. Concerning a certain blue light."

The pause that followed was wickedly empty. I had her right where I wanted.

"I did not see much. I was blinded when I tried to look into the woman who did it. All I saw was a..."

She stopped.

My jaw tightened. "What?"

"I am not sure. What I saw was a dungeon and a man."

A man?

"What does that have to do with the assassin?" I asked.

"I do not know. Memories are hard to take in."

I forced myself to stay calm.

"What was she? You should know that much."

"I do not know."

My grip on the phone tightened.

"You are giving me nothing."

"I know she was not a witch," she said quickly. "But I do not know. I swear."

I took a slow breath.

"Why did you hide the fact that she healed you? Fia. That is."

She went quiet.

Then softly she said, "Because she asked me to."

I did not quite believe her.

"Did you get anything from the Omega herself? Healing you meant she touched you. What did you see?"

I leaned against the wall.

"And before you lie to protect a stranger, think about yourself first. Because I know a little something, and your truth had better match that little something."

She exhaled shakily.

"It was vague. A memory in a memory. It was a dungeon, and someone... someone with her likeness was being experimented on by the man. The man I saw in the assassin's own memories."

I straightened.

"What?"

My mind raced.

"And this man. Do you by chance know who it is?"

"No."

I let out a harsh breath.

"Oh, really. Another lie?"

"No... Wait..."

She paused.

"I remember. I have plenty of work opportunities, and all memories blend into a big mess. But I remember... I remember!"

"Speak it."

"Va.... Va... Valentine."

The name landed exactly where I needed it to.

I laughed.

It came out sharp and satisfied.

"Ha."

Perfect.

That confirmed my theory completely. Enough to build a case at least.

"Thank you," I said. "You have been useful."

Her voice came back immediately. Desperate and frayed, like something tearing apart at the seams.

"Now keep your word. Help me. I cannot stay here."

I tilted my head slightly. "In what world does that seem fair? You are partly the reason I am in hell myself."

It became so silent you could almost hear a pin drop.

Then her voice broke.

"No. You promised! You lying bastard!!!"

I ended the call.

The screen went dark.

I stared at it for a moment. Then I opened the call log and deleted the entry.

That was how it was supposed to be now. Clean and simple with no trace back to me. Then I called a random number and let that one sit in.

I turned and walked back toward where I had left Elara.

She was still sitting against the wall. Her head was tilted back now. Staring at the ceiling.

I stopped in front of her and held out the phone.

"Thank you."

She looked up. Then reached out and took it from my hand without a word.

I glanced toward the window at the end of the hall.

The light outside was fading. The sky had gone from gold to deep orange. Soon it would be completely dark.

"It is getting late," I said. "So... goodnight."

She nodded slowly.

"Goodnight."

I turned and walked away.

My mind was already moving ahead. Sorting through what I had just learned. Cataloging it. Filing it away.

Valentine had experimented on someone with Fia's likeness.

That meant Fia was connected to his work. Either directly or through family.

Either way, it gave me exactly what I needed.

Proof.

Or at least the foundation for proof.

The rest I could build, and goddess, I was a good builder.

I reached the guest wing and found an empty room. The door was unlocked. So I pushed it open and stepped inside.

The space was simple, just a bed, a dresser, and a small window that looked out onto the courtyard.

I closed the door behind me, slid the lock into place, and let the quiet settle.

For a moment, I just stood there, staring at the bed.

It was solid, a heavy wooden frame that looked like it had been built to stay exactly where it was, but I knew better.

I stepped forward, braced my hands against the edge, and pulled.

The legs dragged across the floor with a harsh scrape that cut through the silence.

I winced at the sound but kept going. Dragging it away from the wall until there was enough space to see what was underneath.

A rug lay across the floor, plain and unremarkable, the kind of thing people stepped over without a second thought.

I knelt and rolled it back.

The stone beneath was smooth, almost polished, clean in a way that felt deliberate.

All except for one section.

There, just off-center, was a small latch, easy to miss unless you already knew it was there.

I slipped my fingers under it and pulled.

The panel lifted with a low, reluctant shift of stone.

Darkness waited beneath.

So also, a passage.

This was the same passage built years ago, one of several that ran beneath the estate, linking rooms through secret routes and hidden paths that let you move without being seen.

I lowered myself into the opening, my feet finding the smooth surface almost at once.

There was no ladder, only polished stone slanting steeply downward.

A slide, if you would.

I let go.

Gravity took me immediately, pulling me down faster than I expected as the walls blurred on either side and cool air rushed hard against my face.

By the time the slope began to level, I was already bracing myself.

I came to a stop at the bottom, steadying my balance before straightening.

Then I looked around.

The passage stretched in both directions, narrow and dark, lit only by faint cracks of light filtering down from above.

I turned left and started walking, my footsteps echoing softly as the sound carried farther than it should have.

The air was colder down here, damp against my skin, thick with the smell of earth and old stone.

At the first junction, I turned right, then left again without slowing.

The layout was still clear in my mind, every twist and turn fixed in place from years of use.

I had walked these paths more times than I could count.

The section I needed came into view soon enough, marked by a narrow shaft that led upward.

I reached for the wall and began to climb.

The handholds were rough and uneven, forcing my fingers to grip tight as I pulled myself higher, careful not to slip.

At the top, I felt the edge of the panel.

I pushed against it slowly, just enough to open a narrow gap.

Muted light spilled through the dark.

Ronan's chambers.

Chapter 407: King Lear and Cordelia 2

ALDRIC

The room beyond was dark and still.

Empty.

Good.

I eased the panel open the rest of the way and pulled myself up, the cold floor meeting my feet as I stepped into the room.

For a moment, I just stood there, letting my eyes adjust.

Nothing had changed.

The bed was unmade, sheets twisted as if he had left in a hurry. Clothes hung loosely over a chair. A glass of water sat untouched on the nightstand.

It felt like he might walk back in at any moment.

I moved to the dresser and pulled open the top drawer.

There were shirts there, folded neatly and pressed.

I reached in, took one, and ran the fabric between my fingers.

It was soft and clean but had been used repeatedly.

It would do.

I folded it again and tucked it under my arm before turning back toward the hidden panel.

Lowering myself down, I pulled it closed above me and dropped back into the shaft, descending carefully until my feet found the passage floor.

Darkness stretched ahead once more.

I started walking.

My mind had already moved on.

I needed a witch, someone discreet, someone who would not ask questions, someone capable of a spirit summoning.

Ronan was dead and would have already been shamefully buried already.

But that didn't mean he was gone.

Spirits held on to things. Knowledge, memories, the kind of information the living could no longer reach.

If I could summon him, I could make him talk.

And if he talked, I would find what I was looking for.

His own fleshcraft files.

The leverage I needed against Valentine, Pauline and Fia.

Without those files, my case was built on testimony alone... On the word of a dodgy delicate who had seen fragments and most of all, on my own accusations.

That might be enough.

But it would not be certain.

The files would make it certain.

They would give me proof. Concrete. Undeniable.

And once I had that, I could move.

I could go to the supernatural council. To the royal family.

I could expose Valentine. Pauline. Fia.

All of them.

At once.

And watch everything Cian had built crumble around him.

When I reached the main passage again, I slowed to a stop, letting my thoughts catch up with me as the silence settled in.

There were several witches I knew, some I had worked with before and others whose reputations alone were enough to make them options, but most of them were too visible, too connected, and far too likely to talk if the wrong pressure was applied.

That ruled them out almost immediately.

Still, one name remained.

A hedge witch, independent and deliberately removed from coven politics, living far beyond the edges of Skollrend territory in a small cabin near the forest where few people had reason to go.

I had gone to her once, years ago, for something minor that barely warranted the effort, yet she had handled it with a level of efficiency and discretion that had stayed with me.

She had not asked questions.

She had not spoken more than necessary.

She would work.

With that settled, I started forward again, my pace steady as the passage carried me toward the outer sections of the estate, where the tunnels thinned out and connected to the service entrances used by staff who were never meant to be seen.

Another shaft came into view, and I climbed it without hesitation, pushing open the panel at the top with practiced care.

It opened into a storage room.

Empty, as expected.

I pulled myself out, closed the panel behind me, and crossed the room in a few quiet steps before reaching for the door.

It gave way easily beneath my hand.

Beyond it, the hallway stretched out in stillness, undisturbed and silent in a way that made everything feel momentarily suspended.

I stepped into it and kept walking, neither hurried nor cautious, because there was no need for either.

No one stopped me.

No one questioned me.

I was Gabriel now, and that alone was enough.

Trusted, believed, welcomed back without resistance.

A victim returned.

I could move freely now, and the absence of resistance felt almost unreal as I crossed the remaining distance to the main entrance and pushed through the doors without hesitation.

The night air met me immediately, cool and sharp against my skin, filling my lungs as I stepped outside and let it steady me.

For a moment, I just breathed it in.

Then I started forward, my path already set as I moved toward the edge of the grounds, toward the forest waiting beyond, toward the witch who would make the rest of this possible.

The shirt tucked under my arm felt heavier than it should have, not because of its weight, but because of what it meant and what it would allow me to do.

It was worth it.

Ronan's spirit would tell me what I needed to know, and once he did, there would be nothing left out of reach.

The files, the proof, the leverage, all of it would fall into place exactly as I needed.

Everything.

Everything I needed to burn them all.

A smile found its way onto my face as I walked, slow and certain, because for the first time since this began, I could see the shape of what came next.

The game wasn't over.

It was just beginning.

I reached the training grounds and slowed to a stop at the edge, where the open stretch of land gave way to the forest beyond.

It loomed ahead, dark and dense, the trees packed tightly enough to swallow most of the moonlight before it could touch the ground.

Somewhere in there, Mourning Moon had taken root.

Cian had made sure of it, planting it himself and letting it spread through sections of the woods until entire paths became inaccessible to anyone who did not know how to move through it.

I did.

Or at least, I knew enough.

That was all I needed.

I adjusted the shirt tucked beneath my arm, securing my grip before stepping forward.

Then I heard footsteps behind me.

"Alpha Gabriel?"

I stopped.

The voice was female. Young too and too familiar.

For a brief moment, everything in me stilled before I turned, slow and deliberate, already shifting my posture as my arm moved instinctively, angling the shirt further out of sight.

Elara stood a few feet away.

She was dressed for training, loose pants and a fitted shirt, her hair pulled back in a way that left her face fully visible beneath the muted glow of the night.

I blinked once, more out of reflex than surprise.

What was she doing here? What was she dressed for?

"Oh," I said, letting the word come lightly as if I had not expected to see anyone at all.
"Elara. You are not asleep."

She shook her head.

"I wanted to shift," she said. "To get my mind off things."

I nodded, easing my expression into something that passed for understanding.

"Yeah," I replied. "Me too."

She stepped closer.

Not enough to crowd me, but enough that I could feel the shift in her attention as her eyes flicked, quick and precise, to my arm, to the way I was holding it, before lifting back to my face.

She had noticed.

Of course she had.

"I also wanted to ask," she said, her voice slower now, more careful. "Is there a reason you called me Ela?"

The question settled between us.

My chest tightened, not from panic, but from the sharp awareness of a mistake I had not even realized I made.

The name had slipped out too easily.

A habit that was not supposed to belong to me.

I let a brief pause stretch, just enough to seem thoughtful rather than caught, before tilting my head slightly.

"Ah," I said. "Your father used to call you that, didn't he?"

She nodded.

"Yeah. He did."

A faint crease formed between her brows.

"It was just... strange hearing you of all people say it."

I gave a small shrug, keeping it easy, almost dismissive.

"I must have picked it up from him," I said. "He kept me locked up long enough. Some things were bound to stick."

Her expression softened at that, the tension easing just enough to make the lie believable.

"I guess that makes sense."

For a moment, it seemed like that would be the end of it.

Then she paused.

And I saw it happen.

The shift.

Her gaze sharpened again, the softness draining out of it as something more deliberate took its place.

"What about my password?" she asked.

This time, I did not have the luxury of a delayed reaction.

My eyes flicked to hers, sharper than before, the movement brief but impossible to take back.

"How did you guess that?"

Chapter 408: King Lear and Cordelia 3

ALDRIC

"I suppose you've already figured it out," I began, my tone measured, almost gentle. "Your father and I—"

"No."

The interruption came clean and absolute, slicing through whatever I had intended to say next.

Her voice had changed, stripped of hesitation and sharpened into something resolute, something that left no room for doubt.

"You're him," she said, her gaze locking onto mine with unsettling clarity. "You're him."

I stilled, not because I was caught off guard, but because there was no longer any reason to pretend otherwise.

"Don't insult me by pretending this is anything else."

There it was. Certainty.

The mask, carefully constructed over time, slipped away without resistance. I let the concern drain from my expression, let the warmth I had worn like a disguise dissolve into something colder, something far more honest.

"So," I asked, my voice lowering as I studied her, "did you follow me out here, or was this stroke of insight purely instinct?"

She did not even acknowledge the question.

"Oh my goddess," she breathed, her voice barely above a whisper now, though the horror in it rang louder than any shout. "You are genuinely evil."

Her eyes widened as if seeing me for the first time, as if the man she thought she knew had finally been peeled away to reveal what had always been underneath.

"How are you doing this?" she demanded, her voice trembling despite her effort to steady it. "How are you controlling him, wearing him like this?"

I tilted my head slightly, considering her, though not her question.

"Does the answer truly matter to you, Elara," I asked, "or are you simply trying to delay the realization of what this means for you?"

"You took his life," she snapped, anger rising now to meet the fear, "and now you've taken his body as well. Do you even hear yourself? Do you understand how sick that is? Because I promise you, once this comes out, everyone else will."

A smile tugged at my lips, slow and unrestrained, and I allowed it to settle fully this time.

It felt... relieving.

"We are quite far from the main estate," I said calmly, gesturing faintly to the empty stretch of land around us, "and you did not tell anyone you were coming here, which I know because I raised you and have always been intimately familiar with your tendency to act first and consider consequences later."

A soft laugh slipped from me, quiet but genuine.

"In fact, I should thank myself for not correcting that particular flaw of yours. Had you been more cautious, more disciplined, I might have found myself exposed far sooner."

Her expression twisted, revulsion overtaking whatever disbelief remained.

"You would kill me?" she asked, though the question lacked the defiance she likely intended.

I lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug.

"That depends entirely on you," I replied. "Would you expose me?"

She took a step back, subtle but telling, her body stiffening as if instinct alone was urging her to put distance between us.

"No," she said quickly, too quickly, the word tumbling out before she could temper it. "I wouldn't."

We both knew it was a lie.

"But what do you plan to do now?" she pressed, as if reclaiming some measure of control through the question.

"Revenge," I answered simply, the word settling between us with deliberate weight. "Nothing more, nothing less."

"Revenge for what?" she challenged, her brows drawing together. "Everything that happened to you was the result of your own actions. That isn't injustice, it's consequence. Some would call it karma."

Something sharp flared in my chest at that, sudden and unwelcome.

"You would take their side?" I asked, my voice tightening despite myself.

She let out a breath that sounded almost disbelieving.

"Look at yourself," she said, gesturing toward me as though the evidence spoke for itself. "Look at what you're doing and tell me this is even remotely normal."

"I was prepared to give you more than this," I said, my tone hardening. "Power, Elara. Real power."

"No," she said immediately, shaking her head with firm conviction. "If that had ever been your intention, you would not have chosen this path to achieve it. You kept secrets even. I had a whole brother all this time, and he knew. He knew the real you. This bullshit might have worked on him. But not me! And besides, we already have more

than enough. I am a Skollrend Luna, and you were an Alpha. What more could we possibly need?"

The word *were* lingered, though it was the one she chose next that struck deeper.

"Papa."

It landed wrong, grating against something I had long since buried.

"We were spares," I snapped, the volume of my voice rising before I could restrain it.

"Exactly," she shot back, her own voice rising to meet mine. "Spared from the burden, spared from the constant weight of expectation and responsibility. That was a privilege, not a punishment, and you know it as well as I do."

"No," I said, my jaw tightening. "I had ambition, something you clearly lack. If you did not, you would have seen the opportunity for what it was instead of clinging to complacency like your mother always did. That is what drove her away—my refusal to remain small."

Elara's expression hardened, any lingering hesitation now gone entirely.

"Trying to murder your sister-in-law and your nephew, imprisoning your own family, and orchestrating a coup against your bloodline is what you call ambition?" she asked, her voice steady despite the fury beneath it. "If you can say that out loud and still believe it, then you are beyond reason. You are not driven; you are unwell, and that is exactly why she left. She tried to take me with her, and I stayed because I believed you. I thought she was the unstable one. I was wrong. Goddess, I was so wrong."

Her gaze did not waver.

"But it ends here."

I took a step closer, deliberately closing the space she had tried to create.

"You are standing alone with me," I said quietly, letting the implication settle before continuing. "Given that reality, do you truly believe provoking me is the wisest course of action, or would it not serve you better to reconsider your position and choose your words more carefully?"

She did not retreat this time.

Instead, she lifted her chin slightly, meeting my gaze with something steadier than before, something that refused to bend.

"You won't kill me," she said, her voice no longer rushed or uncertain but deliberate, almost calm, as though she had already weighed the possibility and dismissed it. "For all your cruelty and all your delusion, there is still one line you cannot bring yourself to cross, and we both know it."

"Morrigan, Cian, even Gabriel," I said, each name placed carefully, each one carrying its own weight. "None of them were spared."

Her expression faltered, just slightly.

"You truly believe sharing my blood grants you protection?" I continued, watching as that certainty in her eyes began to fracture. "That you are somehow exempt from the same decisions I have already made?"

I let the silence stretch, deliberate and suffocating, giving her just enough time to follow the thought to its end.

To understand.

"You are far more out of your depth than you realize, Elara."

This time, the change was unmistakable.

It was not loud or dramatic, but it was there in the way her breathing shifted, in the way her gaze flickered past me as though calculating distance, escape, and most importantly, her survival. The defiance did not disappear, but something colder slipped in beside it, something instinctive that no amount of pride could silence.

For the first time since she arrived, she looked at me and saw not her father, not a man she could reason with or challenge, but something else entirely.

And she believed it.

Her body moved before her mind could catch up.

She turned and ran.

Chapter 409: King Lear and Cordelia 4

ALDRIC

She moved fast.

Faster than I expected, fast enough that for a fraction of a second I simply watched her go, registering the sudden shift from defiance to raw instinct.

Her feet struck the ground hard and unevenly, her breath already breaking apart into sharp, panicked bursts as she ran, no longer looking back, no longer pretending she had any control over this.

Then she screamed.

The sound tore through the night, high and piercing, carrying far beyond the clearing, a desperate call that might have meant something if we were anywhere else.

But we were not.

I bent without thinking, my hand closing around the first thing it found. A stone, small enough to grip, rough against my palm, heavy enough to matter.

I did not hesitate.

I threw it.

It cut cleanly through the air and struck the back of her head with a dull, sickening thud.

Her scream snapped off mid-sound.

For a moment, it looked as though the world had tilted beneath her feet. Her body faltered, her balance collapsing as her hands flew up too late to catch what had already happened. She pitched forward, barely managing to break her fall as she hit the ground on her hands and knees.

Her head jerked, disoriented.

Slowly, almost blindly, she reached back, her fingers brushing over the point of impact. When her hand came away, it glistened dark in the low light, slick with blood that had already begun to spill.

The stone slipped free from her hair and dropped beside her.

She turned, and our eyes met.

By then, I was already moving.

She tried to rise, tried to force her body back into motion, but whatever rhythm she had found before was gone now, broken by pain and shock.

It did not matter.

I closed the distance before she could take more than a step.

My weight hit her from behind and drove her down into the ground, the impact knocking the air from her lungs in a harsh, startled sound. My hands found her throat almost immediately, and my fingers got to work immediately by locking into place as though they had always belonged there.

She reacted instantly.

Her body bucked beneath me as she twisted and valiantly fought, with her hands clawing at my wrists as she tried to pry me off. Her mouth opened, desperate for air... for sound... but all that came out was a strangled gasp that never fully formed.

I tightened my grip.

Her nails bit into my skin, sharp and relentless, tearing through flesh in a frantic attempt to break free.

Then her leg came up.

She was fast and precise. I saw myself in that as her knee drove straight into my groin.

The pain detonated through me, white-hot and blinding, forcing the air from my lungs in a broken exhale, and my grip faltered just enough to give her an opportunity.

It was all she needed.

She shoved hard, twisting out from under me as I recoiled, and scrambled away, dragging in ragged breaths as she forced herself back to her feet.

I doubled over for a moment, the world narrowing around the pulse of pain while my body fought to recover.

By the time I straightened, she was already running again.

Not far. Not nearly far enough.

I lunged.

This time, there was no hesitation or even miscalculation. I hit her from behind with enough force to send us both crashing to the ground.

It brought me pleasure when her body slammed forward as I came down on top of her, pinning her beneath me.

My hands found her throat again.

"You are such a disappointment," I said, my voice rough, strained from the lingering pain and the effort of holding her down. "No drive, no vision, nothing that even begins to resemble what you could have been."

She did not stop fighting.

Instead, she turned her head sharply and bit down.

Her teeth sank deep into the flesh between my thumb and forefinger, hard enough to draw an immediate, sharp hiss from me as pain flared again, different but just as immediate. I yanked my hand back on instinct.

She twisted beneath me, using the opening, her fists coming up in quick, desperate strikes that connected with my face once, then again, each hit fueled by panic and adrenaline.

Her legs followed.

She was kicking hard, and she was relentless with it, too.

Her heel slammed into my ribs, then my stomach, each impact driving the air from me in uneven bursts until I was forced sideways, my hold on her breaking completely.

She did not stop.

Even as I hit the ground, she kept going, her kicks landing again and again, faster now, harder too, as though she needed to make sure I stayed down.

I curled inward, instinctively protecting what I could, riding out the blows, and waiting.

Then Gabriel surged, his presence forcing its way forward with sudden strength as he pushed against me and clawed for control, for breath, for even the smallest piece of what he had lost.

And for a moment, I let him take it.

Not out of mercy, but because I needed him to.

"Please... stop," I said, my voice shifting into something softer, something fractured that did not belong to me. "Get him out of me."

Elara froze as recognition set in.

Her leg halted mid-motion while her entire body locked in place, caught between instinct and disbelief.

"Uncle Gabriel?"

Inside, he fought harder, pushing and straining as he clawed for control, desperate to reclaim what was his and hold on to the sliver I had allowed him.

It didn't last.

I forced him back down with a decisive, crushing will, sealing him away as I reclaimed every inch he had managed to take.

Then I shifted.

The change began in my hands, subtle at first but unmistakable as bone stretched and reshaped beneath skin, as nails split and gave way to claws that were curved outward, sharp, dark, and made for something far more purposeful.

She barely had time to react.

I caught her leg and yanked hard, sending her crashing onto her back as the impact knocked the breath from her in a broken gasp that never quite became sound.

Before she could recover, I dragged her closer.

And then I struck.

The first cut opened cleanly across her throat, the second dug deeper with deliberate precision, and by the third, there was no restraint left in the motion.

Blood surged out immediately, hot and heavy, spraying across my face and chest as it spilled over my hands and soaked into everything it touched.

Chapter 410: Fight like a girl

ALDRIC

She made a sound that came out wet and broken, something that barely resembled anything human.

Her hands flew to her throat as she pressed hard against the torn flesh, trying to force it closed even though the damage had already gone too far.

The blood did not slow.

It pushed through her fingers in heavy streams and kept spilling no matter how tightly she pressed.

She tried to get up, her body jerking forward as her legs strained against the ground, but whatever strength she had left was fading too quickly to hold her up.

She was not healing fast enough.

I straightened and looked around until something caught my eye.

A large stone sat half buried in the dirt, its edge rough where the earth had held it in place.

I walked over and pulled it free, then tested the weight in my hands as it settled, heavy and solid, more than enough to finish this.

When I turned back, she was still moving.

She dragged herself forward with shaking arms, each inch gained with effort as blood marked her path behind her.

I walked up behind her and raised the stone, then brought it down hard across her back.

The sound came sharp and immediate as bone gave way under the impact.

She tried to scream, but it broke apart into a strained rasp that never fully formed.

Her body went slack after that, her arms collapsing beneath her as the last of her strength gave out.

I let the stone drop beside her, then reached down and grabbed her shoulder before turning her over onto her back.

Her eyes found mine at once.

They were wide with fear, fully aware now of what was coming.

Her mouth opened, and blood bubbled up as she struggled to speak.

"Papa," she whispered, the word thin and broken as it slipped through what remained of her voice.

"Please."

I picked up the stone again and lifted it above my head, holding it there for a brief moment as everything around us seemed to still.

Then I brought it down.

The impact crushed through her skull with a final, sickening force, and the bone gave way as blood burst outward and spread across my hands and the ground beneath her.

Her body jerked once, then went completely still.

I stood there for a moment as my breathing came hard and uneven, my chest rising and falling while the aftermath settled around me.

Blood covered my hands and stretched up my arms, staining my chest in dark streaks that had not yet begun to dry.

I looked down at her, or at what was left of her, and even though I knew exactly who lay there, the face no longer resembled anything I could recognize.

Bone had given way beneath the force, and flesh had torn where it should have held.

I released the stone.

It slipped from my grip and hit the ground beside her head with a dull, final sound that seemed louder than it should have been.

I crouched as the stillness settled in, forcing myself to act before anything else could take root. There were trees a short distance away, thick enough to break the line of sight from the open clearing, and I moved toward them before hesitation could catch up with me.

I dragged her by the arm and took the stone as well.

Her body resisted at first, catching against the ground, then gave way as I pulled harder, leaving a dark trail behind that I immediately regretted. I stopped, looked at it, then shifted course, choosing a path where the earth was softer and the marks would not hold as clearly.

It took longer than I wanted.

By the time I reached the trees, my breathing had deepened again, though not from effort alone. I let go of her and stood still for a second, listening, making sure there was nothing but the quiet of the night around me.

Then I went back for the leaves.

Dry ones lay scattered beneath the trees, brittle and light, and I gathered them in armfuls before dropping them over her body, covering her from head to toe until the shape beneath began to blur. It was not enough, so I added more, pulling from nearby patches, breaking branches, dragging whatever I could find until she disappeared beneath it.

Even then, I did not stop.

I crouched again and scooped up loose earth, mixing it with sand where I could find it, then spread it over the darker patches of ground, working it in with my hands until the blood lost its shine and sank into something dull and indistinct.

I moved outward from where she had fallen, covering the trail as best as I could, smearing, breaking, blending until there was no clear line left to follow.

The stone slipped from my hand again and landed beside the disturbed earth with a dull, final sound that seemed louder than it should have been.

Only when I was done did I step back.

My chest tightened again, and my breathing faltered in a way that had nothing to do with the fight, nothing to do with the effort it had taken to end her.

This was something else.

Something I refused to examine too closely.

I lowered my gaze to my hands.

Gabriel's hands.

They were soaked through, stained with blood that had not yet cooled.

Her blood.

My daughter's blood.

For a moment, I did nothing but stand there with that realization pressing in, threatening to take shape in a way I did not want to allow.

Then I forced myself to breathe.

Forced myself to think.

Forced myself to move past it before it could become something I would not be able to control.

She had made her choice.

She had chosen them.

She had chosen to stand against me, and worse, she had been ready to expose everything I had worked for.

I had done what was necessary.

That was the truth I held onto.

That was the only version of this I would allow to exist.

I had no choice.

I turned away from the body and began to walk, leaving her where she lay as I moved toward the forest and the path that still remained ahead of me.

I found the shirt and tucked it beneath my arm, happy that it was somehow untouched by everything that had just happened.

It was what I needed the most right now.

Elara had been collateral.

Necessary.

Unavoidable.

I did not slow.

The forest rose ahead, dark and silent as it waited, its shadows stretching outward as though inviting me back into something deeper and less forgiving.

I stepped into it without turning around.

I kept moving.

Each step carried me further into the dark, away from what I had left behind and toward what still mattered.

Toward the witch.

Toward revenge.

Toward everything I had fought for, no matter what it had cost me to get here.