

To ruin an Omega

#Chapter 411: Happiness is a wine - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 411: Happiness is a wine

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CIAN

The next morning, sunlight filtered through the curtains, warming the room. I woke with Fia still tucked against me, her breathing soft and even. My hand remained on her stomach, protective even in sleep.

She stirred, turning to face me. Her eyes fluttered open, and a sleepy smile curved her lips.

"Morning," she murmured.

"Morning." I kissed her forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Good. Really good, actually." She stretched, then winced slightly.

"Sore?"

"A little." Her cheeks flushed. "But in a good way."

I grinned. "Good."

We took our time getting ready. Fia showered while I checked my phone for any urgent pack business. Nothing that couldn't wait until after breakfast.

When we finally made it downstairs, the dining room was already set. The smell of bacon and fresh bread filled the air. My mother sat at the table, a cup of tea in her hands.

Her eyes lit up when she saw us walk in together. The knowing smile on her face told me she'd noticed our moods immediately.

"Happy night, I see," Morrigan said, her tone teasing.

Fia's blush deepened, but she was smiling. She glanced at me, then back at my mother.

"Actually," Fia said, her voice bright with barely contained excitement, "there's something we want to tell you."

Morrigan set down her tea. "Oh?"

"I'm pregnant."

The words hung in the air for a heartbeat. Then my mother's face transformed. Pure joy radiated from her as she stood up so quickly her chair scraped against the floor.

"Oh, Fia!" She rushed around the table and pulled Fia into a tight embrace. "Oh my goodness, this is wonderful! This is the best news!"

I watched them, warmth spreading through my chest. My mother pulled back, holding Fia at arm's length, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"How far along? When did you find out? How are you feeling? Do you need anything?"

Fia laughed. "Not very far. Just a few weeks. I found out yesterday, and I'm feeling okay so far."

"This is such a blessing." Morrigan pulled her in for another hug. "Such a gift."

We sat down at the table as the Omegas began bringing in breakfast. Platters of eggs, bacon, sausages, fresh fruit, and pastries were laid out. My mother couldn't stop beaming.

"I hope it's a girl," Morrigan said, reaching for the teapot. "A sweet little girl to spoil."

"I hope so too," Fia agreed, her eyes sparkling.

"It's a boy," I said confidently.

They both looked at me.

"You don't know that," Fia said.

"I know."

"You can't possibly know."

"Alpha instinct."

Fia rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling. My mother laughed, pouring tea for all of us.

I scanned the room as the Omegas continued serving. Something felt off. I counted the familiar faces, and then the other seats, checking who was present.

Of course, Aldric and Ronan were missing. Now that they were dead, and Uncle Gabriel was not present yet. But I had a feeling he was adjusting to his newfound freedom and would come around. The thing was... Elara was missing.

I frowned. Mostly because Elara did not miss a breakfast gathering when she was around, and the glaring aspect was what she was going through right now with her father's execution by my hand.

I was worried for her.

I caught the eye of a sentinel standing near the door and gave him the signal to come. He approached immediately.

"Yes, Alpha?"

"Where is Elara?"

"I haven't seen her this morning, Alpha."

Unease prickled at the back of my neck. "Go check on her. Make sure she's alright."

"Yes, Alpha." He left quickly.

I hated that the worst thought kept piling inside my head. But I did my best not to think the worst.

I turned back to the table. Mother was still talking, her hands moving animatedly as she discussed nursery ideas with Fia. I integrated myself into their bubbly conversation to get rid of the gnawing, eerie feeling that did not leave me.

"We could convert the room next to yours," my mother said. "It has wonderful natural light. Perfect for a nursery."

"That sounds lovely," Fia said.

"And we'll need to start thinking about colors. Neutral tones would be safest if we don't know the gender yet, but if it's a girl, I'm thinking soft lavenders or creams with gold accents. If it's a boy—"

"It's a boy," I interjected.

Fia kicked me lightly under the table. I grinned at her.

The sentinel returned, but instead of Elara with him, he carried a folded piece of paper. My stomach dropped.

"Alpha." He approached and handed me the letter. "I found this on her bed."

I unfolded it, my eyes scanning the neat handwriting.

Cian,

I need to leave for a while. I can't explain everything right now, but I need space to process what's happened. Please don't worry about me. I'll be safe.

I'm sorry I didn't say goodbye in person. I couldn't face it.

Thank you for everything you've tried to do for me.

Elara

I read it twice, my jaw tightening. This didn't sit right with me. Elara wouldn't just leave without telling anyone, not after everything.

I pulled out my phone and dialed her number. It went straight to voicemail.

"Damn it," I muttered.

"What's wrong?" Fia asked, her brow furrowing.

"Elara's gone. She left a letter."

Morrigan's expression shifted to concern. "Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

I showed them the letter. My mother read it, her lips pressing into a thin line.

I looked back at the sentinel. "Check with the guards at the gate. Find out what time she left and if she said where she was going."

"Yes, Alpha." He hurried off again.

I set the letter down and rubbed my hand over my face. My appetite had vanished.

"I'm sure she's fine," Morrigan said gently. "What she went through with her father, Aldric, what she's still going through now, it's incredibly heavy. It's not easy to come out of something like that."

"She begged me to spare him, you know," I said quietly. "After everything he did to her, to all of us, she still begged me to punish him but keep him alive."

Fia reached over and took my hand. Her fingers squeezed mine.

"You couldn't have done that," she said softly.

"I know." I looked at her. "That man was dangerous. Keeping him alive would have put everyone at risk."

"Then you did what you had to do."

"I just hope she's given grace," I said. "I don't want our people making her a monster for her father's sins. Our people can be very prejudiced. Very stuck up about bloodlines, legacies, and even inherited sin."

"You won't allow it," Fia said with certainty.

"I won't."

Morrigan nodded in agreement. "Elara is not her father. The pack and others will see that in time."

I wanted to believe that. I needed to believe that.

Before I could respond, the dining room door opened, and Uncle Gabriel walked in, looking more rested than he probably had in weeks. The healing had done its job. His color was better, and his movements were steadier.

"Uncle," I said, standing.

"Cian." He smiled warmly. "Morrigan. And you must be... Fia." His eyes landed on her with obvious gratitude. "I was hoping to find you all here."

My mother stood and embraced him. "You look well."

"I feel well. Thanks to Fia." He turned to her. "I wanted to thank you properly. What you did for me, the healing, I can't express how grateful I am."

Fia stood, looking slightly embarrassed. "You don't need to thank me. I'm just glad you're better."

"I do need to thank you." Gabriel's voice was sincere. "You saved my life. That's not something I take lightly."

"Please, join us for breakfast," Morrigan said, gesturing to the table.

Gabriel sat down, accepting a cup of coffee from one of the Omegas. His eyes swept over all of us, lingering on the warmth in the room.

"You all seem in good spirits this morning," he observed.

Morrigan practically bounced in her seat. "Well, there is a reason for that. We have wonderful news after all. Fia and Cian are expecting."

Gabriel's eyebrows shot up. His gaze moved between Fia and me, then a genuine smile broke across his face.

"That's incredible news. Congratulations to you both."

"Thank you," Fia said.

"A new generation," Gabriel mused. "The pack will be thrilled."

I thought about Elara again. About the letter. About her phone being off. The timing of her disappearance felt wrong, but I couldn't pinpoint why.

"You seem distracted," Gabriel said, looking at me.

"Elara left this morning. She didn't tell anyone. She just left a note. It is bothering me a little."

Gabriel's expression grew serious. "Left? Where did she go?"

"We don't know yet. I've sent someone to check with the gate guards."

"That's concerning."

"It is."

Morrigan touched Gabriel's arm. "We were just saying that what she's been through is difficult. She might need time to process everything."

"Perhaps," Gabriel said slowly. "But the timing is odd. Don't you think?"

I agreed. The timing was very odd.

The sentinel returned, slightly out of breath.

"Alpha," he said, bowing his head quickly, "the guards reported no movement at the gates. She didn't leave the grounds."

Something in my chest tightened.

"What do you mean, she didn't leave?" I asked, my voice quieter than it should have been.

"They were certain, Alpha. No one like Elara passed through the gates. She did not leave so that means..." he hesitated, then steadied himself, "she's still somewhere within the estate. Or close to it."

Fia's grip on my hand tightened, but this time, it felt different. She was tense.

A cold weight settled low in my gut. If she hadn't left...

Then where was she?!?

I rose slowly, the chair scraping against the floor, the sound sharp in the heavy silence. Every instinct in me, every piece of training, every lesson carved into bone and blood, surged to the surface at once.

"Get every sentinel in the pack," I said, my voice cutting clean through the room.

The sentinel straightened immediately. "Alpha?"

"Scour the estate," I continued, already moving, already thinking ten steps ahead. "Every corridor, every room, every blind spot. I want the surrounding grounds covered as well. Forest line, training fields, outer walls. No gaps should be left open."

"Yes, Alpha."

"Move!"

Chapter 412: Unethical 1

ALDRIC

The next morning had brought with it a sharp clarity that had been absent during the messier hours of the night. I had taken care of what needed doing, and now I sat at the edge of consciousness inside this borrowed body, waiting to see if anyone would be foolish enough to stumble across what I had hidden.

The files were out there now. What needed to be out there anyway. They were now distributed... delivered. Each one was placed exactly where it would do the most damage.

I had gone to the witch first. Found her in that filthy hovel she called a sanctuary, surrounded by candles and bones and the kind of desperate mysticism that only the weak clung to. She had tried. I would give her that much. She had reached into the great beyond with trembling hands and pulled Ronan's spirit back just long enough for me to get what I needed.

He had fought me.

Even dead, even stripped of his body and his power, Ronan had tried to resist because he had clarity now, and he hated me. But the dead had no leverage. The dead had no strength. And when the witch tightened her grip and forced him to speak, he gave me what I wanted.

The cabin.

He had hidden his version of the files at the cabin.

The witch had been less useful when it came to the rune. I had asked her about it. About what Fia had done when she healed Gabriel's body. About whether it could be fixed or reversed, or at least stabilized enough to keep me in control permanently.

She had examined it. Poked at it with her limited talents. Muttered under her breath in that way hedge witches did when they were trying to seem more competent than they actually were.

In the end, she told me what I already suspected.

She was not talented enough to undo what Fia had done. The healing had interfered with the rune in ways even she could not unravel. The magic was tangled now. Unstable. And fixing it would require someone with far more skill than she possessed.

The Original witch who had made the rune for me in the first place could have done it. But going to her would require money. A lot of money. The kind of money I did not have access to without drawing the wrong kind of attention.

My accounts were probably frozen. My assets were probably seized. Everything I had built over decades was now in the hands of people who thought I was dead, dead, dead.

I could not go back to any of it without revealing myself. And revealing myself before I was ready would mean losing everything.

So I had settled for doing what was achievable. Getting the files. Distributing them. Setting the dominoes in motion, even if I could not control how they would fall.

It was not perfect.

But it was enough.

I had hitched a ride with some fool who thought he was doing a good deed for a weary traveler, and I had torn that place apart until I found them. Buried beneath the floorboards in a metal box that had rusted at the edges. Inside were copies. Backups. Everything Ronan had kept as insurance against the day someone might try and succeed to silence me because they finally had enough.

I had read through them again on the way back. Scanned every page. Every name. Every detail. And that was when I found it.

The name Athena. The face too.

One of the experiments had been named Athena, and I had missed it the first time because I had been too focused on the bigger picture. Too focused on having leverage against Pauline and Valentine. But now, with time to think, with space to plan, the pieces fell into place with a clarity that was almost beautiful.

Pauline's husband had acted like a madman when he lost his toy at the time. Everyone had heard and seen it. Everyone had whispered about it. The way he tore through the estate looking for her. The way he raged when she could not be found. It had been dismissed as grief. As the irrational behavior of a man who had lost something he had obsessed over.

It had been years since it happened. But I finally understood it all. I would have. If I had taken a deep look at the files. I would have... the second I laid my eyes on Fia because of how strikingly similar she looked to this Athena.

Athena had not just been a lost pet. Athena had been one of them. One of the fleshcraft abominations. Pauline had sold the girl out of her own jealousy and insecurity.

The letter I sent him was vague. Just vague enough to destabilize his relationship with Pauline, and without revealing too much. A few carefully chosen words. A hint that someone knew what she had been hiding and was kind enough to let him know. It ended with a suggestion that his lost beloved was still alive. In Skollrend.

It would eat at him. It would make him hurt. It would turn him against Pauline, and when their marriage crumbled, it would create the kind of chaos, and with that, the legitimacy I could use.

Valentine's letter had been even more satisfying to craft.

I had included a picture of Athena. A grainy photograph pulled from the files. The kind of image that would mean nothing to most people but would send Valentine spiraling the moment he saw it.

He would recognize her. He would know what this was. A threat. And he would act.

Valentine was not the type to sit still when something threatened his carefully constructed world. He would lash out. He would make mistakes. He would become reckless in ways that would make him vulnerable.

The third letter had gone to the Lily of the Valley Alpha.

I was not close to him. Not anymore. But I had been close to his wife when she was alive. She had been my connection to the royal family since she had been Luna Princess, and through her, I had access to the kind of influence most wolves could only dream of.

Now that she was dead, I could not walk straight to the royal family and present my case. Not in this body. Not without the right leverage. The sin of fleshcraft was an abomination that demanded extermination, and I had the evidence to prove it. But I needed an intermediary. Someone who would carry my message without questioning it too closely. Someone who would see the value in what I was offering and act on it.

The Lily of the Valley Alpha and son-in-law of the royals was that person.

When he saw what I had to give him, he would want to talk. And when we talked, I would manipulate him into doing exactly what I needed.

I had considered reaching out to Hazel as well. She was about to be connected to the family now, thanks to moves I had made for her with Pauline. But it was too risky. The bitch was young, most likely idealistic. The kind of person who might ask the wrong questions or hesitate at the wrong moment.

No, the son-in-law was the better choice.

Safer. More predictable. Easier to control.

I looked back at Cian

He looked as white as a ghost. Still panicked as he was since the moment the sentinel confirmed Elara had not left through the gates. His Alpha instincts kicked in exactly as I had expected them to.

I allowed myself to think about her then.

About Elara. About the way her hands had flown to her throat when I tore it open. About how her eyes had still held something soft and pleading right up until the very end.

She had made it easy, really.

When I returned at dawn with everything in place: the files distributed and the letters sent, I had considered my options with the kind of detachment that came from knowing the outcome no longer mattered.

Taking her body back to her room to stage a hanging would have been poetic. Tragic even. The kind of thing people would whisper about for weeks. But her head had been too damaged. The skull was caved in, and the face was unrecognizable. Even if I

managed to get her back to the estate without being seen, the sheer wrongness of it would raise questions I could not afford to answer.

I had thought about throwing her from her window instead. A beautiful, heartbroken girl who could not bear the weight of her father's sins. It would have fit the narrative perfectly. People loved a tragedy like that. They would have mourned her. Pitied her. Never questioned it.

But the risk remained.

Carrying her body across the grounds, even in the dark, even with Gabriel's face, was exposure I did not need. A single person awake at the wrong time could end me. A single guard patrolling where he should not have been would kill me. It would unravel everything.

So I settled for the next best thing.

Chapter 413: Unethical 2

ALDRIC

I went back to where I had left her beneath the leaves and earth, and I made the grave deeper. Not deep enough to hide her forever, but deep enough to buy time. Enough time to let the pieces I had set in motion do their work. Enough time to get far away before anyone started asking the right questions.

I had smoothed the dirt carefully and covered it with fresh leaves, making it look like nothing more than a patch of disturbed ground in a forest full of disturbed ground. If someone found it, they would find it. But it would not be today. It would not be this week.

And by the time they did, I would be gone. Or so I thought.

"I cannot just sit here," Cian said, his voice cutting through my thoughts. "I need to join them. I need to scour the place myself."

I blinked and refocused on the room. Morrigan sat across from me, her tea forgotten. Fia had gone still beside Cian, her hand resting on his arm in a way that was meant to be grounding.

"You should calm down," Fia said gently. "I am sure nothing happened. Elara probably just needed space and went somewhere quiet to think as she prepared to leave."

"My heart is not at peace," Cian said, shaking his head. "I will go."

"Then I will join you," Fia said, already starting to rise.

"No." Morrigan's voice was firm. She set her tea down and looked at Fia with the kind of maternal authority that left no room for argument. "You should stay. You should remember you are with a child. You do not need the stress."

Fia hesitated, then sank back into her seat. Cian leaned down and kissed the top of her head, his hand lingering on her shoulder for a moment longer than necessary.

"I will be back," he said quietly.

He turned to me then, and I saw the question forming before he even opened his mouth.

"Let me join you," I said, keeping my tone light and concerned. The kind of thing a recently freed uncle would say to his nephew who was clearly spiraling.

"You should stay, Uncle Gabriel," Cian said. "Just eat and rest."

I wanted to argue. I wanted to insist. If I could get out there with him, I could steer the search away from the places that mattered. I could make sure no one got too close to the forest line. I could ensure that even if they found something, it would not be today.

But Cian was adamant.

His jaw had set in that way Alphas did when they had made up their minds, and I knew pushing further would only raise suspicion.

So I let it go.

I smiled at him with warmth, which also did the work of reassuring. The kind of smile Gabriel would have probably given.

"Of course," I said. "I understand."

Cian nodded once, then turned and left the room. The door closed behind him with a soft click, and the silence that followed felt heavier than it should have.

I sat there with Morrigan and Fia, the two of them exchanging quiet words I did not bother listening to, and I considered my options.

It would be easy to kill them both.

Morrigan first. A quick snap of the neck before she even had time to scream. Her teacup would fall. It would shatter against the floor. And in that brief moment of confusion, before Fia even registered what had happened, I could be on her.

She was pregnant, which would fuck up her common sense and make her slower. All those hormones and overwhelming empathy. It made people vulnerable. It would do the same for her. She would be more vulnerable than she had been a day ago. The instinct to protect the child would make her hesitate. It would make her second-guess. And in that hesitation, I could do whatever I wanted.

I could take my time with her if I chose to. Make it hurt. Make it last. Make it the kind of thing that would break Cian so completely that he would never recover. The thought of his face when he came back and found them both dead brought with it a flicker of satisfaction that I did not bother suppressing.

He would crumble. He would rage. He would tear the world apart looking for answers that would never come, even if he did take me and Gabriel to the afterlife in the most brutal way imaginable.

It was tempting.

So very tempting.

But then reality settled back in, cold and unwelcome.

Death hurts.

I had died once now, and that one time had been worse than anything I had experienced while alive. I still remember it clear as day. The way and manner Cian had ripped my head out in the clearing, while my own body betrayed me. I had felt every second of it. The tearing. The blood filling my lungs. The darkness creeping in while my vision narrowed to a pinpoint.

The pain did not end when the body stopped. It lingered. It clung. It followed you into whatever came next, and there was no escaping it.

No rest from it.

No mercy in it.

And I did not want to go through that again.

Not so quickly.

Not when I had just gotten back. Not when I had only just started to regain some semblance of control.

The rune was unstable. The witch had made that clear. If I died in Gabriel's body now, there was no guarantee what would *happen to my soul*, and she was not sure why I was gambling with such dangerous magic, as the magic itself, with the state of the rune now,

had the capacity to unravel completely. I might be cast out into the void with nowhere to anchor.

That fear was enough to keep my hands still.

So I smiled at them instead. I picked up my fork and took a bite of the eggs that had been sitting untouched on my plate. I made small talk. I asked Fia how she was feeling. I complimented Morrigan on the breakfast spread. I played the part of the grateful, recovering uncle who was just happy to be alive and free and sitting at a table with family.

They bought it.

Of course they did.

People always bought what they wanted to believe.

Morrigan was still talking about nursery colors when I felt it. A shift. A pull. Something deep inside the body that was not mine to control.

I had felt it before. In the moments when Gabriel pushed back. When he tried to claw his way to the surface and take back what belonged to him. But this was different.

The pull hurt because of how forceful it was.

The pull grew stronger. Sharper. It dragged at me with a force I had not anticipated, and I barely had time to brace myself before everything tilted sideways.

I tried to hold on. I tried to dig my claws into the edges of consciousness and keep myself anchored, but it was useless. Whatever this pull and move that Gabriel was making now, it was stronger than me. Stronger than the rune. Stronger than anything I had prepared for.

The last thing I heard before I lost my grip was Morrigan's voice, bright and warm and completely unaware of what was happening.

"Gabriel, are you alright? You look pale."

Then everything went dark.

And when I came back, I was not alone anymore. No... That was not it. It was the fact that I was not in the driver's seat or the one turning the wheel anymore.

Gabriel had taken over his body once again.

GABRIEL

The first thing I felt was the weight of the fork in my hand.

It took me a moment to understand what that meant. The weight. The pressure of metal against skin that belonged to me. The slight tremor in fingers I could actually feel.

I blinked, and the world sharpened around me in a way it had not done in what felt like forever, with all that had happened. I was in the dining room. The morning light streaming through the windows I recognized but had only now seen through a film of distance and horror. Morrigan was sitting across from me, her teacup raised halfway to her lips. Fia was beside her, one hand resting protectively over her stomach.

They were talking.

I could hear them clearly now. None of it came out muffled and filtered through the prison Aldric had shoved me into when he crawled inside my skull and made my body his.

This was real.

This was mine.

I had control.

The realization hit me so hard I almost dropped the fork. My heart hammered against my ribs with a violence that made my vision blur at the edges, and I had to force myself to breathe. In. Out. In. Out. The air tasted different when I was the one pulling it into my lungs instead of just watching Aldric do it.

How long had it been?

A day? Two? No... It had been a couple of days. Even at that... It had felt like weeks.

Time had fractured while I was trapped. I remembered fragments. Flashes of movement and sound that did not belong to me but happened anyway because Aldric had worn me like a coat and done whatever he wanted while I screamed inside a cage made of my own flesh.

I remembered the delicate.

The memory surfaced without warning, sharp and jagged. How could I forget that voice? That young and terrified voice. Her voice had been high and pleading when she called out to me to save her, thinking I was someone who would help her and keep my word.

But I had not been myself.

It had also not been me with Elara. I felt my stomach lurch.

No.

Not my stomach. Not my hands. Not my anything.

But I remembered it. The way her neck had felt beneath fingers that were mine but not mine. The sound she made when the air stopped reaching her lungs. The way her body went slack and heavy and wrong in a way that would never leave me, even if I lived a thousand years. When I had taken that rock and slammed it into her skull.

That was his own daughter. But he had still done it.

Aldric had killed her.

He had taken my hands and used them to snuff out her life like it meant nothing, and then he had buried her in the forest where no one would find her.

It was then it set in.

The fork slipped from my grip and clattered against the plate.

Morrigan looked up, her expression shifting from easy conversation to concern in the space of a heartbeat.

"Gabriel, are you alright? You look pale."

I opened my mouth to answer, but the words tangled on my tongue. My throat felt tight and raw. Like I had been screaming for days and only just now stopped long enough to notice the damage.

I tried to speak again, but all that came out was a rough exhale that sounded more like a gasp.

The other person... Fia... leaned forward slightly, her brow furrowing. "Uncle Gabriel?"

Uncle.

The word settled over me with a weight I had not expected. I was her uncle. I was family. I barely knew the girl, but I knew I was supposed to protect her and keep her safe and make sure nothing bad ever touched her or Cian or anyone in this house.

But I had failed in that regard.

Aldric had used me to send letters. I remembered that too. The scratch of pen on paper. The careful choice of words designed to manipulate and destroy. Her, especially, and in turn Cian.

And now Cian was out there searching for a girl who was already dead.

A girl I had killed.

No.

Not me.

But my hands. My body. My face that Elara had seen in her final moments.

It did not matter that I had been screaming inside my own head while it happened. It did not matter that I had tried to stop him. The result was the same. She was gone, and I was the weapon Aldric had used to make it happen.

I had to tell them.

I had to warn them before he came back. Before he took control again and finished whatever sick plan he had been building while I watched helplessly from the inside.

"He—" The word came out strangled and broken. I tried again, forcing the sound past the tightness in my throat. "He killed—"

Morrigan set her teacup down with a soft click. "Gabriel, what is wrong? Do you need water?"

"No." I shook my head, too hard, too fast. The room tilted slightly and I gripped the edge of the table to steady myself. "You need to listen. You need to—"

The pull started then.

I felt it deep in my chest, like someone had hooked a line around my ribs and was dragging me backward. Away from the light. Away from control. Away from everything, I had just barely managed to claw back.

No.

Not now.

Not yet.

I tried to hold on. I dug my metaphorical heels into whatever part of my consciousness still felt solid and fought against the pull with everything I had. But it was useless. Aldric

was stronger. He had always been stronger, and the rune that bound him to this body was not something I knew how to break.

Fia stood up, her hand reaching across the table toward me. "Uncle Gabriel, you are scaring us. What is wrong?"

"The Delicate." The title came out barely louder than a whisper, but it came out. I forced my eyes to meet hers, trying to pour every ounce of desperation and warning into that single look. "He used her. The letters. He sent them. He even hurt her... His own... He killed her. He is going to—"

The pull grew stronger and just as sharp. It yanked at me with a violence that made my vision fracture at the edges, and I knew I only had seconds left. Maybe less.

I had to tell them. I had to make them understand.

Morrigan was on her feet now, too, her face pale. "Gabriel, slow down. What are you talking about?"

But I could not slow down. There was no time.

The darkness was already creeping in at the edges. I could feel Aldric surging back, furious and vicious and ready to tear me apart for this brief moment of rebellion.

I had one chance. One sentence. One warning before he shoved me back into the cage and made sure I never got out again.

I looked at Fia. At Morrigan. At the two people sitting in this room who had no idea what was living inside me.

And I said the only thing that mattered.

"You are going to die." My voice cracked on the words, rough and desperate and breaking. "Everybody is going to die."

Fia went rigid. Morrigan's hand flew to her mouth.

But they did not seem to get it. Not nearly quickly enough. So my hand moved before I could think it through. I grabbed the fork from the table, gripped it tight, and drove it toward my throat.

If I died, he died with me. If I killed this body, Aldric would have nowhere to hide. No weapon to use. No way to hurt anyone else with hands that had already done too much damage.

It was the only way.

The only thing I could do to stop him.

The tines were halfway to my neck when my hand froze as if locked in place. The muscles seized up so violently that it felt like someone had grabbed my wrist and held it there with iron strength.

Aldric.

He was fighting back. Clawing his way to the surface with a speed that made my head spin.

I tried to push harder. Tried to force the fork down those final inches. But my arm would not move. My fingers started to loosen against my will, and I knew I was losing.

"No," I choked out. The word was barely audible. "No, please, I— have to—"

Fia screamed.

Morrigan lunged forward, her hands reaching for the fork, but she was too slow.

The darkness surged up and swallowed me whole before either of them could reach me. Before I could finish what I started. Before I could do the one thing that would have saved them all.

Aldric ripped control away from me with a violence that felt like being torn in half, and the last thing I heard before I disappeared was my own voice speaking words I was not saying.

"I... I am sorry. I do not know what came over me. I guess my mental health is still in a very bad place, I think."

The fork clattered to the table.

And I was gone.

And then the darkness swallowed me whole.

The last thing I felt was Aldric's rage, hot and suffocating, as he ripped control away from me and shoved me back down into the prison I had only just escaped.

The last thing I heard was Fia's voice, high and sharp with fear.

"***** ** *****."

FIA

I watched Gabriel's expression shift.

The conviction that had been there seconds ago when he pressed the fork toward his throat dissolved into something calmer. Saner. His breathing evened out, and when he spoke again, his voice had lost that frantic edge.

"I'm sorry," he said, lowering his hand from where it had frozen mid-air. "I don't know what came over me. I guess... My mental health is still in a very bad place, I think."

The fork clattered against the table.

Morrigan moved closer, her hand hovering near his shoulder but not quite touching. "Gabriel, that was—"

"Terrifying," he finished for her. "I know. I'm sorry for scaring you both."

I studied his face.

His words before had been muddled. Panicked. Like someone drowning and trying to scream for help, with water already filling their lungs. But now he sounded reasonable. Almost clinical in the way he described his own mental state.

Underneath it all, though, I felt something else.

A simmering rage that pulsed just beneath the surface of his skin. It felt familiar in a way I couldn't place, like a scent I'd caught once in passing and never quite forgotten.

I turned to Morrigan. She was nodding along with whatever Gabriel was saying now, her expression softening into sympathy.

"This feels wrong," I said.

Both of them looked at me.

Gabriel put his head down, his elbows bracing against the table. "I know. I know it does."

He covered his face with his hands, and when he spoke again, his voice came out muffled. "I still get haunted by my brother. I didn't think it was that bad. But it is."

My chest tightened.

The unease didn't lift. If anything, it dug deeper, settling into my bones like ice that wouldn't melt no matter how much warmth I tried to pour over it.

"You knew about the delicate?" I asked.

His hands dropped slightly, just enough for me to see his eyes. They were red-rimmed, tired, but something in them sharpened when I said the word.

"Yes," he said. "When I was in my cell, Aldric mentioned it. He talked about a lot of things while I was locked up. He planned to use the girl to figure you out... I believe."

I reached across the table before I could second-guess myself. My hand closed over his, and I squeezed gently.

It looked like an act of kindness. Comfort for a man who had been through hell and was still crawling his way out of it.

But inside, I prayed.

I prayed to the goddess with every fiber of my being to show me something. Anything. To alleviate this sickly feeling that had lodged itself in my chest the moment Gabriel looked directly at me and said *you're going to die*.

I wanted a vision. Sure, it had only happened once. But I needed one.

Because I didn't know why my heart and mind were suddenly turning against someone who should have been safe. Someone who was family.

Nothing came.

No flash of insight. No sudden clarity.

Just the feel of his pulse beneath my fingers, steady and strong.

"What about the letters?" I asked, keeping my voice light. "What could that be about?"

He looked up, and for a split second, I saw something cross his face.

Death.

Cold and absolute and utterly devoid of mercy.

But then it was gone, smoothed over so quickly I almost convinced myself I'd imagined it.

"I don't know," he said. "It just came from some buried trauma, I think."

I rubbed my thumb over the back of his hand. "What triggered it? Just now, I mean."

His gaze flicked to the fork still lying on the table.

"The knife and the fork, I believe," he said quietly. "I had self-harm thoughts while I was in his prison."

I looked down at his hands. At his wrists where the sleeves of his shirt had ridden up slightly.

There were no scars.

Not a single mark.

My fingers shifted, pressing more firmly against the inside of his wrist, feeling for his pulse again. It beat strongly and even beneath my touch, no irregularity, no sign of distress.

"And the people he killed too," I said.

His pulse spiked. then

It was brief but unmistakable. A sudden jump that made my own heart stutter in response.

"Who?" I pressed.

Grand Luna Morrigan's voice cut in before he could answer. "Fia, maybe we should get him to the infirmary."

Gabriel's head snapped toward her so fast it should have given him whiplash.

"I agree," he said immediately. "I feel strange."

I hesitated.

Maybe I was overthinking this. He would have seen Aldric write letters, wouldn't he? He'd been imprisoned by the man for years. He would have witnessed things. Heard things. Maybe even seen Aldric hurt people.

Maybe.

But he'd said *killed*

someone. And he'd added *his own* before cutting himself off mid-sentence.

His own what?

I didn't press.

"Right," I said slowly. "The infirmary."

I stood and moved around the table to help him up. Morrigan joined me on his other side, and together we guided him to his feet. He swayed slightly, and I put my hand on his back to steady him.

The moment my palm made contact with his spine, blue light erupted from my fingers.

It wasn't gradual. It wasn't gentle.

I did not feel that usual beat that came before the flow of power.

This... It blazed bright and hot and immediate, flooding through my hand and into him before I could even process what was happening.

Gabriel screamed.

The sound tore from his throat, raw and agonized, and he collapsed forward. His knees hit the floor hard, and I barely managed to pull my hand back before he went down completely.

The panicked voice returned.

That same desperate, drowning tone from before.

"It's you," he gasped, his head jerking up to look at me. "You're the reason I still have any control over this body."

Morrigan and I both froze.

"What?" Morrigan breathed.

"Aldric has stolen this—"

He stopped.

Just stopped mid-sentence like someone had slammed a door shut on the words.

I watched his expression shift again. That calm, reasonable mask slid back into place even as his body stayed rigid on the floor.

Then I saw it.

Blood.

It seeped through the back of his shirt right where my hand had touched him, spreading in a dark stain that grew wider with each passing second.

I stepped back, my arm shooting out to push Morrigan behind me.

"What's going on?" she asked, her voice climbing higher.

I didn't take my eyes off Gabriel.

"That's no longer Uncle Gabriel," I said.

"What?"

I shifted my stance, keeping myself between her and him. "It's Aldric in control now. Isn't it?"

Gabriel's head tilted.

Slowly. Deliberately.

No. This was not Gabriel.

Then he smiled.

It was wrong. Everything about it was wrong. The curve of his lips didn't match the coldness in his eyes, and the way he looked at me made my skin crawl.

"You always ruin my plans," he said.

His voice was still Gabriel's, but the cadence was different. Sharper. More controlled.

I recognized it. My accusation stood firm because I had been right.

He moved.

One second, he was on the floor, the next he was lunging toward us with a speed that shouldn't have been possible for someone who'd just collapsed.

I shoved Morrigan hard to the side and threw myself in the opposite direction.

He missed us both by inches.

His body slammed into the table, and dishes went flying. The crash of porcelain shattering against the floor filled the room, but he didn't seem to notice. He was already turning, already adjusting his trajectory toward me.

I scrambled backward, my hands reaching for anything I could use as a weapon.

My fingers closed around a chair, and I swung it up just as he came at me again.

It connected with his shoulder, knocking him off balance, but he recovered too quickly. His hand shot out and grabbed the chair, ripping it from my grip and throwing it aside like it weighed nothing.

"Fia, run!" Morrigan's voice came from somewhere behind me.

I couldn't.

If I ran, he'd go after her. She was closer to the door, and pregnant women weren't supposed to be running from murderous souls wearing stolen bodies.

I planted my feet and raised my hands.

The goddess blessed me, and blue light flickered at my fingertips.

He saw it and laughed.

The sound was harsh and grating, nothing like Gabriel's warm chuckle.

"You think that will stop me?" he asked. "You couldn't even finish the rune properly. All you did was make things harder for both of us."

I did think it would work again. Gabriel. The real Gabriel had given me something to work with. My healing touch did something to Aldric. It hurt him in a way.

He lunged again.

This time, I was ready.

I drove my palm forward, aiming for his chest, and the moment I made contact, the blue light exploded outward.

He screamed.

It was the same agonized sound from before, but this time, he didn't collapse. He staggered back, clutching at his back, which was odd because that was not where my hand had touched. I saw smoke rising from beneath his fingers.

The smell of burning flesh hit me a second later.

"You bitch," he snarled.

I needed that shirt off. Something was going on under there that I needed to figure out.

That was, of course, if Cian and all the sentinels of the pack did not get here first.

Chapter 416: Talking body

CIAN

I pushed through the estate grounds with Garrett at my side, my boots striking the stone paths with more force than necessary. Every corner we turned felt more vacant than the last, each room we checked offering nothing in return. The sentinels had been thorough, excessively so, to the point where it no longer made sense.

"We've covered the eastern wing, the guest quarters, the garage, and the cellars," Garrett said, matching my pace. His tone remained steady, but the strain beneath it was unmistakable. "The greenhouse, the storage buildings, the old chapel. Nothing."

I stopped and turned to him. "Do you really think she left?"

He hesitated, only for a moment, but it was enough.

"Speak freely," I said.

Garrett's jaw tightened. His gaze drifted past me before returning, more deliberate this time. "There were bags in her room. Packed, but still there. Her wardrobe was almost untouched. I've been in this pack long enough to recognize when something is off, Alpha. That's my job."

"And?"

"Elara loved that Gucci attaché case," he said. "The one with the gold hardware. She carried it everywhere, whether she needed it or not. She wouldn't have left it behind. Not if she intended to be gone for any real length of time."

The knot in my chest tightened further. I looked past him, scanning the grounds ahead. The sun had risen higher, casting warmth across the estate, but it failed to reach the cold settling deep in my bones.

"Where else hasn't been searched?" I asked.

"The forest line. The training grounds. A few outbuildings near the perimeter we haven't gotten to yet."

"Take a group to the forest line," I said. "I'll check the training grounds."

"The training grounds sit close to the forest edge," Garrett replied. "It's also a shifting area. Do you want backup?"

"No. I'll handle it."

He gave a single nod and moved off to gather the others. I watched him go for a moment before turning toward the training grounds.

The path was familiar. I had walked it countless times. Ronan and I used to race along this stretch when we were younger, reckless and laughing, our wolves urging us faster than we could control. The memory surfaced uninvited, and I forced it down before it could take hold.

I never really knew him.

That was the truth I had to accept now. The man I had called my brother had been someone else entirely, someone capable of betrayal, someone who could stand beside me, smile, and plan my ruin all at once.

The training grounds stretched out ahead, wide and flat, bordered by trees on one side and open sky on the other. The dirt had been packed down by years of use, and the lingering scent of earth and sweat hung in the air. I paused at the edge, letting my gaze move across the space.

Nothing seemed out of place.

I stepped further in, scanning the ground, the tree line, the shadowed edges where anything could be concealed. Beneath my skin, my wolf stirred, restless and unsettled. He had been uneasy since morning, and now that tension sharpened.

I turned toward the forest's edge, and that was when I caught it.

Blood.

The scent was faint, but unmistakable, metallic and wrong. My wolf surged forward, and I followed without hesitation, drawn toward the far corner of the grounds where the trees thickened, and the light dimmed.

The smell intensified.

I quickened my pace, my chest tightening with each step. The trail led past the tree line and into the shade, where the undergrowth grew denser, and the ground softened beneath my boots.

Then I saw it.

A patch of disturbed earth. Fresh. The soil was darker, damp in places, covered loosely with leaves that had been scattered in haste. A large stone rested nearby, partially concealed by the brush.

I moved closer.

The stone was stained. Dark streaks ran along its surface, settling into the cracks where the rock had split. It was blood. The blood was still fresh enough from how cool the weather was that it had not fully dried.

My stomach dropped.

I stared at the ground, at the stone, at the careful attempt to make it all appear undisturbed. My mind resisted what my eyes were telling me, refusing to form the conclusion waiting just beneath the surface.

It couldn't be.

It couldn't be what it looked like.

But the smell of blood had grown too strong, too undeniable to ignore.

I dropped to my knees.

My hands struck the dirt with force as I started tearing into it. There was no thought behind the movement, no strategy, only instinct. I dug, clawing through the soil in frantic handfuls, my breath coming faster as the earth gave way beneath my fingers.

The dirt was loose, unnaturally so. It shifted too easily, crumbling apart as if it had been disturbed not long ago, and that realization only made the urgency worse.

I kept digging.

My nails scraped against something solid, and I froze.

For a second, I couldn't move. My hands trembled as I brushed away more soil, careful now, exposing what lay beneath.

A hand.

Pale and motionless. The fingers were stiff, slightly raised, the palm was in full display, and the pinky finger was facing upward, with the thumb angled downward.

My chest tightened painfully. Air refused to come. My thoughts scattered, slipping out of reach as I continued digging, more desperate now, tearing through the earth until more of her emerged. An arm. A shoulder. The curve of her torso.

Then her head.

The skull was crushed on one side. What remained of her face was barely recognizable, but it didn't matter. I knew. I knew before I had even uncovered her fully.

This was Elara.

The world shifted beneath me.

I leaned back on my heels, my hands still buried in dirt and blood, my vision blurring at the edges. Inside me, my wolf let out a sound that barely resembled a howl, something broken and raw that tore through every part of me at once.

Devastation came first. It struck like a physical force, knocking the breath from my lungs and leaving nothing in its place. Then grief followed, heavy and suffocating, wrapping tight around my ribs until it felt like they might give under the pressure.

Then came rage.

It burned through everything else, sharp and absolute. My hands curled into fists, and I felt the shift pressing against my skin, my wolf rising with a single, violent purpose. He wanted blood. He wanted answers. He wanted something to tear apart for what had been done here.

Who did this?

When?

Why?

I reached for her, my hand trembling as it settled against her shoulder. "Who did this to you?"

The words fractured as they left me.

Then something shifted in my mind.

Her hand. The way it had been positioned. The thumb angled downward, the palm open and steady. It wasn't random. It was deliberate. Rigor mortis had fixed it in place, but before that, it looked like she had chosen it.

Was it sign language? If it was... That would... That would spell...

Father.

Cold spread through my veins.

Aldric was dead. I had killed him myself. I had torn his head from his body and watched the light leave his eyes. There had been no doubt, no hesitation. Death like that did not reverse. There was no power capable of undoing it.

And yet the thought refused to release its grip.

I pushed myself to my feet, unsteady, my legs barely holding beneath me. My mind raced, trying to force logic onto something that made none, trying to shape meaning out of what should have been impossible.

Then I heard movement behind me.

I turned sharply, and to my surprise, someone stood there.

A woman, small-framed, dark-haired, and dressed in clothes that were far too clean for someone who had been moving through the forest. Her expression was composed, almost serene, in a way that felt deeply wrong, as if she had been waiting for this moment.

"Who the fuck are you?" I growled.

She tilted her head, her lips curving slightly, something close to a smile but not quite. "I apologize, Alpha Cian."

The magic or whatever the fuck it was, hit before I could react.

It slammed into my chest like a battering ram, lifting me off my feet and throwing me backward. My body collided with a tree, and I felt the branch pierce through my side, tearing through flesh and muscle as it punched out the other side.

Blood filled my mouth.

I coughed, spitting it out as my vision swam. Pain radiated through my torso, sharp and unrelenting, but I did not care. I gripped the branch with both hands and shoved myself forward, feeling it tear free from my body as I staggered off it.

The woman watched me with that same calm expression.

I charged.

My shift began before I even made the conscious choice. Bones cracked and reshaped, my skin splitting as fur erupted across my body. The pain was brutal, worse than it had

ever been because I was forcing it too fast, pushing my body past its limits, but I did not stop.

My claws extended mid-stride, and I swiped at her.

I barely grazed her shoulder when my entire body locked.

Every muscle seized at once, freezing me mid-motion. I could not move. I could not breathe. My wolf snarled inside me, thrashing against whatever force had taken hold, but it was useless.

I dropped, as the ground rushed up to meet me, and my vision blurred as darkness crept in from the edges. I tried to fight it, tried to hold on, but the pull was too strong.

The last thing I saw was the woman stepping closer, her expression still maddeningly calm.

Then everything went black.