

## To ruin an Omega

### #Chapter 421: Over my limp body - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 421: Over my limp body

*Chapter 421: Over my limp body*

**FIA**

Then he moved.

His leg swept out in a wide arc, fast enough that I barely registered it before it connected. It took both of us out from under ourselves. I went down hard on my hip, the impact shooting up my side in a sharp, jarring pain, and Morrigan hit the floor beside me with a heavy thud that rattled the loose debris around us.

By the time I forced my body to respond, he was already on his feet.

Not as steady as before, though. I saw it this time. The slight hitch when he shifted his weight, the uneven pull of his breath as his chest rose and fell. He was tiring. It wasn't much, but it was something, and in a fight like this, something was enough to keep going.

We were wearing him down.

I pushed myself up, ignoring the way my hip protested, and charged before he could recover properly. If we gave him space, even a second, he would take it and turn it against us.

He tried to sidestep me, but Morrigan was faster.

Her hand shot out and caught his ankle, claws digging just enough to hold. It threw him off balance, his body pitching forward, and I hit him at full force before he could correct it. The impact drove him back into the wall, and the plaster shuddered under the force of it, dust shaking loose around us.

For a second, I thought I had him pinned.

Then his hand found my throat.

His grip closed tight, fingers digging in with bruising force, and everything narrowed instantly. My air was cut off and the pressure started to build. I found black spots flickering at the edges of my vision like something alive, something waiting to swallow me whole if I let it.

I didn't let it.

I brought both fists down on his forearms as hard as I could manage, ignoring the way my muscles screamed in protest. The first rattled him. But the second... The second hit landed right, and his grip faltered just enough to give me an out.

I twisted away, dragging in a breath that burned all the way down, my lungs protesting the sudden rush of air.

Morrigan was there again.

She didn't hesitate. She never did.

Her hands locked onto his shoulders, and she used his imbalance against him, throwing him toward the center of the room. He stumbled over the broken pieces scattered across the floor, his foot catching on something I didn't see, and for a moment he almost went down again.

I didn't give him the chance.

I came in from behind, grabbing onto what was left of his shirt and yanking hard. The fabric was already torn where Morrigan's claws had ripped through it earlier, and it gave easily under my grip, splitting apart into ragged strips that came away in my hands.

I threw them aside without thinking.

And then I saw his back.

It stopped me for half a second, just long enough for the realization to settle in.

They looked like... Runes.

They covered him from shoulder to waist, etched into his skin in patterns that didn't make sense no matter how long I looked at them. Lines twisted into shapes that refused to settle into anything familiar, overlapping and weaving in a way that made my eyes ache if I tried to follow them too closely.

But that wasn't what mattered.

What mattered were the ones that glowed.

Bright. Hot. Red.

They pulsed against his skin like something alive, like embers buried too deep to go out. And I knew them. Not the shapes, not the meaning, but the feeling.

Those were the places I had touched.

Every time I had tried to heal him. Every time I had pushed that energy into him, hoping to reach Gabriel through whatever this was. It hadn't just done nothing.

It had been burning through it.

The realization hit me all at once, sharp and clear.

I looked at Morrigan.

She was breathing hard, blood still running from her nose, streaking down over her mouth and chin, but her eyes were clear and tunnel focused. When she met my gaze, I didn't need to explain.

There was an unspoken synergy and she understood exactly what I wanted .

She moved before I even shifted, circling around him, her steps deliberate despite the strain in her body.

Aldric realized it too late.

By the time he turned, Morrigan was already there. Her arms wrapped around his chest, locking his arms to his sides, her claws digging in deep enough to hold him in place. He fought immediately, his body bucking violently, muscles straining as he tried to break free, but she held on, bracing herself against him with everything she had left.

"Do it," she ground out, her voice tight with effort.

I didn't hesitate.

I stepped in and pressed both palms flat against his back.

This time, the power came without resistance.

It surged out of me in a flood, bright and immediate, that blue light spilling over my hands and into him like it had been waiting for this. The moment it touched those glowing runes, everything changed.

Aldric screamed in both terror and agony.

It tore out of him in a way that didn't sound human. It was raw, jagged, full of something ancient and furious, and it vibrated through him into me, into the floor, into the air itself. His body convulsed under my hands, muscles seizing as the energy pushed deeper.

Heat built beneath my palms, intense enough that I could feel it even through the light, and the runes reacted.

They flared brighter at first, like they were fighting back, like whatever magic held them in place was trying to resist. Then, slowly, they started to darken.

To burn out.

I watched it happen.

Watched as the patterns began to fade, piece by piece, like they were being erased by something unseen. The red dimmed, flickering unevenly before going dark entirely, leaving nothing but bare skin in its place.

For a moment, I thought that was it.

That we were actually doing it. But then...

"Fia!"

Morrigan's voice cut through everything.

It wasn't anger or urgency that made me look up. It was something else. Something sharp enough to break my focus.

She wasn't looking at me.

Her eyes were fixed past me, wide in a way I had never seen before, something like shock flickering across her face, mixed with something I couldn't place.

Then she let go.

Just like that.

Her arms dropped away from him, her body stepping back as if she had been pulled.

"What are you—"

I didn't get to finish.

His hand closed around my throat again, harder this time, fingers digging in with a force that made my vision spark. He yanked me around, forcing me to face him, his eyes blazing with something close to hatred, and his mouth pulling back into a snarl that didn't belong to Gabriel.

But I wasn't looking at him.

I was looking past him now.

At Morrigan and what had caught her attention so badly.

She had already moved, crossing the room with a kind of focus that sent a chill down my spine. Blood still streaked her face, and with the way her claws were still out, it was clear that her whole body coiled with a violence that had shifted direction.

Not toward Aldric.

Toward someone else.

My gaze followed hers.

There was... There was someone. There was a girl.

Recognition hit me in a way that made my chest tighten. I knew that face. Not from here, not from now, but from a night that still sat wrong in my memory, like it had never settled properly into place.

The night of the accident.

The night everything changed.

She stood in the doorway like she had always been there, like she hadn't just appeared out of nowhere. She stayed calm and still despite the fact that the Grand Luna was charging toward her. There was something unsettling about it, the way her expression didn't change or react to the chaos around her.

I didn't think about it.

There wasn't time.

I reacted.

My fist came up and slammed into Aldric's face with everything I had left. I felt the impact travel through my knuckles, felt the give of cartilage as Gabriel's nose broke under the force. Blood spilled immediately, hot against my skin, and his grip loosened.

I didn't stop.

I hit him again.

I couldn't feel sorry about it. There was no time for guilt about using Gabriel's face as a punching bag when Morrigan was closing in on that girl with murder in her eyes.

"Morrigan, no!"

She didn't hear me. Or she didn't care.

The girl didn't even move. She just raised one hand, almost lazy in the gesture.

And I felt the charge in the air, even from where I was.

Morrigan flew backward.

Like an invisible hand had grabbed her and thrown her with enough force to send her crashing through the window behind her. Glass shattered. The sound of it breaking was almost delicate compared to the heavy thud of Morrigan's body hitting something outside.

"No!!!!"

The scream tore from my throat, raw and desperate.

I started toward the window, but the girl's voice stopped me.

"She'll be fine."

I turned to look at her. Really look at her.

She was young. Younger than me, maybe. Her features were delicate, almost fragile, but there was nothing fragile about the way she held herself. She stood in the wreckage of the room like she owned it.

"I did not intend to harm her," she said. Her voice was soft. Conversational. Like we were discussing the weather instead of the fact that she'd just thrown a woman through a window. "I'm just here for you... To take you."

"Over my dead body."

I charged.

Every muscle in my legs screamed as I pushed off the floor, closing the distance between us in three long strides.

*Chapter 422: Dear Despair*

**FIA**

**TRIGGER WARNING**

***This Chapter contains graphic depictions of violence, including physical assault of a pregnant woman, head trauma, and threats to an unborn child. Reader discretion is advised.***

I launched myself at her with everything left in my body.

Three strides. That was all it took to close the gap.

Her hand came up again, that same lazy gesture, and I felt it. The air around me thickened, pressing in from all sides like an invisible wall trying to stop me mid-stride.

However... It didn't work.

Whatever force she'd thrown at Morrigan slid off me like water off glass. I saw the surprise flicker across her face, just for a second, before my fist connected with her jaw.

The impact sent her stumbling sideways into the doorframe. Her head cracked against the wood with a sharp sound that would have made me wince under different circumstances.

She touched her split lip, looking at the blood on her fingers like she couldn't quite believe it was there.

"Oh." Her voice stayed soft, almost curious. "I forgot you have a resistance to miracles."

I didn't give her time to say anything else.

I came at her again, hands up, ready to fight in a way that had nothing to do with power and everything to do with pure desperation. She blocked my first swing, her movements faster than they should have been for someone her size, and countered with a strike aimed at my ribs.

I twisted away as I felt the air move past me where her fist had been.

The doorway. I needed to get past the doorway.

She wanted to take me. Those were her exact words. Someone had sent her, and there was only one person who would send anyone to collect me like I was some kind of package to be delivered.

*Valentine.*

The thought made my stomach turn, made something cold and sharp settle in my chest.

I fainted left, then drove my shoulder into her when she moved to block. The force of it pushed her back a step, closer to the wall, and I took the opening. I lunged toward the door, toward the hallway beyond it, toward any chance of getting out of this room.

Her hand caught my arm, yanked me back hard enough to make my shoulder scream in protest.

We crashed into each other, both of us fighting for position now. Her nails raked across my forearm, drawing blood, and I drove my knee up toward her stomach. She shifted at the last second, taking the hit on her hip instead, and shoved me backward.

I hit the table. What was left of it, anyway.

The broken wood dug into my back, and I used it to push off, launching myself at her again before she could press the advantage.

My fist caught her in the temple this time.

Her head snapped to the side, and I saw the opening I needed.

Behind us, I heard movement. The wet sound of breathing through a broken nose, the shuffle of someone trying to get their bearings back.

Aldric.

If he recovered enough to join this fight, if the two of them came at me together, I was done. There would be no getting out of that.

I grabbed the girl by her hair and with everything I had in me, drove her head into the doorframe.

Once.

Twice.

The third time I did it, I felt her body go slack in my grip.

I didn't wait to see if she would recover.

I ran.

Out of the dining room, into the hallway, my feet pounding against the floor hard enough to jar my already aching hip. The house stretched out in front of me, long and shadowed, and I didn't know exactly where I was to go. I just knew I had to move.

Behind me, I heard her.

The sound of someone getting to their feet.

*Fuck! Fuck!*

I pushed harder, my lungs burning with every breath as my legs also threatened to give out.

The rug appeared in front of me without warning.

One second the floor was bare. The next, thick fabric materialized under my feet, twisting and bunching in a way that defied physics.

My foot caught and I went down hard.

The impact drove all the air from my lungs, and my head cracked against the floor with enough force to make the world tilt sideways. Pain exploded behind my eyes, bright and immediate, and everything went fuzzy at the edges.

I tried to push myself up, but my arms wouldn't respond properly. They felt distant, disconnected, like they belonged to someone else.

Footsteps approached. Slow and unhurried.

She knew I wasn't going anywhere.

Through the haze, I saw her stop beside me. Blood still dripped from her split lip, and there was a dark bruise already forming along her jaw where I'd hit her, but her expression remained calm. Almost sympathetic.

"I did expect this to be harder," she said, tilting her head slightly. "Considering how you were able to use your gifts the last time despite knocking on death's door. I guess this means you do not have much control over your own gifts."

The words came to me slowly, fighting their way through the fog in my head.

"You're one of his experiments, aren't you?"

It made sense. The way she moved, the way she used what she called 'miracles' like it was second nature, the empty quality in her eyes that reminded me of something broken that had been put back together wrong.

She knelt beside me, her movements careful and precise.

Then her head turned, looking toward something I couldn't see from where I lay sprawled on the floor.

"They're coming," she murmured.

When she looked back down at me, something shifted in her expression. Not quite regret, but close.

"Know that this brings me no pleasure. I am not like you. I am not stable. I need to do this to survive." She reached for the edge of the rug, pulling it toward her. "He promised you will be fine. He just wants to..."

"Please."

The word came out broken, barely more than a whisper.

My hand moved to my stomach without thinking, protective even though there was nothing I could do to stop what was about to happen.

"I'm with child. He's a monster. You have to know what will happen to me."

Her hands paused for just a second.

Then she lifted the rug and covered my face with it.

The first impact came before I could process what was happening.

Pain exploded across my cheekbone, sharp and blinding, and I tried to move, tried to get my hands up to protect myself, but my body still wasn't responding the way it should.

The second hit landed on my temple.

The world tilted further, darkness creeping in at the edges of my vision.

The third caught my nose.

I felt something give, felt hot blood spill across my face, soaking into the fabric pressed against my skin.

She hit me again.

And again.

Each impact sent fresh waves of pain through my skull, each one driving me deeper into that darkness that had been waiting at the edges. I couldn't see. Couldn't breathe properly through the blood and the fabric and the weight of her hand pressing down.

I tried to speak, tried to beg her to stop, but nothing came out except a choked sound that didn't even sound like me.

The hits still kept coming though.

The pain started to fade after that. Not because it had lessened, but because everything was fading.

The sound of the impacts grew distant, muffled, like I was hearing them from underwater.

My thoughts scattered, refusing to form into anything coherent.

I felt myself slipping away. I felt consciousness leaving me piece by piece with each blow that landed.

The baby.

The thought flickered through the darkness, desperate and terrified.

My baby.

Gabriel.

Morrigan.

I couldn't help any of them if I wasn't here.

But I was already gone.

The darkness swallowed me whole, and the last thing I felt was the weight of the rug against my face and the sound of my own heart beating slower and slower until I couldn't hear it anymore.

*Chapter 423: Second 1*

## **CIAN**

I woke to the sharp sting of a palm cracking against my cheek.

"Alpha. Alpha Cian, can you hear me?"

Garett's voice reached me through the fog, distant at first, like it had to fight its way in, then clearer the second time his hand struck my face, harder now, enough to snap something in my head back into place. My eyes dragged open.

His face came into focus above me, close enough that I could see the tension pulling at his mouth, the tight line of his jaw. Concern didn't sit on him easily, but it was there now, plain and unhidden.

"There you are," he said, a breath slipping out of him like he had been holding it. "You had us worried for a second."

I tried to sit up and immediately regretted it. My body felt wrong, heavy and slow, like I had been out for far longer than I remembered. Every muscle resisted, stiff to the point of pain. Garrett's hand came to my shoulder, steadying me as I forced myself upright, even as the world tilted slightly under me.

"Seeing the body must have been a shock," he went on, quieter this time. "I'm sorry, Alpha. I should have been here. I should have found her first."

The body...

My gaze shifted without me meaning to, drawn to the patch of disturbed earth a few feet away. The soil had been dug up in a rush, uneven, careless. And there she was. Elara.

What was left of her.

The side of her skull had caved in, the damage clear even from where I sat. Her body lay twisted, wrong in ways that made it hard to look for too long, but I couldn't look away. Not from her hand.

Still positioned like that.

*'Father.'*

The word surfaced before I could stop it, cutting through everything else. And then the rest followed. The woman. The way her magic hit me, not like something I felt but something that took hold, locked me in place, turned my body against me. The branch tearing into my side. The helplessness as everything went dark.

I grabbed Garrett by the front of his shirt and pulled him in close enough that he had no choice but to focus on me.

"Someone is here. Skollrend has an infiltrator."

His eyes widened for half a second before sharpening. He didn't question it, didn't hesitate. "What do you need?"

"Get everyone to the perimeter. I want the entire estate covered. No one leaves. No one gets in." I released him and pushed myself up, ignoring the way my legs threatened to give out under me. "We need people at the main house too. Now."

Garett turned immediately, his voice cutting through the air as he started issuing orders. The sentinels behind him moved without pause, breaking off in different directions like they had been waiting for something to snap into motion.

And then I felt it.

The bond hit me without warning.

It flared inside my chest so suddenly it forced the air out of my lungs, sharp and violent, as if something had clawed its way through me from the inside. Fear came first, thick enough to choke on, followed by something worse. Terror, raw and unfiltered, flooded through the connection so fast it made my vision blur. Then despair settled in behind it, heavy, suffocating, pressing down until it felt like I couldn't breathe.

Fia. She was... *Fuck this!*

"Eight of you," I called out, my voice cutting through the chaos around us. "With me to the main estate. Shift. Now."

They didn't hesitate. None of them did.

The change came fast, faster than it should have. I forced it. I didn't give my body time to ease into it the way it wanted. Pain followed immediately.

Bones cracked and twisted, reshaping under pressure that felt like it would tear me apart. My spine arched as everything shifted, my skin splitting in places as fur forced its way through. My jaw stretched forward, the ache deep enough to rattle through my skull. It burned, every second of it, worse than usual because I was pushing too hard, rushing something that was never meant to be rushed.

I didn't care.

My wolf surged forward, angry and sharp, taking control before the pain had even settled. The others followed, their own transformations just as brutal, just as desperate. I could hear it, bones snapping, claws tearing free, breaths turning into something rough and animal.

Then we ran.

The estate blurred past in streaks of green and stone, the ground barely registering under my paws as I pushed harder and faster.

Each step hit hard enough to leave marks behind, but I didn't slow. I couldn't. The others stayed close, their presence steady at my back, their breathing heavy but controlled as they kept pace.

The bond pulsed again.

Weaker.

I pushed harder.

The main house came into view, rising up ahead of us, and then I saw her.

My mother.

She was on the ground near the base of it, her body crumpled in a way that made something in me drop hard. Blood streaked across her face, down her arms, soaking into her clothes. One of her legs bent at an angle that made it clear what had happened. It was broken, and not in just one place.

But she was breathing.

Barely, shallow and uneven, but it was there.

I shifted back before I even reached her, forcing the change again. It tore through me in reverse, just as rough, and just as unforgiving. My human form snapped back into place, leaving me raw and unsteady as I dropped to my knees beside her.

For a second, I didn't know where to touch her. My hands hovered over her, useless, caught between wanting to help and knowing I could make it worse.

"Keep going," I shouted over my shoulder, my voice rough. "Into the house. Kill any intruder on sight."

They didn't stop.

Eight wolves rushed past us, massive and focused, their claws scraping hard against the stone steps as they charged inside.

*Chapter 424: Second 2*

**CIAN**

"Mother," I said, my voice rough. "Can you hear me?"

Her eyes fluttered open, unfocused at first, like she was still somewhere else, then slowly sharpened as they settled on my face. She tried to breathe in, but it caught halfway and turned into a cough. Blood followed, spilling past her lips and trailing down her chin.

"I'm fine," she rasped.

"You're not." My gaze moved over her again, more carefully this time, taking in every detail whether I wanted to or not. Too many injuries. Too much damage. My jaw tightened. "Who did this to you?"

She coughed again, her whole body jerking with the effort. When she spoke, it came out thin, barely there. "A girl. Young, with dark hair."

The same one.

Something in me snapped into focus. The girl from the tree line. The one who had locked my body in place and left me helpless. She was the same one who had done this...

Heat surged through me, fast and sharp, turning my thoughts into something narrow and dangerous. I lifted my head, eyes catching on the broken window above us. Glass still clung to the frame, jagged edges catching the light. The drop from there was high enough to hurt, high enough to kill if done right.

But my mother had been stronger than that.

My mother's hand shot out and wrapped around my wrist. The grip wasn't what it used to be, but it held—enough to stop me from moving.

"Cian," she said, forcing the word out. "Listen to me."

I looked back down at her.

"Aldric is in Gabriel's body."

The words didn't settle right away. They hit, then kept going. The feeling could be best described as something crashing through me instead of stopping at the surface.

Everything I had been trying to ignore since the trial came rushing back. That feeling that something was off. The way Gabriel had carried himself. The pauses that lasted a little too long. The way his voice had felt wrong, even when the words made sense.

It all fell into place at once, and I felt it in my chest, tight and heavy.

"Stay here," I told her, already pulling away. "Someone will get you to the infirmary."

Her hand loosened around my wrist, slipping off as I pushed to my feet.

The jump came easily. Too easy. My body coiled on instinct, and I launched myself upward, fingers catching the edge of the window frame. Glass bit into my palms the second I grabbed hold, sharp enough to cut, but I didn't slow down. I pulled myself up and through, landing hard inside the dining room.

The space was a disaster.

Tables were overturned. Chairs were splintered. Pieces of wood and shattered glass were scattered across the floor, and the air smelled wrong, sharp with blood and dust.

The wolves I had sent in were already there, back in human form now, standing near the far wall. Their bodies were tense, their shoulders tight. Their eyes also moved like they were waiting for something to come at them again.

"Where is my wife?" The question tore out of me before I could stop it, harsher than I intended, but I didn't care. "She is supposed to be here."

One of them stepped forward, careful, like he didn't want to say the wrong thing. "We will check the other rooms, Alpha."

"Seal this building," I said, my voice steady in a way I didn't feel. "No one gets in. No one gets out. I want every exit covered."

They moved right away, breaking off without hesitation, spreading through the room and toward the hallways beyond.

I turned.

Gabriel stood near the overturned table.

For a second, my brain tried to make it normal, to place him where he should have been, but it didn't fit. His posture was wrong. The way he held himself wasn't him. Even the look on his face felt off, twisted into something that didn't belong there.

Blood ran from his nose, smeared across his mouth, and his eyes followed me as I moved. There was nothing familiar in them.

"You bastard."

I didn't remember crossing the distance. The only thing that stayed was the impact of my fist connecting with his face. His head snapped to the side, his body stumbling back, and I followed before he could recover. My hand fisted in his shirt, dragging him forward before slamming him into the wall hard enough to rattle the frame behind him.

I hit him again.

This time, his jaw took it, and I felt something give under my knuckles.

"I know you did this," I said, the words coming out low, tight. "You killed her, too, didn't you? You killed Elara because she figured it out."

His head snapped back with the next hit. Blood sprayed against the wall, streaking across it in uneven lines. I hit him again. Then again. My knuckles split, skin tearing open, but I didn't feel it the way I should have.

I only stopped when he laughed.

The sound didn't belong to Gabriel. It came out rough, dragged up from somewhere deeper, something that scraped against my ears the wrong way.

"Yes," he said, voice low and grating. "Give in. Let it take you."

My fist hung in the air, just for a second.

"If I die," he went on, lips pulling into a smile that didn't fit his face, "you will never find her."

Fuck this sicko! I hit him anyway.

"What did we ever do to you?" The question broke out of me, raw and uneven. "Why? Why? Tell me why!!!"

He barely reacted to the hit this time. Blood kept running from his nose, dripping down over his mouth as he spoke.

"I think my parents would be proud," he said, almost calm. "To see how far I've come. How much I am willing to do and how far I am willing to go to get what I want."

His hand came up, slow, deliberate, and brushed against my face.

My skin crawled where he touched me.

"So, dear nephew," he murmured, his voice dropping lower, "how far are you willing to go? Will you kill this meat suit of mine to get what you want most right now? Revenge."

My grip tightened on his shirt.

"I want her name," I said, each word measured. "And I want to know where my wife is. If you think wearing Gabriel's face will stop me, you're wrong."

"I do not think—"

He stopped.

Mid-word.

His expression shifted without warning. The smugness drained out of him like it had been pulled away, replaced by something else entirely. His eyes widened, then flickered, like he was fighting for control of his own body.

When he spoke again, it wasn't the same voice. There was a different cadence to it.

"I have access to his memories," he said, faster now, like he was running out of time. "This wasn't his plan. Something changed, and now the bastard is grasping at straws."

"Uncle Gabriel?"

"Before he takes over," he said, his gaze locking onto mine, sharp and clear in a way it hadn't been before, "you need to know this. It's Valentine. There are others who will come for her too. He sent letters. To Northern Ridge's Nocturne. And Lily of the—"

He winced, his entire body going rigid, muscles locking under my grip.

"What... What is happening?" I demanded.

"He's trying to take back control." Gabriel's voice strained, each word dragged out with effort. "You need to go. Lock me up while you can."

I held his gaze for a second longer, searching for anything that told me this wasn't real. I didn't find it.

I nodded once and stepped back.

"Secure him," I said to the sentinel near the door. "Put him in a cell."

The sentinel moved forward without hesitation.

I stepped away, my hands still trembling, the urge to keep going still there, sitting just under the surface, waiting for an excuse.

But Fia was still out there.

And standing here wasn't going to bring her back.

Valentine needed to go. No. He needed to die.

*Chapter 425: When the seasons change 1*

**FIA**

I blinked. Or I thought I did. The concept of eyelids felt theoretical at best.

The space around me resolved slowly. I noticed there were stone walls that were damp and gray. It looked... It looked like a cell.

The more I looked at it, the more I realized it was the kind of cell that had held me before, when I embodied my ancestor Athena in those vivid dreams of mine. Yes... It was. It was the same vile space that had held so many innocents before and after her.

I could almost taste the iron in the air, could almost hear the echoes of screams that had soaked into these walls over decades.

But it wasn't real. I knew that somehow.

I sat up. My body moved without the pain I should have felt after what had just happened.

I had no throbbing skull, no broken nose, no blood coating my face. All I really felt at this point was a strange lightness, like I'd been hollowed out and filled with something kinder entirely.

Then I noticed someone was there.

I looked and to no one's surprise. There was indeed someone.

The apparition stood across from me.

She wore my face.

She had the same dark hair, same pale skin, same frame. But the eyes were different. They held something ancient, something that had burned itself out long ago and left only embers behind.

"Athena?"

The word left my mouth before I'd consciously decided to speak.

She smiled. The expression transformed her face, made her look younger despite everything those eyes had witnessed.

"We finally meet, granddaughter."

The weight of that word settled over me like a physical thing. *Granddaughter*. I'd only gotten to know about her from fragmented memories I had gotten from my dreams. So all I had really about this woman was the trials and tribulations that she had gone through in life. The woman who had suffered so Valentine could build some sick sort of empire with the blood of the Omegas who had died in these very walls, or ones like them.

"I'm dead?"

I needed to know. Needed to understand if this was the end, if that girl had beaten me into nothing and left my baby to whatever fate awaited children conceived by a mad warlock's design.

Athena's smile faded. She moved closer, her steps silent against stone that should have echoed.

"You should know by now that there are feelings and fates so much worse than death."

The statement landed with the finality of a door slamming shut. I thought about Morrigan's face before the girl had thrown her against the wall. I thought about the baby growing inside me, about Gabriel trapped in his own body while Aldric wore his skin like a costume.

"So this is like before."

When I'd been dying on that private road, when something had reached into me and pulled me back from wherever I'd been headed. When I'd woken with power singing through my veins and power burning on my flesh.

Was this another of my gifts similar to the dreams I had of the past and meeting up with my mother's younger version?

Athena tilted her head, studying me with an intensity that made my skin prickle.

"Muna used to tell me stories about you." Her voice went soft, almost fond. "Our whole salvation. And now you're about to share the same fate as me. The history book on the shelf does like repeating itself."

The bitterness in those last words cut through the fondness like a blade.

"I can't end up like that."

The words came out sharp, desperate. I couldn't become another woman who died in these walls while Valentine continued his experiments, continued his search for whatever vessel he'd been chasing since before I was born.

Athena laughed. The sound held no humor.

"Right. I was so pathetic that I died in his walls."

She stepped closer, and I could see the bruises on her throat now. Faint marks that hadn't been visible before, like she was slowly becoming more corporeal, more real with each passing second.

"Riddle me this, Fia." Her eyes locked onto mine, unblinking. "How do you intend to defeat a warlock with a god complex and a juiced up healer born from fleshcraft?"

The question hung between us like a challenge.

I pushed myself to my feet. The movement felt strange, like I was learning how to inhabit my own body all over again.

"First, I need to leave this... trance."

Athena watched me stand, her expression unreadable.

"There's nothing holding you back." She gestured around us, at the cell that wasn't quite solid, at the walls that seemed to shift and breathe with each passing moment. "You're the one who pulled yourself here. You're the one who pulled me here as well. Perhaps because you have need for me."

I stared at her.

"I did this?"

The concept felt impossible. I'd been beaten unconscious, had felt my awareness scatter under that rug while the girl had brought her fists down again and again. How could I have pulled anything anywhere when I'd barely been holding onto existence?

"I guess that's the difference in this reiteration."

Athena moved to the wall, pressed her palm against stone that looked solid but gave slightly under her touch like it was made of something softer.

"Though we have similar faces, we perhaps don't share similar fates." She turned back to me, and something in her expression had shifted. Gone vulnerable in a way that made her look more real than anything else in this space. "You were born blessed. I was destined to suffer as an Omega and meet a bitter end. Everything that was great about me was born in a lab. So was my sweet girl. Muna. Even her gift to peer into the future couldn't save her from a bitter death."

"Enough!"

The word exploded out of me, sharp enough to make the walls around us shudder.

"Don't say that."

I couldn't listen to her talk about my mother like that. Couldn't hear the resignation in her voice when she spoke about the woman who had loved me, who had tried to save me from this exact fate.