

To ruin an Omega

#Chapter 71: The Believer - Read To ruin an Omega

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BO

The kitchen was warm. Steam rose from the pot on the stove. I stirred the broth slowly, watching the vegetables tumble in the liquid. The scent of herbs filled the air. Rosemary. Thyme. A hint of garlic.

I was making snacks for the Omegas who worked the night shift. Simple food. The kind that stuck to your ribs and kept you going through long hours.

Then I heard it.

Footsteps. Quick and urgent. Voices raised in the hallway just outside the kitchen. Not shouting. But loud enough to carry. Excited. The kind of noise people made when something big had happened.

I turned down the heat on the stove. Wiped my hands on my apron. Walked toward the doorway.

Three Omega girls stood in the corridor. Their heads were close together. Their hands moved as they talked. One of them saw me and her eyes went wide. She elbowed the girl next to her.

They all looked at me.

"What is going on?" I asked.

The first girl opened her mouth and then closed it before she looked at the others.

I felt my jaw tighten. These girls were supposed to be working. The hallway floors needed scrubbing. There were linens to fold. Instead they were standing here gossiping like they had nothing better to do.

Lazy. That was what they were. Push-overs who did the bare minimum and spent the rest of their time talking.

But I was curious. Something had happened. Something big enough to pull them away from their duties.

"You haven't heard?" the second girl said. Her voice was breathless. Like she had been running.

I looked at her and waited.

"The Grand Luna," the third girl said. She leaned forward. Her voice dropped to almost a whisper. "She doesn't have the rot."

I felt something cold slide down my spine.

"What?" The word came out sharper than I intended.

"She was poisoned," the first girl said. "It wasn't the rot at all. Someone was poisoning her."

My heart started beating faster. I kept my face neutral. Calm. I was just another Omega hearing shocking news.

"How... How... did they find out?" I asked.

The girls exchanged glances again. The second one smiled. Like she was about to tell me the best part of the story.

"Funny story actually," she said. "The new Omega Luna. She was the one who exposed it. Can you believe that?"

My stomach dropped.

"She must be really good," the third girl added. She turned to look at me directly. Her eyes were bright with something. Interest maybe. "You're close with her, right? Given you were put in her charge?"

I ignored the question. Pushed past it like it was nothing.

"Have they gotten anyone?" I asked. "This is big."

"Yes," the first girl said. She nodded rapidly. "Ten people. They brought them in for questioning. Some sentinels were among them too."

Ten people.

The knot in my stomach tightened. It pulled taut like a rope about to snap.

"Who would do such a thing?" I said. I made sure my voice sounded horrified. Shocked. Like the thought of someone poisoning the Grand Luna was the worst thing I had ever heard.

"Well, they got six Omegas," the second girl said. She started counting on her fingers. "Mira. Nella. Tessa. Rynn. Sola. And Verena."

Each name hit me like a stone. But I kept my face blank. Concerned but not panicked.

"And four sentinels," the girl continued. "Kayden. Marcus. Jorin. And Thale. Makes sense, you know? They were all in charge of the Grand Luna's care at some point."

Kayden.

The knot in my stomach twisted. Became something sharp and painful. Something that made it hard to breathe.

"I have to check on the food," I said quickly.

I turned and walked back into the kitchen. My legs felt wooden. Stiff. Like they did not quite belong to me.

The girls' voices faded behind me. They went back to their gossiping. Already moving on to the next piece of news. The next scandal to pick apart.

I grabbed the dish I had been preparing. The snacks were ready. Still warm. I packed them carefully. My hands moved on autopilot while my mind raced.

Kayden was caught.

They had Kayden.

I picked up one of the plates and left the kitchen. I moved through the corridors toward the Luna Suite. My heart was pounding. Fast. Strong. I could feel each thump in my throat, almost like someone was pushing from the inside.

I needed to think. I needed to figure out my next step. But first I needed a place where no one would look for me. A place where I could breathe.

The suite was silent when I reached it. I knocked and waited. Nothing. I knocked again, harder this time.

Still nothing.

I pushed the door open. The sitting room was empty. The bedroom door was open too. Also empty.

She was gone. The new Luna was not here.

Good.

I set the dish on the table. My hands trembled, and the plate rattled against the wood. The sound felt sharp in the quiet room. Too sharp. Too loud. It made my pulse jump even more.

I stared at the food I had made. Then at the door.

"Luna Fia?" My voice scraped out of me. High. Unsteady. I sounded like someone begging.

There was no answer.

I checked the bathroom. Empty.

She was really gone.

I walked back to the main door and locked it. The click sounded final. Heavy. I leaned against it and pressed my forehead to the wood. I stood there for a long moment, breathing in slow, shaky pulls.

Then I took out my phone.

My hands would not stop shaking. I had to unlock the screen twice before it opened. I scrolled through my contacts until I found his name.

Alpha Aldric.

I pressed call. Lifted the phone to my ear. Each ring crawled by, slow like something dragging through mud.

Then he answered.

"How did this happen, Bo?" His voice exploded through the line. Rage crashed into me. "Tell me how the fuck this happened!"

I flinched. Closed my eyes.

"I don't know," I whispered. The words felt thin. Almost hollow.

"You don't know?" His shout hit my ear like a slap. "This has been running clean for a long while now. No mistakes. No suspicion. Everything was perfect. Then suddenly the whole plan is blown open? Especially when Morrigan is so close to croaking out?"

"I heard the new Luna figured it out," I said. My voice was quiet again. Small.

Silence filled the line. Not empty. Heavy. Sharp. I could almost feel him thinking.

"I thought she was just an Omega," he said at last. His voice had changed. Low now. Cold. "What happened? Are you useless after all?"

The words slid straight under my ribs. They cut deeper than they should have. They landed in places where old wounds lived. Places I never spoke about. Places he knew how to hit.

"Fix this," he said. "Fix this before it's traced back to me. They still believe Gabriel is responsible for all this mess and I have to keep it that way. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said.

"If you cannot do it," he continued. "Tell me now. Tell me so I know what to do next. So I can handle this myself."

I straightened up. Pulled away from the door. My reflection stared back at me from the mirror across the room. I looked so pale and frightened. But nothing could take away my determination.

"I am your greatest soldier," I said. My voice was stronger now. "I believe in your mission. I... love you. I will fix this. Nothing will be traced to you."

I took a breath.

"They got Kayden," I said. "But it will end there. I will make sure to take him out. Whatever they know dies with him."

"So the bitch gets to live then?" Aldric asked.

I hesitated. "We will cross that river. I assure you."

There was another pause. I could hear him breathing on the other end. Thinking.

"Perhaps I underestimated the Omega," he said finally. "Make her a problem for Cian. If you survive this."

"Of course, Alpha," I said.

The line went dead.

I stood there for a moment. The phone still pressed to my ear. The silence on the other end ringing louder than any words.

I had not gotten to say I love you again.

I lowered the phone. Stared at the screen. His name was still there. Alpha Aldric. The man I had followed for years. The man whose vision I believed in. The man who would reshape everything.

And now it was all falling apart.

No. This was fixable. I could fix this.

Kayden knew things. Not too many things. But he did know me. I also knew Kayden would not talk. Not now at least.

But... He was not invincible. He would be broken eventually. Before that happened I had to make sure he would not talk. Whatever it took. Whatever I had to do.

Fia had figured out the poison. Had exposed everything. She was smarter than I thought. More dangerous than I had expected.

Perhaps getting close to her was dangerous to my safety.

No. No. No

Make her a problem, Aldric had said.

So I had to do just that and proximity helped. But first... Kayden.

Chapter 72: The room where it happens

BO

I unlocked the door and stepped out of the Luna's quarters. My legs felt steady now, steadier than they had been all morning. Having a plan did that for me. It grounded me. It kept everything quiet inside my head.

The corridors were alive the moment I entered them. Wolves hurried through the hall, their steps sharp and tense. Voices whispered in corners. I heard bits of conversation float past me, each one laced with fear. The poisoning. The Grand Luna. The prisoners.

No one looked at me directly, but I felt their eyes slip over me as I walked. People always watched when they were scared. I kept my chin low and moved with purpose.

I reached my quarters, slipped inside and locked the door. The sound was crisp. It settled something deep in my chest. I stood still for a moment, listening. Nothing. Good. I was alone.

I crossed the room, grabbed the side of my bed frame and dragged it out of place. The wood scraped over stone and filled the room. I had done this enough times that my muscles moved without thought. Sweat never gathered. My breath never hitched.

There it was.

I crouched and slid my fingers under the loose floorboard. It lifted with a soft sigh of dust. Beneath it sat the box. Plain. Forgettable. The kind of thing no one would look at twice. People expected secrets to look dramatic. That made them easy to hide.

I set the box on the floor beside me. My hands were calm now. My pulse steady. I opened the lid.

The colors inside always struck me. Soft greens. Murky reds. Clear liquids that caught the light. Pills pressed in familiar shapes. Every item had a history. A purpose. A design. This was the work of many years. My quiet study. My careful bought craft.

Alchemized poison never lied. It did exactly what it was made to do. It was simple. Elegant. Predictable. The slow acting ones the witch madewere my favorites. They had taken down Luna Morrigan piece by piece. Gradual, almost gentle, like her body had given up on its own.

But others moved fast. They took minutes. Sometimes seconds.

I reached for a pill the color of dried parchment. Small. Round. A quick killer. I held it near the window and watched the light skim over its surface. It looked innocent.

I turned it between my fingers.

Poisoning Kayden directly was foolish. They would look at everyone who delivered his meals. Everyone who guarded him. Everyone who had been near him. I would be on that list before the ink dried on their report. That path was suicide.

I needed something cleaner. A death that pointed away from me. A story they could accept without digging too deep.

A lone culprit. Cornered. Afraid. Choosing death instead of capture.

People liked simple stories. They offered comfort.

I felt the pill crumble a little under my thumb. Its texture was soft, like chalk. Easy to break apart. Easy to slip into anything.

An idea bloomed. It spread through me slow, then settled firm.

I stood and walked to the desk. I pulled out a plain sheet of paper. Nothing special. No crest. No seal.

I sat and picked up my pen. I waited until the right voice filled my thoughts.

What would Alpha Aldric say? How could I make his voice my own?

I let myself breathe once. Then I lowered the pen to the page and began to write.

'Do not worry. Alpha Aldric has a plan to save you tomorrow. He told me he's returning to Skollrend. Stay strong. Do not speak. Destroy this paper after reading. Swallow it if you have to. Do whatever it takes to make sure no one finds it. Our goals cannot be compromised any further.'

I read it over. It sounded good. Reassuring but urgent. The kind of message someone might send to keep their accomplice calm.

I picked up the pill and started rubbing it against the paper. The chalk-like substance left a fine powder on the surface. I rubbed harder. Made sure it coated the entire sheet. Both sides.

The paper took on a nice sheen. Almost glossy. Like it had been treated with something.

Perfect.

Anyone who put it in their mouth to swallow it... I could only pity them.

Kayden would read the note. He would believe it came from me talking with Aldric. It would settle his heart and then he would do exactly what the note said. He would destroy it.

He would swallow it.

And then he would die.

They would find him dead in his cell. They would search for clues. Maybe they would find traces of the alchemised poison. Maybe they would not. But that didn't matter. What did matter was that it would not be found in the food or water which could be traced back and it would look like he had taken his own life. Like he had chosen death over betrayal.

A dead end.

I folded the paper carefully. Made sure not to touch the treated surfaces too much with my bare skin. I wrapped it in a clean cloth and tucked it into my pocket.

Then I put everything back in the box. Closed the lid. Lowered it into the floor. Replaced the floorboard. Pushed the bed back into place.

Everything looked normal again.

I stood there for a moment. Stared at the bed. At the floor. At the spot where my secrets were buried.

Now I just needed to find a way to get to Kayden without being suspicious.

I left my quarters and locked the door behind me. The hallways were still busy. Still full of whispers and hurried footsteps.

I needed to wash my hands. Even though I had been careful I could not risk any trace of the poison. I also needed to eat. My stomach was grumbling. Loud enough that I could feel it twisting inside me.

Then I remembered. The dish. The food I had made. It was still in the Luna's quarters.

I turned and headed back toward the suite. My mind was already working through the next steps. How to get to Kayden. How to slip him the note. How to make it look natural.

When I reached the Luna's quarters I knocked. Waited.

This time there was an answer. I heard footsteps inside and the door opened.

Fia stood there. She looked tired. Her face was pale. There were dark circles under her eyes.

I let my face shift. Let the distress show. Let my eyes go wide.

"Is it true, Luna Fia?" I asked. My voice came out higher than usual. Breathless.

"It is all true," she said.

"I am horrified," I said. I brought my hand to my chest. Pressed it there like I was trying to steady my heart.

"So am I," she said.

"I brought you a light snack but you weren't around and then I heard the horrid news."

Fia looked at the food on the table and said; "Thank you, But I cannot eat. I have to be somewhere."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

She looked at me for a moment. Then she sighed.

"I just came to take a breather and wash my face," she said. "I and the healers are heading to the dungeons to help the Omegas and Sentinels."

My heart jumped with glee. The dungeons. She was going to the dungeons.

"Help them?" I asked.

"Cian burned them with wolfsbane juice," she said.

Something cold washed over me. Wolfsbane juice. That was brutal. That was torture.

Kayden had taken that. He had taken that and he did not spill. He kept his mouth shut.

I felt something like pride. Brief and strange. But also fear. Because that meant he was scared. Scared enough to endure that kind of pain rather than talk.

He was scared that if he spoke then and there his life would be over. That also meant that the punishments would only get worse.

There was only so much a man could take before he broke completely. Before he became a bitch.

I had to do this. I had to do it now.

And here was my opportunity. Like someone had just dropped it in my lap.

"I should come too, Luna Fia," I said quickly.

She shook her head. "No. I know you want to help. But it is best we keep it small. We are already working with trusted servants. Who knows who else is in on it?"

"I am a trusted servant too," I said. I let my voice crack. Let the emotion bleed through. "I get chills just hearing about it."

I paused. Let my eyes fill with tears. They came easily. I had practiced this enough times.

"I have friends there too," I said. My voice was barely above a whisper now. "Friends that I know in my bones are innocent. I do not want them to suffer needlessly or die if I can help."

A tear slid down my cheek. I did not wipe it away.

"Forgive me, Luna Fia," I said. "But we are both Omegas. We know how weak our immune system is. If we can help them, should we not?"

She stared at me. Her expression was hard to read. I could see her thinking. Weighing my words.

I held my breath.

Finally she nodded.

"Okay," she said. "But stay close by so I can vouch for you."

"Of course," I said. Relief flooded through me. I let it show on my face. Let her see how grateful I was.

"Let us go then," she said.

I followed her out of the suite. My hand went to my pocket. To the folded cloth. To the note hidden inside.

I had what I needed. I had access.

Now I just had to wait for the right moment.

We walked through the corridors together. Fia moved with purpose. Her shoulders were set. Her jaw was tight. She looked like someone on a mission.

It was cute to see the puppet believe she had no strings.

Nonetheless, I stayed close behind her. I kept my face worried. I made an active effort to keep my hands clasped in front of me.

But inside I was smiling.

This was going to work. I was going to fix this. I was going to make sure nothing traced back to Aldric. Nothing traced back to me.

Kayden would die. The investigation would hit a wall. And I would still be here. Still trusted. Still invisible. While Alpha Cian poured hate to Fia when he came to learn that Kayden was his person of interest and that gold mine ended up dead shortly after her meddling hands decided to be something she was not.

We descended the stairs toward the dungeons. The air grew colder. Damper. The stone walls pressed in on both sides.

I could hear voices below. Low and pained. The sound of suffering.

Oh, to be a fly on the wall when the dominoes started to fall.

Chapter 73: Everyone is Dumb 1

CIAN

The technical department hummed around me. Banks of monitors cast blue light across the faces of three technicians hunched over their keyboards. The main screen on the wall showed lines of code scrolling past. Too fast for me to understand. But these people knew what they were doing. They had better know what they were doing.

I stood behind them. My arms crossed over my chest. Watching. Waiting.

The phones were spread across the table in front of them. Ten devices in plastic evidence bags. Each one labeled with a name. Each one a potential key to finding who tried to kill my mother.

"Starting the deep dive now, Alpha," the lead technician said. A man named Roth with thick glasses that kept sliding down his nose. He pushed them up with one finger. Then his hands flew across the keyboard.

"Pull everything," I said. "Messages. Call logs. Deleted files. App usage. Banking information. All of it."

"Already on it," another technician said. A woman with short red hair. Her eyes never left her screen.

I watched the data start to populate on the main monitor. Lines and lines of information. Phone numbers. Timestamps. Transaction records. It was overwhelming. Like trying to drink from a fire hose.

The hours dragged by. My feet started to ache from standing in one position. My shoulders were tight with tension. But I did not move. Did not sit. Did not look away from those screens.

"Most of this is normal," Roth said after the first hour. "Social media. Pack communication apps. Gaming. Shopping."

"Keep digging," I said.

They kept digging.

More hours passed. The third technician, a younger man who had not spoken yet, got up to get coffee. Came back with four cups. Set one next to me. I picked it up. Drank it. It was cold by the time I remembered it was there.

"Got something," the red-haired woman said.

My whole body went rigid. "What?"

"Bank transfers. Four phones showing unusual activity." She tapped her screen. Four names appeared on the main monitor. Three sentinels. One omega.

"Show me," I said.

She pulled up the transaction histories. Large sums of money moving through accounts. Larger than what any sentinel or omega should have been handling. Unless they were doing something illegal.

"The omega's transactions track back to an online gambling site," she said after a few more minutes of typing. "Looks legitimate. Well, as legitimate as gambling gets. They have been losing money mostly. Some wins. But the pattern is consistent with someone who has a problem."

"Scratch them off the list," I said. Gambling addiction was its own issue. But it was not attempted murder.

"The three sentinels though," she continued. Her fingers moved rapidly across her keyboard. Windows opened and closed on her screen. "Two of them are clean. The money moving through their accounts matches up with legitimate side businesses. One runs a small training program for younger wolves. The other does woodworking. Both have receipts. Both have proper documentation it seems."

"And the third?" I asked. My voice came out rough.

"The third," Roth said, taking over as he pulled up a new screen. "Has received a very large payment. Single transaction. Obscene amount for a sentinel's salary. He also sent plenty of that money to a different account."

The number on the screen made my stomach drop. That was more than a sentinel made in a year. Maybe two years.

"When?" I asked.

"Four months ago," the red-haired woman said.

My hands clenched into fists. My nails bit into my palms. Four fucking months. Someone had paid this sentinel.

"Trace it," I said. "Find out who sent the money."

Roth nodded. His fingers flew across the keyboard. Code scrolled across his screen. Numbers and symbols I could not begin to understand. The younger technician leaned over to help. Both of them worked in tandem. Typing. Clicking. Pulling up new windows and closing old ones.

Minutes passed. Then more minutes. The tension in my shoulders spread down my spine. Into my legs. My whole body felt coiled. Ready to spring.

"It is encrypted," Roth said finally. "High level security. Military grade maybe. Or something close to it."

"Can you break it?" I asked.

"Not quickly," he admitted. He pushed his glasses up again. "This is sophisticated work. Whoever sent this money knew how to cover their tracks."

My jaw clenched. Of course they did. Of course Gabriel would not be stupid enough to send money from an account traced directly to him. Not when he coveted what belonged to me and blatant treason wouldn't get him the vote of confidence he would need from the Elders.

"Then trace the recipient," I said. "Find out who received the money. Find out what they did with it."

All three technicians turned back to their screens. The room filled with the sound of typing. Rapid fire clicks. The hum of computers working overtime.

I stood there. Watching. My coffee cup was empty in my hand. I did not remember finishing it. Did not remember drinking most of it.

The main monitor showed layers of financial records. Bank statements. Transaction histories. Digital footprints that these people were following like breadcrumbs through a dark forest.

More time passed. The window behind us showed darkness outside. Night had fallen. How long had I been standing here? Four hours? Five? I had lost track.

"Got it," the younger technician said suddenly. His voice cracked slightly with excitement. "I found where the money went."

"Talk," I said.

He pulled up a new screen. A name appeared. Along with an address. A business license.

"Ophelia Cottonwood," he read. "Runs a shop in the neutral zone. According to our database, she is a witch. Part of the Shadow Society registry as well."

"Cottonwood," I said. The name felt heavy in my mouth.

The technician typed more. Pulled up more information. "Yes, Alpha. Her shop specializes in potions, readings, and," he paused. His eyes went wide behind his screen. "Poison."

"What kind of poison?" I asked. But I already knew. Could feel it in my gut. A sick, twisting certainty.

He adjusted his own glasses. "Alchemised poison. Says so right here in her business description. Custom blends. Magical enhancements. Untraceable formulas."

The room felt like it was shrinking. My vision tunneled down to that name on the screen. Ophelia Cottonwood. A witch who made poison. A witch who had been paid an obscene amount of money for my mother to be attacked.

"Whose phone?" I demanded. My voice came out too loud. Too sharp. "Whose phone made that transaction?"

Roth checked his screen and scrolled back through the data. His face went pale.

"Kayden," he said quietly. "The payment came from Sentinel Kayden's account."

Kayden. My chest felt tight. My lungs refused to pull in enough air. Kayden had been with my family for years. He had guarded my mother. Had stood at her door. Had sworn oaths of loyalty.

And he had paid a witch to help poison her.

My hands were shaking. I pressed them flat against the table. Felt the cold metal beneath my palms. It did nothing to calm the rage building inside me. The hot, vicious fury that wanted to tear something apart. To make someone bleed.

"Are you certain?" I asked. My voice was barely above a whisper.

"Yes, Alpha," Roth said. "The transaction originated from his phone. His account. There is no mistake."

I took a deep breath. Then another. The air felt thick. Hard to swallow. But I forced myself to stay calm. To think clearly. To not just run down to the cells and rip Kayden's throat out with my bare hands.

"Drag the bastard here," I said. Each word was deliberate. Controlled. "Right now."

The red-haired technician grabbed a phone. Made the call. Her voice was professional. Efficient. Telling the guards to bring Kayden to technical immediately.

I turned back to the screen. Stared at that name. Ophelia Cottonwood. A witch in the neutral zone. Someone Gabriel must have contacted. Must have paid through Kayden to keep his own hands clean.

But we had him now. We had the trail. The money. The proof.

And Kayden was going to tell me everything. Every last detail. Every conversation. Every moment of his betrayal.

Or I was going to make him wish he had never been born.

Chapter 74: Everyone is Dumb 2

FIA

The dungeons had taken something from me. Not just energy. Something deeper. Something I did not know how to name.

We climbed the stairs in silence. Each step felt heavy. My legs dragged. My arms still throbbed from holding bowls and wringing cloths. The smell of wolfsbane clung to my skin. Sharp and bitter. It made my nose itch and my eyes sting a little.

Bo walked behind me with soft footsteps. Careful. Gentle. Like she did not want to disturb whatever was left of my thoughts.

When we reached my quarters I pushed open the door and went straight to the bed. I did not bother to pretend I had grace. I just fell onto the mattress and let it swallow my weight.

The ceiling stared back at me. Plain stone. Cold. Steady. It felt familiar in a strange way. Like the only thing today that had not shifted.

"That was fulfilling," I said. My voice sounded thin to my own ears.

"Right?" Bo answered. Her tone was light, almost cheerful, like she was trying to guide me back toward something softer.

I turned my head. She stood near the door with her hands clasped in front of her. Calm. Patient. Watching me in that quiet way she always did.

"At least I can sleep easy knowing everyone will be fine," I said. I let my eyes slide shut for a moment. Let the weight of the day settle over me. "I still do not understand why anyone would poison the Grand Luna. She is kind. She treats people well."

Bo did not respond immediately. The pause felt long. Then she said, "Sometimes people are just chosen to be sacrifice."

The words hit something inside me. They dropped into my chest and sank there. Heavy.

"You are right," I said softly. I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling again. "It reminds me of myself. My sister sacrificed me for her own plans and I survived it."

Bo shifted her weight. The floor creaked. The sound was small, almost shy.

"It is cruel," I whispered. "To know you can give good and mean well and still never get the same back. But I guess the universe has a way of settling things. Maybe that is pride speaking, but maybe I do belong here. Maybe fate tries to make sense in its own way."

My eyes drifted across the room. They landed on the table. On the dish sitting there, untouched.

"Oh. The food you brought earlier," I said. "I forgot it was there."

I pushed myself up from the bed. My body protested at once. My muscles burned. Every movement felt like a fresh complaint. But hunger pushed through it. I had not eaten since morning and my stomach twisted hard enough to hurt.

I moved toward the table.

Bo moved faster. She crossed the room with quick steps and snatched the plate before I could reach it.

"I will warm it for you in the small kitchen area," she said.

I blinked and watched her fingers curl around the plate.

That was when I saw it.

Her fingertips were blue. Not her whole hand, only the first two joints. A deep shade that looked close to purple under the dim light.

I reached out and caught her hand.

"What is up with your hand?" I asked.

She pulled away at once. The movement was sharp and too sudden to be casual.

"Do not dirty your hands, Luna Fia," she said. Her voice sounded steady on the surface, but something underneath it felt tight. "It is only residue from the medicine we handled in the dungeons."

I nodded slowly. "Right."

She turned and walked toward the small kitchen area.

I watched her back as she moved. Each step careful. Too controlled.

My hand lifted to my nose without thought.

The scent hit me hard. Sharp and earthy. Nightshade. That bitter green smell I had learned to fear. I knew it from healer lessons, from warnings, from every caution I had ever studied.

But there was something sweet mixed in. Almost floral. It smelt like a perfume sitting over poison.

My heart stopped.

We had not touched Nightshade in the dungeons. Not once. None of the treatments used it. Nothing we handled could have stained her fingers blue. Nothing could have carried that scent.

My eyes widened.

"Goddess," I breathed.

Bo froze halfway to the kitchen. Her back stayed turned. Then she turned around slowly. Her face calm. Curious. Like she was observing a mild change in the weather.

"What is wrong, Luna Fia?" she asked.

"No no no," I said. The words tumbled out, thin and shaking. My hands trembled. My whole body trembled. I could not stop it.

I stared at her. At her smooth expression. At her blue fingers. At the plate she was still holding.

"Bo," I said. "What did you do?"

She tilted her head a little. A small smile touched her lips.

"I am lost," she said.

"You must think me a fool," I said. My voice came out harder now, sharp enough to cut the air. I stepped toward her, even though my legs felt like they were sinking into water. "It is you. You are the traitor, are you not?"

The smile spread across her face. Slow. Deliberate. It was like watching a mask fall away.

She set the plate down on the small table beside her. The movement was gentle. Almost delicate.

"Wow. He was right about you. You are smarter than even I gave you credit for," she said.

My blood ran cold.

"Answer me," I said.

Bo laughed. It was a soft sound. Musical. The kind of laugh you would hear at a party. At a celebration. Not here. Not now.

"You want an answer?" she said. "Fine. Yes. It is me. Are you happy now?"

I felt the ground tilt beneath my feet. The room spun. I grabbed the edge of the bed to steady myself.

"Why?" I asked. The word came out broken. "Why would you do this?"

Bo shrugged. The gesture was casual. Like we were talking about the weather. Like we were discussing what to have for dinner.

"Why does anyone do anything, Omega?" she said. "Power. Safety. Survival. Pick one."

"You poisoned the Grand Luna for...power..." I said. "She trusted you. She trusted all of you."

"She was in the way," Bo said. Her voice was flat now. Just as it was empty. "People who stand in the way get moved. That is just how things work. It is the way of the world."

I felt something hot rise in my chest. Anger. Fear. Betrayal. They all swirled together until I could not tell them apart.

"So the help you rendered at the dungeon then was to cover your tracks. Wasn't it? It was to kill your companion to save yourself."

"What the fuck do you think you know?!"

Chapter 75: Long Live the Queen

FIA

I looked at the door. Then back at Bo.

The distance between us was maybe ten feet. She was small. Slight. I had trained with warriors. I had sparred with guards who outweighed me by a hundred pounds. I could take her.

But what did I really know about this Omega?

She had lied to my face for days. She had smiled while she poisoned. She had held my hand while she plotted murder. Everything I thought I knew about her was a story she had written for me to read.

"Why would you ally with anyone but your Alpha?" I asked. My voice came out steadier than I felt. "You swore oaths. You made vows."

Bo's smile twisted. "I do not owe you anything."

"But I know what I know now." I kept my eyes on her hands. On the blue staining her fingertips. "So what happens? What are you going to do?"

Something shifted in her face. The playfulness drained away. What remained was something harder. Colder.

"I did not want to have to do this," she said. Her voice dropped low. Almost sad. "But Goddess, you are so nosy. Nothing seems to escape your eye."

She took a step toward me.

"Nothing," she continued, "except the fact that your own sister and stepmother tricked you into a marriage to Alpha Cian. And of course you believed I gave a fuck about you."

The words landed like blows. Each one struck something soft inside me. Because it was true.

Then she dropped the plate.

It shattered against the stone floor. The sound was sharp and sudden and it made me flinch. Before I could react she bent down fast and snatched up a shard. The edge caught the light. Long, jagged and fucking wicked.

"New stories can be spun," she said. She straightened slowly. The shard glinted in her grip. "I just need to take you out."

I stepped back. My heel caught on the edge of a rug and I stumbled but did not fall.

"You do not need to do that," I said as I raised my hands in front of me. I hoped to look open and pleading. "You fell for this Alpha Gabriel's propaganda. You believe that he will—"

Bo laughed. The sound was sharp and ugly.

"Shut the fuck up," she said. "Jeez, just shut the fuck up!"

"Bo—"

"Do not fucking psychoanalyze me." Her voice rose. Her calm mask cracked and something raw showed through. "You do not know me. You want to know why I aligned myself with Alpha Gabriel?"

She advanced another step. I moved back. My shoulders hit the wall.

"I did it because he is infinitely better," she said. "Cian is rough and young. He does not know what the fuck he is doing so he lashes out. You saw how badly he treated you for the longest time. Why do you think that is?"

I did not answer. I could not. My throat had closed up.

"Because most of them already see us Omegas as scum," she spat. "The lowest. Manipulative. Worthless. You should see the disgust they have for us when we are in heat." Her lip curled. "It does not stop them from using us though."

She was close now. Too close. The shard hovered between us like a promise.

"Ask yourself why ninety-five percent of the Omegas here are female," she said. "Think about that, you fool."

"Cian was cruel to me because he believed he was played," I said. The words tumbled out fast. Desperate. "And the Omega rule was made because men will always distrust other men. It was a quiet law that Alphas carried out because they could not trust their women to not want what they deemed lower Omega male flesh. Over the centuries the reason behind it has changed even if it is very slow—"

Bo chuckled. The sound was dark.

"Now that Luna Morrigan does not have the rot," she said softly, "and Alpha Cian does not have to fear that the Goddess will punish him for defying her hand in your marriage... do you think he will stay with you?"

She tilted her head. Her eyes glittered.

"When his heart belongs to another?"

The words hit me like a punch to the stomach. I could not breathe.

"Maybe if you knew," Bo whispered, "you would have let that bitch Morrigan fucking die."

She lunged.

I saw it coming. Some part of me had been waiting for it. I twisted sideways and her first strike missed my throat by inches. The shard whistled past my ear.

I grabbed her wrist. Twisted. She hissed and tried to pull free but I held on. My other hand came up and caught her shoulder. I shoved hard and she stumbled back.

But she recovered fast. Faster than I expected.

She came at me again. Low this time. Her body slammed into mine and we went down together. My back hit the floor and the impact drove the air from my lungs.

She scrambled on top of me. Her weight pressed down. The shard flashed up.

I caught her wrist with both hands. Held it back. The point hovered above my face. Trembling.

"Get off me," I gasped.

She did not answer. She just pushed. Her whole body leaned into it. The shard inched closer.

I was stronger than her. I knew I was. But she had leverage and position and something else. Something that burned in her eyes. I could not pinpoint what it was. Hate, fear or desperation. Perhaps it was all of it.

The shard crept lower.

I tried to buck her off. She shifted her weight and stayed on. I tried to roll. She hooked her leg around mine and pinned me flat.

"Just hold still," she said through gritted teeth. "It will be over soon."

I twisted my head to the side. The shard slipped past and drove into the stone floor next to my ear. Sparks flew.

She yanked it free and struck again.

This time I got my hand up.

The shard bit into my palm.

Pain exploded through me. White hot. Blinding. I screamed. The sound tore out of my throat raw and ragged.

Blood ran hot down my wrist. Down my arm. I could feel it pooling beneath me on the cold stone.

Bo wrenched the shard free and raised it again. My injured hand grabbed at her weakly. But it slipped and just left red streaks on her sleeve.

"Help!" I screamed. The word ripped out of me. "Someone help me! Please!"

Bo leaned in close. Her breath was warm against my face. Her eyes were empty.

"Every sentinel will be focused on who matters now," she said. "The Alpha."

My heart stopped.

Cian. Of course they were going to be with Cian.

Something cracked open inside me. Something I had been holding back without even realizing or acknowledging it. A door I had kept shut because I was scared of what lay on the other side.

The mate bond.

I reached for it. Not carefully. Not gently. I threw myself at it with everything I had. Every scrap of strength. Every ounce of desperation. Every bit of fear, pain and need.

The bond flared to life like an ember in fucking dry paper.

It was like touching fire. Like plunging my hand into ice water. Like standing in a storm and feeling lightning strike right next to me.

I felt him.

Distant. Occupied. His attention elsewhere.

I screamed down the bond. Not with words. With everything. With the terror clawing at my chest. With the pain burning in my hand. With the weight of Bo pressing me into the floor.

CIAN.

The shard came down again.

I caught her wrist. Barely. My grip was weak. Slick with blood. Sliding.

CIAN PLEASE.

I could feel him turning. Feel his attention shifting. Feel something like confusion and then alarm rippling through the bond.

Bo pressed harder. The shard touched my throat. Cold. Sharp.

"Goodbye, Luna Fia," she whispered.

I closed my eyes and reached one more time.

HELP ME.

Chapter 76: You cannot fight fate

CIAN

The sentinels returned quicker than they should have. Their boots struck the floor in a frantic rhythm that set my nerves on edge. But they didn't come with the bastard I wanted. I waited for the usual report, the stiff posture, the salute. Instead I got silence. Their faces were drained of color. Their eyes stayed glued to the ground.

A warning in itself.

"What the fuck is holding your tongue?" I snapped. "And where is he?"

They traded looks like boys caught stealing from the kitchen. Fear rolled off them in waves.

"Speak," I said again, this time quieter and cold.

One stepped forward. His throat bobbed. "Alpha, Kayden was found unconscious in his cell. Foaming at the mouth."

Cold hit me so fast it felt like my blood froze solid.

"We called for the healers right away," he added. "But it looked critical. Very critical."

Perfect timing. Perfect sabotage. Right when everything depended on him staying alive.

I pushed past them and ran. The corridors rushed by as nothing more than streaks of stone and shadow. My heart hammered so hard it hurt. Every second felt like another nail driven into my skull.

I crashed through the infirmary doors. The smell punched me. Medicine. Blood. A bitter tang that clung to the air.

My mother was on one of the beds. Pale. Motionless. Covered in a web of wires and monitors that kept her currently fragile body alive. Seeing her like that made something deep in me twist. But I forced myself to look away.

Kayden was the priority.

Maren and Elder Thorne worked on him like soldiers on a battlefield. Their hands moved quickly but not fast enough for my sanity. Kayden's body convulsed in violent jerks. Foam gathered at the corners of his mouth. His eyes were rolled back as if he was already halfway gone.

"What the fuck is wrong with him?" I demanded.

Maren looked up at me and any scrap of hope I wanted to cling to died. Her face was tight with strain. "It looks like poison, Alpha."

"How the hell would poison get into his cell?" I stepped closer. Watched Kayden's chest seize. Watched his limbs jerk beyond his control. "He was locked down. Under constant surveillance."

"He may have realized he was cornered," Maren said. She grabbed another vial, plunged a needle into his arm. "Some prisoners choose death over interrogation. It would not be the first time."

Coward. The word scraped through my head like metal on stone. That fucking coward.

"Then do not let him die," I said. My voice came out like ice. "I want him breathing. I want him talking. You bring him back if he stops."

Maren kept working, but her head shook slightly. "We will do everything we can, Alpha. But this is alchemised poison. It carries the same base signature as your mother's. Not the same mixture, but the same creator."

A different poison. The same hands behind it.

Ophelia Cottonwood. The neutral zone witch. Too clever for her own good. Too dangerous for mine.

"None of this adds up," I muttered. My mind tried to assemble the pieces and failed. Every guess brought another question. "Kayden had no access. No contact. No way to smuggle this in to the dungeons. It should be impossible."

Elder Thorne glanced up briefly. "Yet it happened."

I looked from Kayden's trembling body to my mother's still one. Two attacks. Two poisons. Two perfect opportunities.

"Could there be another accomplice?" I asked. My voice sounded calm, but my pulse was a storm. "Someone even closer. Someone inside."

Elder Thorne looked up from crushing herbs. His old hands were steady despite everything. "We went with Luna Fia to the dungeons to treat them. We gave them no food. Whatever he took had to be willing."

"It still does not prove that someone else is not in on this," I said. The words tasted sour. Wrong. Something was nagging at me. Something I could not quite grasp. "He would have gotten it from somewhere after all."

I turned back to Maren. "Just try to keep him here. We know who did the poisons. We will get to them soon."

"We will..." Maren started.

She did not finish.

The machines screamed. A long, flat tone that cut through everything. Kayden's body went rigid. Then limp.

"No no no." I rushed forward. Pushed Maren aside. Grabbed Kayden's shoulders. "Bring the fucker back. Bring the bastard back."

I pressed my hands to his chest. Started compressions. One. Two. Three. His ribs cracked under the pressure but I did not stop. I could not stop.

"Alpha." Thorne's hand landed on my shoulder. Gentle. Firm. "He is dead."

I spun on him. "Because you two are incompetent."

Something flickered in Thorne's ancient eyes. Pain maybe. Or understanding. "We apologize for making you feel that way."

"I do not just feel that way." I pointed at him. My finger shook with rage. "I know—"

Then pain hit me like a blade between the ribs.

It was not physical. Not really. But it burned through my chest all the same. Sharp. Urgent. Desperate.

It came with something else as well. A feeling. Almost like a thought but stronger. It rushed through my heart and my skin prickled with goosebumps. Every hair on my body stood on end.

CIAN.

I could sense it was her. It felt like a voice. Her voice. It was thick with her fear. Her terror.

"Goddess," I breathed. "Fia."

Then I ran.

The mate bond pulled at me like a rope. Like a magnet. Like gravity itself had shifted and everything was drawing me toward her. I had never felt it like this before. Never felt anything like this. The intensity was staggering.

CIAN PLEASE.

I ran faster. My lungs burned. My legs screamed. But I pushed harder.

The hallways stretched endlessly. Corners appeared and disappeared. Sentinels tried to speak to me and I shoved past them without stopping.

HELP ME.

The Luna Suite doors filled my sight like a target. I did not slow. I did not reach for the handle.

I kicked them open.

The world stopped breathing.

Fia lay sprawled on the floor. Blood soaked the carpet. Her palms were smeared red where she tried to push herself up. More blood pooled beneath her knees, staining her clothes and streaking her arms. And on top of her was Bo. The quiet, obedient omega I had handpicked to guard Fia. The one I had trusted.

She held a piece of glass. Long. Jagged. The kind that could rip a throat open in a single stroke. The shard pressed against Fia's skin. Already cutting. Already drawing a steady line of crimson.

The roar that broke out of me was pure instinct, a sound from before language existed.

I ran.

Bo's head jerked up. Her eyes widened with the realization that she had been caught. She hesitated for a fraction of a second. Then she chose violence. She drove the shard toward Fia's throat. Hard.

I hit her like a storm.

The force tore her off Fia's body. The glass dragged across Fia's neck as Bo flew backward. A thin line of blood opened. Too close. Too fucking close.

Before she reached the floor, my hand closed around her neck.

Her body jerked in my grip. She slashed at me with the shard, wild and desperate. She aimed for my eyes, my chest, any place soft enough to pierce.

I caught her wrist. Slammed it into the wall so hard the sound echoed through the suite. The crack of bone was sharp and beautiful. The shard tumbled from her fingers and shattered on the floor at our feet.

Her scream cut through the air, high and sharp. I did not loosen my grip.

My head turned toward Fia. She was upright now, holding her bleeding neck with one trembling hand. Her skin was washed out. Her breathing shallow. Her eyes wide with shock and pain.

Seeing her blood on the floor flipped something inside my skull. Rage poured into my veins like acid. I felt it eat through restraint. Through reason. Through mercy.

"What the fuck is happening?" I growled. The words vibrated from somewhere deep inside me.

Fia swallowed with difficulty. "She works for Alpha Gabriel. I think she poisoned the person helping her in the dungeons."

I stared at Bo. At the trembling body in my hand. At the snake I had fed and trusted.

"Oh," I said. Quiet. Almost gentle. "It was you."

I tightened my grip.

Her face reddened. Darkened. Her mouth opened in a silent cry. Her legs thrashed. Her nails tore at my skin, leaving burning lines along my forearm.

I did not feel a thing.

"Who else is in your league?" I asked.

Her lips moved without sound. Her eyes bulged. She clawed at my hand like a drowning woman reaching for the surface.

I loosened my hold just enough for air to wheeze through her throat.

She sucked in a broken breath. Then she smiled. A warped little thing. The same cold arrogance I had seen in her file. The same deceit I had overlooked when I placed her beside Fia.

"You have no idea what is coming for you and your family," she hissed.

Behind me, Fia's voice came soft but urgent. "Keep her alive. We might need her."

Bo laughed. The sound rattled like something dying already. "I will never betray my ranks."

My hold tightened by instinct. Her pulse fluttered beneath my fingers, thin and frantic.

She looked at me again. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Your mother will suffer. You will die." Her eyes slid toward Fia. "And your fake Luna will bleed."

Something in my head snapped.

A line. A limit. A lock that kept my darkest instincts contained. It broke cleanly.

I leaned in. "Go first," I said. Calm now. Too calm. "Make the way for us."

And I twisted.

Her neck cracked like rotten wood. Loud, sharp and final.

I let her drop.

She hit the floor in a violent spasm. Her back arched. Her mouth gaped open. Wet choking sounds gurgled from her throat as her body tried to breathe without a working spine and throat. Her heels scraped helplessly against the ground, making small dragging sounds.

Her eyes rolled. Her limbs jerked. Foam formed at the corner of her lips. Blood seeped from her useless nose.

Then everything went still.

Silence fell heavy over the room. Only Fia's ragged breathing broke it.

And Bo lay there twisted on the floor, neck bent wrong, eyes wide open, staring up at nothing she could ever report back to again.

I turned to Fia. She was staring at the body. Her eyes were wide with horror. Her face had gone even paler than before.

"What the fuck did you do?" she breathed.

I ignored the question and crossed to her in two strides before knelling beside her.

"Put pressure on it," I said. My hands found her shoulders. Steadied her.

"Cian—"

"Put pressure on it."

She pressed her hand harder against her neck. The blood seeped through her fingers. Not arterial. Not fatal. But enough to make my chest ache with something I did not want to name.

I lifted her in my arms. She was lighter than I expected. Or maybe the adrenaline was still pumping through my veins. Making everything feel different. Wrong.

I carried her out of the suite. Stepped over Bo's body without looking down.

Chapter 77: Use me 1

FIA

I thought I was going to die.

Not in the abstract way you think about death when you're young and it feels like some far-off thing that happens to other people. No. I thought I was going to die right there on that floor with glass pressed to my throat and Bo's weight crushing my chest.

The fear was unlike anything I had ever known. It crawled through my veins like ice water. It squeezed my lungs until breathing felt like drowning. Every second stretched into an eternity while my mind screamed at me to move, to fight, to do something. But my body would not listen. My limbs felt heavy and wrong. The blood on my palms made everything slippery. I could not get purchase. Could not push her off.

So I reached for him.

I did not know if it would work. The bond between us was still new. Still strange. But I threw everything I had into it. All my terror. All my desperation. His name ripped through my mind like a prayer I did not know I believed in.

And then he came.

The doors exploded inward and there he was. Cian. His face twisted into something I had never seen before. Something primal and dark and utterly terrifying.

He moved so fast I barely tracked it. One moment Bo was on top of me. The next she was flying through the air. The glass dragged across my neck as she went and I felt the sting of it opening my skin. But I was alive. I was still alive.

I watched him.

Goddess help me, I watched every second of what he did to her.

His hand closed around her throat like it belonged there. Like violence was just another language he spoke fluently. She slashed at him with the broken glass. Wild. Desperate. He caught her wrist and slammed it into the wall. The crack of bone was so loud it echoed through the room.

She screamed and he did not flinch.

His eyes found mine while he held her there. Checking. Making sure. And something passed between us through the bond. Something raw and unfiltered. He had not put his emotions in a bubble. Neither had I. So I felt it all.

His rage. His fear. His desperate need to protect me.

He was acting from a position of care. I knew it the same way I knew my own heartbeat. This brutal, violent thing he was doing. It came from somewhere soft. Somewhere that wanted me safe.

That did not make it less terrifying.

When he turned back to Bo, his face went blank. Empty. Like someone had reached inside him and switched off everything that made him humane.

I tried to speak. Tried to tell him to stop. That we needed her alive. That she might have information.

"Keep her alive," I managed. My voice came out thin and shaky. "We might need her."

Bo laughed. The sound made my stomach turn. "I will never betray my ranks."

Then she looked at me. Right at me. Her eyes were bright with something cruel.

"Your mother will suffer," she said to Cian. "You will die." Her gaze slid to mine. "And your fake Luna will bleed."

I saw the moment it happened. The moment whatever was holding Cian together just broke.

He leaned close to her. His voice dropped to something quiet. Almost gentle. "Go first. Make the way for us."

And he twisted.

The sound her neck made would haunt me for the rest of my life. It was wet and sharp and final. Like branches snapping in a storm.

He let her drop.

She hit the floor and her body did not know it was dead yet. Her back arched off the ground. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish pulled from water. These horrible gurgling sounds came from her throat. Her heels scraped against the floor. Dragging. Twitching.

Then nothing.

She just lay there. Neck bent at an angle that should not exist. Eyes open and staring at the ceiling.

I could not look away.

"What the fuck did you do?" The words came out of me in a breath. I did not mean to say them. They just spilled out.

Cian ignored me. He crossed the room in two strides and knelt beside me. His hands found my shoulders. Steadied me.

"Put pressure on it," he said.

"Cian—"

"Put pressure on it."

I pressed my hand harder against my neck. The blood kept seeping through my fingers. Warm and sticky and wrong.

Then he lifted me.

His arms went under my back and my knees and suddenly the floor was gone. I was pressed against his chest and he was carrying me like I weighed nothing at all. Like I was something precious that might break if he was not careful.

We stepped over Bo's body. He did not look down.

The hallway passed in a blur. My vision was starting to swim at the edges. Colors bled into each other. Shapes lost their sharpness.

Two omegas appeared ahead of us. Their faces went pale when they saw the blood.

"There is a body in the Luna Suite," Cian said. His voice was flat. Businesslike. "Take it to the morgue. Get the room cleaned."

They nodded and hurried past us without a word.

I kept my eyes on his face. It was the only thing that stayed in focus. The hard line of his jaw. The tension in his brow. The way his eyes stayed fixed ahead like he could will the infirmary closer just by staring at it.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He looked down at me. "For what?"

"I did not know she was that way." My throat hurt to speak. The words came out rough. "She used me. And I let her."

Something flickered across his face. Something almost as soft as the way he was in that room. "Sometimes we just want to believe people are good."

"What if there are more?" I asked. The thought made my chest tight. "You could regret the choice you made."

He looked at me then. Really looked. And I felt something bloom between us through the bond. Something warm. Something fragile. Something I could tell he didn't like but it didn't stop it from flourishing nonetheless.

Then he turned his eyes forward again.

"I have no regrets."

He said it simply. Like it was just a fact. Like the sky was blue and water was wet and he had no regrets about killing someone with his bare hands.

"I know the witch who helped with this mess," he continued. "I will be saving my mother."

Oh. The pieces of why he made such a drastic choice were starting to fit together in my head but the edges kept blurring.

But I also could not take what Bo had said out of my head. If his mother was cured and there was no rot, then she could live a long and fulfilled life. He didn't need to keep the ruse of marriage. There was indeed someone else at the forefront of his mind.

The blonde witch. He would let me go, wouldn't he?

That was supposed to be good. It was what I wanted from the very beginning. So... Why didn't it feel good? Why did it almost hurt?

I shook the unbidden thought. Because there was no way. Not even if hell froze over. I was being this way because he came through when I needed him. That had to be it.

That made sense. I needed to think of something else. Anything else.

"Phone," I said suddenly. "Bo had a phone. You could find out who else she was working with."

"Don't bother your pretty head with that." His grip on me tightened slightly. "I know this is Uncle Gabriel's doing. All the bastard knows how to do is fucking hide. Use others to his advantage." His jaw clenched. "But the next time I see him, I will let him know I am not to be fucked with."

I heard him. I got what he meant. But more servants could be loyal to Gabriel and they would be dangerous to have around.

I wanted to voice that out. But my body was starting to feel strange. Lighter somehow. Like I was floating just above his arms instead of resting in them.

"I don't feel so good."

"We are almost there." He started walking faster. His boots struck the floor in a rapid rhythm. "Just keep your eyes on me."

I tried.

Goddess knows I tried.

His face swam in and out of focus. I could see the worry there now. The fear. It cracked through that blank mask he had been wearing. Made him look younger somehow. More human.

He was scared.

For me.

The thought wrapped around my heart and squeezed. Here was this man who had just killed someone without hesitation. Who had snapped a woman's neck like it was nothing. And now he was scared because I was hurt.

I wanted to tell him I was fine. That I had survived worse. That a little blood loss was not going to take me out.

But my tongue felt thick in my mouth. My eyelids felt heavy. The world was tilting sideways and I could not make it stop.

The last thing I saw was his face above me. The last thing I felt was the steady beat of his heart against my cheek.

Then everything went dark.

Chapter 78: Use me 2

CIAN

The doors to the healer quarters slammed open so hard the hinges screamed. I did not care if they broke.

"Thorne! Maren!" My voice came out raw. Desperate. "Do something."

Maren looked up from her workstation. Her eyes went wide when she saw Fia in my arms. The blood seeping through her fingers. The way her head lolled against my chest.

She moved fast. I had to give her that.

"Bring a bed!" she shouted at the omegas behind her. "Now!"

They scrambled. A wheeled cot appeared and I laid Fia down on it. Her hand fell away from her neck and the wound gaped at me. Red and angry and still bleeding.

Maren pressed a thick bandage against it. Her hands were steady. Mine were not.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Mad." The word tasted bitter in my mouth. "Another disloyal wolf. She tried to kill Fia for discovering her."

Maren nodded. She did not ask more questions. She simply just got to work.

I watched her hands move. Quick. Efficient. She pressed harder on the bandage and Fia made a small sound. Barely there. But I heard it.

"Where is Thorne?"

"Greenhouse." Maren did not look up. "Attending to his herbs."

Of course he was. The one time I actually needed the old bastard and he was playing in the dirt.

"Sera," Maren said to one of the omegas. "Fetch me the—"

"Fuck that."

The words came out sharper than I meant them to. Maren finally looked at me.

"I barely trust any of them at this point." I stepped closer to the cot. "What do you need them to do? I will do it."

Something flickered across her face. Surprise maybe. Or understanding. Either way she did not argue.

"Basin of warm water. Clean cloths. The brown bottle on the third shelf. And the suturing kit from the cabinet."

I moved.

The basin sat in the corner, waiting. I turned on the tap and let the water rise, steam curling up as I dipped my wrist in. Too hot. I eased the tap until the heat softened, checked again, and let out a small breath when it came out just right.

The cloths were easy. The brown bottle took longer because there were a dozen damn bottles on the third shelf and none of them were labeled properly. I grabbed the one that looked brownest and smelled right from all my time here and brought everything to Maren.

She worked while I watched.

The bleeding slowed under her hands. She cleaned the wound with careful strokes. The water in the basin turned pink then red then something darker.

"Hold this," she said.

I held.

"Press here."

I pressed.

"Now lift her head. Gently."

I lifted. Gently.

Fia's hair was matted with blood. It stuck to my fingers in dark clumps. She looked so small like this. So fragile. I had seen her stand up to me. Argue with me. Lie to my face without flinching. But now she just looked like a girl who had almost died.

Because of me.

Because I had not gotten there fast enough.

Maren stitched the wound closed with neat little movements. Each one made my stomach twist. But I did not look away. I owed her that much at least. To witness what my failure had cost her.

"Done," Maren said finally. She stepped back and wiped her hands on a cloth. "The wound was not as deep as it looked. She lost blood but not enough to be dangerous. She will heal."

I should have felt relief. But I felt nothing.

I walked to the basin and plunged my hands into the water. The red swirled off my skin in lazy spirals. I scrubbed until my knuckles ached. Until the water ran clear. Until there was no trace of what I had done.

"She looks pale." I stared down at my clean hands. They did not feel clean. "And cold."

"There is something that can help with that."

I turned. Maren was watching me with an expression I could not read.

"A lot of the time I do not buy Thorne's traditional bullshit," she said. "It is why I chose alternative medicine for wolves in the first place instead of just being a native healer. But many times we still work in synergy." She paused. "So I know this."

"Know what?"

"When a wolf is injured badly, being close to their mate and their warmth does miracles for them." She held up a hand before I could speak. "I know what you want to say. Bullshit. But I kid you not, Alpha Cian. I have seen it play out a hundred times."

I dried my hands slowly. The towel was rough against my skin.

"She just needs you beside her," Maren continued. "Her health will pick up in a heartbeat."

I looked at Fia. Her chest rose and fell in shallow breaths. Her lips had lost their color. Her skin looked like paper.

"But you do not have to," Maren added. "Luna Fia will pick up in the morning."

The morning. Hours away. Hours of her lying there cold and pale while I what? Raised hell to find all I could about Bo and maybe her other accomplices? Sat in my study and pretended I did not feel her through the bond? Pretended I did not feel every weak flutter of her heartbeat like it was my own while I worried about finding the Witch who made the poison that put my mother in a state of in between?

I sighed.

"There could be another mad follower of my uncle here. Who knows what they will do?"

"You could make use of Elder Moira's talent," Maren said. "Get your wolves to swear loyalty to you before the moon goddess like they promised to do with your father's father. Your father and yourself."

"And what? Hope that the goddess strikes them down if they lie?"

"There is a reason you did not reject her on the spot for her deception." Maren's voice was quiet. Careful. "There is a reason this bond flares like fire between you two. And there is a reason even my skeptic ass believes this shit." She met my eyes. "It is real."

I bit my lower lip hard enough to taste copper.

I knew.

Goddess help me I knew.

I had felt it when her terror crashed into me through the bond. Had felt it when I tore through those doors and saw her pinned beneath that traitor. Had felt it when I held her broken body in my arms and ran like the devil himself was chasing us.

This thing between us. This bond I never asked for and never wanted. It was real. And it was getting harder to pretend it was not. Which made it scary. Because I thought I knew how deep it was. But tonight showed me just how much we kept what the goddess made us share under wraps.

"You can go," Maren said. "I will take extra watch of Luna Fia. I will not sleep."

"There is no need for that."

The words left my mouth before I could stop them. Maren raised an eyebrow.

"Warmth right?" I cleared my throat. "I can manage."

I crossed to the cot and gathered Fia in my arms again. She was lighter than before. Or maybe I was just used to carrying her now. That thought did something strange to my chest.

Maren said nothing as I left. But I felt her eyes on my back all the way to the door.

The walk to my chambers felt longer than it should have. Every corridor stretched out ahead of me like it was trying to give me time to change my mind. To turn around. To hand her off to someone else and go back to my empty room alone.

I did not turn around.

My door opened with a click and I carried her inside. The room was dark. I did not bother with the lights. I just crossed to the bed and laid her down on the mattress.

She looked wrong against my sheets. Too still. Too quiet. Fia was never quiet.

I pulled off my shirt and tossed it somewhere. The air was cold against my skin but I ignored it. I climbed onto the bed beside her and pulled her close.

She was ice.

Her body felt like she had been lying in snow for hours. The cold seeped through my skin and settled into my bones. I wrapped my arms around her tighter. Pulled her against my chest until there was no space between us.

The duvet came next. I dragged it over us both and tucked it around her shoulders. Around her hands. Around every part of her that was exposed to the air.

Then I lay there.

Her face was inches from mine. I could count her eyelashes if I wanted to. I could trace the shape of her lips. The curve of her cheek. The little crease between her brows that appeared even in sleep.

She was... nice to look at.

I had known that from the moment I saw her. I had known it and resented it. Because nice things to look at in my life had a habit of being dangerous. Of being mirages wrapped in pretty packaging.

But lying here with her cold body slowly warming against mine. With her breath fanning soft across my collarbone. With the bond humming between us like a living thing.

It was getting hard to remember why I was supposed to keep my distance from her.

"This is going to be awkward as hell when morning comes," I muttered.

She did not respond. Of course she did not. She was unconscious. But I swore her lips twitched. Just a little. Just enough to make me wonder.

I closed my eyes.

Her heartbeat steadied against my chest. Stronger now. More sure. And something loosened in my own chest. Something I had not realized was wound so tight.

She was alive.

She was safe.

And I was in so much trouble.

Chapter 79: Crashing

FIA

The shard caught the moonlight as Bo raised it above her head.

I tried to run. My legs would not move. They felt like they were rooted to the ground. Like someone had poured concrete into my bones and left me there to harden.

"You should have minded your business," Bo said.

She lunged.

I fell backward. The ground rushed up to meet me and I hit hard enough to knock the air from my lungs. Before I could roll away, before I could even think about getting up, she was on top of me.

The shard came down.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Four.

Each strike burned white-hot between my shoulder blades. I felt the blade pierce skin. Felt it slide between ribs. Felt it scrape against bone with a sound that made my stomach turn.

I screamed but nothing came out.

Bo's face was above mine. She was smiling. Not the pleasant smile from before. Not the one she used when she thought I was just another foolish omega. This smile was all teeth, malice and satisfaction.

"This is what happens," she said.

The shard came down again.

And again.

And again.

I gasped and sat up so fast my vision went white.

My hands came up automatically. Ready to fight. Ready to push her off. Ready to do something other than just lie there and let her stab me over and over while I bled out into the dirt.

But there was no dirt.

There was no Bo.

There were only strong arms wrapped around me. Holding me tight. Keeping me in place.

I thrashed against them. A sound escaped my throat that was half scream and half sob.

"Fia."

The voice was familiar. Low and rough and edged with something that might have been concern if I could think straight enough to identify it.

"Fia. Calm down."

The arms tightened. Not painfully. Just enough to remind me they were there. That they were real. That this was real.

"It's me," the voice said.

I stopped fighting.

My breathing was too fast. Too shallow. Each inhale felt like I was trying to suck air through a straw. I blinked hard and the room came into focus around me.

Dark walls. A massive bed. Sheets tangled around my legs.

This was Cian's bedroom.

"I had a horrible dream," I said.

My voice came out hoarse. Like I had actually been screaming.

"I can tell."

He was still holding me. I realized that suddenly. His chest was pressed against my back. His arms were around my waist. His chin was somewhere near my shoulder.

"I felt your fear," he added.

Of course he did. The bond. The stupid goddess-damned bond that apparently worked both ways whether I wanted it to or not.

I turned my head and found him looking at me. His eyes were hard to read in the darkness. But they were focused. Alert. Like he had been awake for a while.

I swallowed.

"Why are you here with me?"

It came out more accusing than I meant it to. But I could not take it back now.

"Am I not supposed to be with the healers?"

Cian's jaw tightened.

"I did take you there," he said. "And you were stitched up."

He paused. His arms loosened slightly around me but he did not let go completely.

"But you needed my body heat," he continued. "And that is what I am doing."

Body heat.

The words hit me like cold water.

I became suddenly, acutely aware of how close we were. How his legs were tangled with mine under the duvet. How his bare chest was warm against my back. How his breath stirred the hair at the nape of my neck.

Heat flooded through me. Not the feverish heat from the blood loss. Something else. Something that made my skin feel too tight and my breathing turn shallow and my heart kick against my ribs like it was trying to escape.

"Do you feel well enough for me to stop?"

His voice was neutral. Like he was asking about the weather. Like this was perfectly normal.

I nodded.

Slowly.

"Okay then."

He pulled away.

The loss of warmth was immediate. I had not realized how cold the room was until he was not pressed against me anymore. The air felt sharp against my skin.

I heard him move behind me. Heard the rustle of fabric as he reached for something.

"You are covered in blood by the way."

I looked down. My dress was stiff with it. Dark patches spread across the fabric in patterns that made my stomach turn. Some of it was mine. Some of it was probably Bo's. I did not want to think about how much of it belonged to which one of us.

"You might want to take a shower," Cian said.

I heard more rustling. When I glanced over my shoulder he was pulling a shirt over his head. The muscles in his back flexed as he moved. I looked away quickly.

"I on the other hand will return to the climax of this madness."

Just like that.

He was already moving on. Already shifting back into Alpha mode like the last few minutes had not happened. Like he had not just been curled around me in his bed keeping me warm with his body heat.

I reached for the bond without thinking.

It was like hitting a wall.

He had locked it down again. Shoved it into that mental bubble where I could barely sense him. Where all I got was the faintest echo of his presence instead of the full force of whatever he was feeling.

How did he do that so easily?

How did he just detach himself like flipping a switch?

"You are right," I said.

My voice sounded steadier than I felt.

"I need to take a bath."

I pushed the duvet off and swung my legs over the side of the bed. The floor looked very far away suddenly. I took a breath and stood.

The world tilted.

I stumbled forward. My vision blurred at the edges and my knees tried to buckle. I caught myself on the nightstand but only barely.

"Are you alright?"

Cian was there.

I did not hear him move. Did not see him cross the room. But suddenly his hands were on my arms. Steadying me. Keeping me upright.

"Just light-headed," I said.

He was close again. Close enough that I could see the concern written across his face even in the dim light. His hand came up to my forehead. Then moved to the side of my neck. Checking my pulse maybe. Or the stitches. I could not tell.

"Maybe I should help you out," he said.

My cheeks went hot.

"What do you mean?"

The question came out sharper than I intended. More defensive. Like I thought he was suggesting something inappropriate when he was probably just being practical.

Cian looked at me like I was acting strange.

"It's just a bath," he said.

Right.

Of course.

Just a bath.

I swallowed and tried to think of something to say that would not make me sound like an idiot. Nothing came to mind.

"Is that a problem?" he asked.

He tilted his head slightly. Studying me.

"I would have gotten an Omega," he continued. "But I will be frank. I am wary of everybody at the moment."

"I get that," I said quickly. Too quickly.

"But I can take a bath myself."

I took a step forward to prove it. My legs cooperated for exactly two steps before my vision blurred again and the floor rushed up to meet me.

"Shit," I muttered.

His strong arms caught me before I hit the ground.

"Please stop being stubborn."

Cian's voice was right by my ear. His hand was wrapped around mine. The other was already reaching for his shirt again.

He pulled it off in one smooth motion and tossed it somewhere behind him.

Then he was guiding me toward the bathroom. His grip was firm but not rough. Just insistent enough to make it clear he was not taking no for an answer.

The bathroom was much bigger than the one in my suite. It was covered in white marble, gleaming fixtures and has a tub that could probably fit three people comfortably.

Cian led me to the edge of the tub and stopped.

"Strip," he said.

I leaned against the wall for support and stared at him.

"What? No."

The words came out horrified. Like he had just asked me to walk naked through the pack house.

"It is not a big deal," he said. "Nothing is happening."

Nothing is happening.

He said it so casually. Like this was perfectly normal. Like he helped injured omegas bathe all the time.

"You are not going to make it seem like I am the difficult one," I said.

My voice came out defensive. I could not help it.

"Imagine the tables were turned and I told you to strip."

Cian shrugged.

"I would have no problems with it."

Of course he would not.

"Unless of course you are having vile thoughts," he added.

I scoffed.

"No I am not."

"So what is the problem?"

He took a step closer. His eyes locked on mine. Waiting for an answer I did not have.

I swallowed hard.

"I will feel exposed," I said finally. "It is embarrassing."

The words felt small as soon as they left my mouth. Childish even. But they were true.

Cian was quiet for a moment. Then he said something that made my brain short-circuit.

"Would me being naked help?"

My cheeks went from warm to burning.

"What?"

He approached me. Slow and deliberate. Each step measured.

"You said it is embarrassing," he said. "Would it be less embarrassing if you were not doing it alone?"

I could not answer. My throat had gone completely dry.

When he realized an answer might not be coming. He nodded.

"Perhaps I can get Maren," he offered. "I trust her."

Maren.

Right.

That would be the sensible option. The safe option. The option that did not involve Cian stripping down in front of me while I tried to pretend I was not affected by it.

"Yes," I said.

The word came out barely above a whisper.

"Yes what?"

His voice was quieter now. Almost gentle. Like he was trying to give me an out if I wanted one.

I took a breath.

"It would be less embarrassing if you were naked too."

I could not believe I said it.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Then Cian said, "Alright."

His hand moved to the zip of his pants.

I watched him. I could not help it. My eyes traced the line of his shoulders. The defined muscles of his chest. The ridges of his abdomen that led down to that sharp v-line that became more prominent with every second.

My mouth went dry.

I forced myself to look away and reached behind my back for the zip of my dress. My fingers fumbled with it. The angle was awkward and my hands were still shaky from the blood loss and the nightmare and everything else.

The zip would not budge.

I tried again. My fingernails scraped against the fabric but could not quite catch the pull.

Cian's hand stilled on his zipper.

"Having trouble?" he asked.

I bit my lip and tried one more time.

Nothing.

"Yeah, I cannot reach it," I admitted.

Chapter 80: Under Running Water 1

FIA

I said nothing as Cian moved behind me.

The air shifted. I felt his presence at my back like a physical weight. The bathroom suddenly seemed smaller. The walls closer. The space between us thin enough to cut.

His fingers brushed the nape of my neck.

I stiffened.

"Relax," he said quietly.

I tried. My shoulders would not cooperate. They stayed locked up tight like someone had bolted them in place.

The zipper made a soft sound as it came undone. Slow. Deliberate. The teeth separated one by one until the dress gaped open at my back.

His knuckles grazed my spine.

My skin prickled. Every nerve ending lit up like someone had run an electric current through them. I felt hyperaware of everything. The warmth of his hand. The roughness of his calluses. The way his breath stirred the fine hairs at the back of my neck.

"There," he said.

His hand dropped away.

He took a step back. Then another. I heard fabric rustle behind me. Heard the quiet sound of his zipper. Heard clothes hitting the tile.

I kept my eyes forward. I stared at the white marble wall like it was the most fascinating thing I had ever seen.

My hands moved to my dress and I let it drop. It pooled around my feet in a stiff pile of blood-soaked fabric. I reached behind me for my bra clasp. My fingers fumbled with the hooks. They finally came loose and I let it fall.

My panties went next.

I stepped out of the pile of ruined clothing and moved toward the tub. My legs felt shaky. The floor felt too far away. I concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other without falling.

The shower was massive. Glass walls. Multiple shower heads. Enough space that two people could stand in it without touching.

I stepped inside.

It was cold under my feet. I wrapped my arms around myself and tried not to think about the fact that I was completely naked. That Cian was about to follow me in here. That we were about to share this space with nothing between us but air and water and whatever self-control we could muster.

The glass door opened behind me.

I heard him step in. Heard the door close with a soft click.

I kept my back to him.

Water rushed from one of the shower heads. Warm. Not hot. Just warm enough to chase away the chill on my skin.

"Tilt your head back," Cian said.

I did.

The water hit my hair first. It ran down my scalp and over my shoulders in rivulets that turned pink as they washed away the dried blood. I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the sensation of getting clean instead of the fact that Cian was close enough to touch me.

Something cold touched my scalp.

Soap.

His hands followed. Strong fingers worked through my hair. Massaging. Scrubbing. Getting rid of the blood and dirt and whatever else had gotten tangled in there during the fight.

The soap foamed. I felt bubbles sliding down the sides of my face and dripping off my chin.

"Turn around," he said.

I turned.

My eyes stayed closed. It seemed safer that way. Less complicated. If I could not see him then maybe I could pretend this was normal. That having Cian wash me was something that happened every day.

A soft sound reached my ears.

I frowned. It almost sounded like...

Cian chuckled.

The sound was low. Quiet. But definitely amused.

I kept my eyes shut.

He continued washing. His hands moved to my face. Gentle. Careful around the bruises. The water followed. Rinsing away the soap and blood until my skin felt clean again.

Then he moved to my arms.

His grip was firm but not rough. He worked methodically. Like this was a task that required his full attention. I felt him scrub at my forearms. My wrists. Each finger individually until the dried blood flaked away.

I was tempted to open my eyes.

The temptation grew stronger with every passing second. Curiosity warred with common sense in my head. What was he doing? What did he look like right now? Was he as unaffected as he sounded?

I gave in.

My eyes opened slowly.

Cian was focused on my hand. His head was bent. His dark hair had gotten wet from the spray and it clung to his forehead in damp strands. Water and soap covered his chest and shoulders. The muscles in his arms flexed as he worked.

He looked up immediately then.

Our eyes met.

My breath caught.

He was looking at me. Really looking. Not the casual glance he usually gave me. Not the dismissive once-over. This was different. Intense. Like he was seeing something he had not noticed before.

I looked away quickly.

Too quickly.

My cheeks burned.

"Turn around," he said again.

His voice sounded rougher than before. Like something had scraped it raw.

I turned.

Water hit my back. Warm. Steady. Then his hands followed with more soap. He worked in silence. His palms sliding over my shoulders. My spine. The space between my shoulder blades where Bo's shard had broken skin.

I needed to say something. Anything. The silence was too heavy. Too charged.

"Did you retrieve Bo's phone?"

The words came out strained.

"No."

He paused. The water kept running but his hands stilled against my back.

"I was busy with you."

Right.

Of course.

"It will be kept though," he continued. "I am sure even if my uncle has more spies and double agents, they would be walking on eggshells at the moment."

I turned to face him.

"But they could delete stuff off the phone."

Cian shook his head.

"I have a competent team of technicians. Nothing would be hidden enough."

Water dripped from his hair into his eyes. He blinked it away.

"Now just stay still and let me wash you."

He raised the shower head and aimed it at my face.

I blinked rapidly. Water got in my eyes and up my nose and in my mouth. I sputtered and wiped at my face with one hand.

Then I saw it.

Blood.

On his chest. Just below his ribs. A dark streak that stood out against his skin.

I pointed.

"Look. You have blood too."

He glanced down and shrugged.

"It is not important."

"It is."

I reached for the soap before I could think better of it. Lathered it up in my hands until they were covered in white foam. Then I pressed them against his chest.

His skin was warm under my palms.

I felt him tense.