

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 101: Desire Paths - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 101: Desire Paths

Chapter 101: Desire Paths

ALDRIC

I leaned back in the leather chair of my room's lounge and stared at my phone. The screen glowed in the dim light of the room. Cian's voice mail had been sent to Valentine minutes ago. By now the witch would have heard it. By now her family would be in shambles trying to figure out what to do.

I could picture it perfectly. Madeline's stone faced father finally cracking. Madeline's mother wringing her hands while playing dumb And Madeline herself sitting there with blood she thought was on her hands while I dangled Cian's mother's life in front of her like a carrot.

Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

I scrolled through my contacts and found Madeline's number. My thumb hovered over the call button. Should I give her a few more minutes to stew? Let the panic really sink in?

No. It was better to strike while the iron was hot. While she was still reeling from whatever lecture her father had given her. While she still felt guilty about the witch I'd made her kill.

I pressed call.

The phone rang once. Twice. Three times.

She was making me wait. The little brat was actually making me wait. I grinned despite myself. She still had some fight in her after all. Good. I liked it better when they had spirit. Made breaking them so much more satisfying.

The line clicked.

"Did you silently curse me out before picking up?" I kept my voice light. Friendly even.

There was silence on the other end. I could hear her breathing though. Quick, shallow and definitely angry.

"Im only saying that because I expected you to pick up faster."

"You called for a reason." Her voice came out clipped. Cold. "Do not waste my time."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. "I'm trying to break the ice here, Madeline. We're going to be working together again. Might as well be civil about it."

There was more silence. She was grinding her teeth now. I'd bet money on it.

"Anyway." I sat forward and rested my elbows on the desk. "Sooner or later your father would get a voice note from my very traumatized and depressed nephew."

"Oh I have had that conversation." The ice in her voice could have frozen hell over. "What the fuck Aldric? Cian sounded terrified. What are you doing to his mother? Is she really going to die?"

"Not anymore."

I heard her sharp intake of breath. The way she tried to control it and failed.

"I just called to tell you one thing." I picked up a pen from my desk. Clicked it open and closed. Open and closed. "Do not contact Cian until the wedding of Alpha Julius."

"What?"

"You heard me." Click. Click. "I know you would be facing some temptation already. That hero complex of yours must be screaming at you to rush in and save the day. So don't think about it. Do not even dare."

A scoff came through the speaker. Sharp and bitter. "I will not stand for you hurting Cian."

"Are you going to threaten me with that lock of hair again?" I set the pen down. "I am sure it gives you some false sense of security and I am happy to play along. But I know the last thing you are is stupid. So stop threatening me. I can be quite petty."

"You think I will not kill you?"

There it was. The tremble beneath the bravado. The fear she tried so hard to hide.

"Oh I know you want to." I stood up and walked to the window. Looked out at the mess of the garden that an estate pack house such as Skollrend had. At the trees swaying in the night breeze. "I know you and your father want to do it badly. But you two are terrified of the repercussions. The release of what your father has done. How your family will suffer for it."

I paused and let that sink in.

"And you my dear are very family oriented."

Her breathing had quickened. I could practically see her face. The way her jaw would be clenched. The way her hands would be shaking with impotent rage.

"I realized it quite perfectly when you chose your father and your family over Cian years ago."

That hit home. I heard the sharp exhale. The way she tried to cover it with a cough.

"Will you prove me wrong this time around?"

"You monster." Her voice cracked. "You left me no choice."

"Of course I did." I smiled at my reflection in the window. "I am thorough but I am no monster. The thing is... No one can have their cake and eat it. I know that too well. So you should catch up with the times witch. I gave you a choice and you chose your family."

I turned away from the window and walked back to my desk. This conversation was almost done. Just one more twist of the knife.

"It was nice talking to you. Greet Valentine for me."

"Can you promise me that his mother will not die before I arrive?"

The desperation in that question.... Good goddess... The way she tried to hide it too and failed. Delicious.

"It's only a little cardiac arrest." I sat down. Picked up the pen again. "Don't worry. She will be fine."

Click. Click. Click.

"If anything... Who you should be worrying about is the new girl. The Omega bride."

There was a pause. But I could tell she was curious. She was absolutely dying to know. "What about her?"

Perfect. She'd taken the bait.

"Cian seems to be warming up to her." I let amusement color my voice. "It is uncanny really. Soon enough Cian's walls will probably fall and he might fall for her. We cannot let that happen now. Can we?"

The silence that followed was everything I'd hoped for. I could picture Madeline's face going pale. Could imagine the way her stomach would drop. The way jealousy and guilt would war inside her chest.

She still loved him. After everything. After all the years and all the hurt. She still loved my nephew.

Which made this so much easier.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. The sound wanted to bubble up. Wanted to spill out in a cackle that would give away just how much I was enjoying this. But no. Control. I needed restraint.

"Goodbye Aldric."

Her voice was flat. Empty. Like she'd shut down something inside herself.

"See you soon."

She didn't say it back. The line just went dead.

I set the phone down on my desk and stared at it for a long moment. Then I let myself laugh. Low and quiet at first. Then louder. Until I had to press my hand over my mouth to muffle the sound.

She would come. Of course she would come. I'd made sure of it. Dangled Cian's mother's life in front of her like a prize. Planted the seed of jealousy about this Omega girl. Given her just enough information to make her desperate and not enough to let her plan.

My phone buzzed. A text from one of my contacts in the pack. An update on the security around Cian's mother. On the Omega Luna settling into her new life.

I read it all. Absorbed every detail. Added it to the map in my head. The constantly shifting chess board where I moved pieces and removed threats and positioned everything just so.

Some people would call what I was doing evil. Monstrous even. Those were Madeline's words weren't they. You monster.

But I wasn't a monster. Monsters acted without purpose. Without plan. They destroyed for the sake of destroying.

I was an artist. And Skollrend was my canvas.

Every stroke mattered. Every color had purpose. Every line led somewhere deliberate.

Cian didn't understand that yet. He thought he could resist. He didn't realize that I'd been shaping his father croaked.

A lot has happened to him. None of it was random. None of it was chance.

All of it was me.

I stood up from my chair and stretched. The clock on the wall now read past midnight. Late. But I wasn't tired. My mind buzzed with too many thoughts. Too many possibilities.

I walked to the bookshelf. Ran my fingers along the spines. Found the one I wanted. A journal. Old leather with worn pages.

Chapter 102: Alchemy 1

FIA

The words hung in the air like smoke after a fire. Sharp. Cruel. Designed to cut.

I just need everyone to just shut up.

I wrapped my arms tighter around myself. The fabric of my sleeves bunched under my fingers. My chest felt hollow. Like something had been scooped out and left to echo.

Cian didn't mean it. I knew that. Knew it the way I knew my own heartbeat. The way I'd known my mother's breathing patterns in those final days when the rot consumed her from the inside out.

He was hurting. Lashing out because the pain had nowhere else to go. I'd done the same thing once. Screamed at the healers who tried to help. Cursed at my father when he told me to be strong. Pushed away anyone who dared suggest my mother might not make it.

The memory still tasted bitter on my tongue.

Cian stormed past Aldric and Elara. His shoulder clipped the doorframe. He didn't slow down. Didn't look back. Just kept moving like stopping meant drowning.

Ronan followed first. His jaw was set in a way that looked like he was trying not to explode. Elara went after him. Her heels clicked against the tile in rapid succession.

Then it was just me, Maren, Thorne and the Grand Luna lying still on the bed with tubes running from her arms like roots trying to anchor her to this world.

The silence pressed down. Heavy. Suffocating.

Maren's shoulders sagged. She turned away from the bed and braced her hands against the counter. Her head dropped forward. I could see the tension in her spine. The way her fingers gripped the edge like she might fall if she let go.

Thorne looked older somehow. The lines around his eyes had deepened. His mouth pulled into a thin line as he stared at the Grand Luna's still form.

"He didn't mean it." My voice came out softer than I intended. "What he said."

"I know." Maren didn't lift her head. "Doesn't make it easier to hear."

"No." I took a breath. Let it fill my lungs. Pushed it out slowly. "It doesn't."

Thorne moved to check the monitors. His hands shook slightly as he adjusted a dial. "We're doing everything we can."

"I know that too." I stepped further into the room. The antiseptic smell burned my nostrils. "But he said he brought things. From the witch's shop. Potions and herbs and whatever else was there."

Maren finally looked up. Her eyes were red at the edges. "Fia..."

"We should try something." The words tumbled out faster now. Desperate. "We can't just stand here and watch her fade."

"You know we cannot do anything." Thorne's voice was gentle but firm. Like he was explaining something to a child. "No one here is a witch with actual power."

My hands curled into fists. Nails bit into my palms. The small pain helped ground me. Kept the frustration from boiling over.

"Discoveries are made every day." I looked between them. "Medical ones. Magical ones. We could get lucky. Figure something out."

Maren crossed the space between us. Her scrubs rustled with the movement. She put a hand on my shoulder. The touch was warm. Steady.

"I understand." Her voice was almost a whisper. "I want the Grand Luna back too. More than anything. But we cannot."

"Why not?" The question cracked in the middle. "Why can't we try?"

"Because there is no point and you know it. Alchemy needs a witch or warlock's magic." Maren squeezed my shoulder. "And witchcraft has levels. Stronger magic bows to even stronger magic. We don't have that kind of power."

"But we have to try." My throat felt tight. "We have to do something."

"I know you want to fix this." Maren's eyes searched mine. "We all want to. But we cannot use the brewing of a witch who we have no strong knowledge of to concoct something for the Grand Luna who is already in a coma and suffering."

The logic made sense. I hated that it made sense. Hated the reasonable tone in her voice. The way she looked at me like I was being naive. But even she knew I just wanted to be naive.

"We have to do something." I repeated it because I didn't know what else to say.

"We can pray." Thorne had moved closer. His weathered hands clasped in front of him.

The words hit wrong. Made something hot and sharp flare in my chest.

"When has that ever been enough?" The question came out harsher than I meant. "When has prayer alone saved anyone? I prayed to Selene a lot and it did not save my mother."

I didn't wait for an answer. Instead, I turned to the sentinel standing guard by the door. He was young. Maybe twenty. His posture was stiff. Alert.

"Whatever Alpha Cian brought back from the witch." I kept my voice level. Authoritative. "Bring it here."

The sentinel's eyebrows rose. He looked at me like I'd grown a second head. Like he was trying to figure out why I thought I could give him orders.

"Would you like me to repeat myself?" I held his gaze and didn't blink.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed. Then he bowed. The movement was stiff. Reluctant. But he turned and left.

"You are threading dangerous waters, Luna Fia." Thorne's voice held a warning.

"I'm not poisoning my mother in law." I turned back to them. "But there has to be something we can do."

I looked at Maren first. Then Thorne. Really looked at them. Saw the exhaustion. The helplessness. The same desperation I felt reflected back at me.

"One of you is a doctor." I gestured between them. "The other is a healer. Surely between the two of you..."

I paused. I didn't know what more to say or what point I wanted to make. But it was there. At the back of my mind.

"My mother used to have plenty of tales to tell me about healers." The memory surfaced unbidden. Her voice in the dark. Stories of wolves who could cure anything with a touch. Who spoke to the Goddess herself. "The things they could do."

"My parents did too." Thorne's expression softened. "And their parents before them. But the healers from the age of legends are not the healers we have now."

He moved to the window. Stared out at the darkening sky.

"Times have changed. We aren't as connected to Goddess Selene as we once were. So all we have are herbs and our faith."

"And you must have done wondrous things with your herbs." I pressed. I couldn't let it go. "I've seen you work. Seen what you can do."

"I have never broken an alchemized spell with herbs though." He said it quietly. Like an admission of failure. "Have you?"

"Maybe it's tonight then." I straightened my shoulders. "Maybe tonight is when it happens."

The sound of footsteps echoed in the hallway. Multiple sets. The sentinel returned with the bottles. Three more sentinels followed behind him. Their arms were full of glass containers. Vials. Jars. Things that caught the light and reflected it in strange colors.

They set everything on the counter. The glass clinked together. Some of the liquids inside swirled on their own. Others stayed perfectly still like they were frozen in time.

"What do you guys say?" I looked between Maren and Thorne again.

Maren stared at the collection. Her jaw worked like she was chewing on words. Trying to decide if she should swallow them or spit them out.

"It's delusional." She finally said.

My heart sank.

"But it'll feel like I'm doing something instead of being useless."

I couldn't stop the smile that pulled at my mouth. It was small but still very grateful.

Thorne was still at the window. His reflection showed in the glass. He was frowning. Thinking. Weighing options that probably all felt impossible.

"Fuck it." He turned around. "I'm in."

Relief flooded through me. It made my knees weak. I grabbed the edge of the counter to steady myself.

"Okay." I took a breath. "Okay. Where do we start?"

Maren moved to the bottles. Her fingers hovered over them without touching. "We need to know what we're working with. What each of these does."

"Some of them have labels." Thorne joined her. Picked up a dark blue vial. Squinted at the writing on the side. "This one says it's for sleep."

"That won't help." Maren set it aside. "We need something that counteracts poison. Or breaks magical bonds."

Thorne added; "Our sense of smell is also quite sensitive and strong. Alpha Cian brought wood chippings that the cure dropped against. If we can pinpoint what was in it, then perhaps we can do something."

I nodded. I was glad ideas were coming in. Because I was just as lost.

They worked methodically. Picking up bottles. Reading labels when there were any. Holding them up to the light. I watched them catalogue everything. Organize it into groups. Possible. Unlikely. Dangerous.

The Grand Luna's monitors beeped steadily in the background. A rhythm that felt both reassuring and terrifying. Proof she was still here. Still fighting.

"This one." Thorne held up a green bottle. The liquid inside looked thick. Almost syrupy. "It says it neutralizes toxins."

"Let me see." Maren took it. Held it close to her face. "The ingredients list is partially rubbed off."

"Can you make out any of it?" I leaned closer.

"Wolfsbane." Maren's voice went flat. "That's one of the ingredients."

"That could be deadly." I pulled back.

"In large amounts." Thorne was reading over her shoulder. "But in small doses it can be medicinal."

"But we have no clue what the dose was and how it would interact with what has been brewing in her system for months."

"Let us not forget this is a poison made by alchemy as well." Maren set the bottle down carefully. Like it might explode.

They fell into a rhythm. Debating. Testing. Maren would suggest something and Thorne would counter. Or vice versa. They pulled out scales. Measured tiny amounts. Mixed things in small glass dishes. While I smelled the wood chippings and tried to make out ingredients.

But even while we did all of this, there was that tiny earnest voice at the back of my mind that just told me this was a waste of fucking time.

Chapter 103: Alchemy 2

FIA

The wood shavings spread across the counter like some kind of offerings. My nose hovered over them. Inhaling as I sorted through the layers of scent that clung to the fragments.

Moonbriar. Definitely moonbriar. The sharp bite of it cut through everything else. This smelled stronger though. Concentrated.

"Here." Thorne passed me another chip. "What about this one? I think I have it. But a double check is needed."

I brought it close. The scent hit slower. Earthy. Almost sweet but with something bitter underneath. "Hollowberry root."

"You're certain?" Maren was already pulling bottles. Glass clinked as she searched.

"My mother made me memorize herbs." I set the chip down. "Said it would serve me well someday and when her disease got to her, I had to step it up a notch. I know my herbs and poisons."

She would have loved this. Hated it too. Both at once. She would have loved that her lessons stuck but hated why I still needed them.

Thorne measured out moonbriar extract. His hands were steadier now. Purpose did that. Gave you something to hold onto when everything else felt like it was slipping away.

"How much hollowberry?" Maren's fingers drummed against the counter.

"Start small." I moved closer. "We can adjust."

They worked. I watched. Offered suggestions when they asked. Mostly I just tried to stay out of their way. Let them do what they knew how to do.

The liquid they mixed turned pale amber. Almost honey colored. It caught the light from the overhead fixtures and seemed to glow from within.

"This could work." Thorne held the vial up. Tilted it back and forth. "In theory."

"Theory isn't certainty." Maren's voice had that flat quality again. The one that meant she was thinking too hard. Seeing all the ways things could go wrong.

"Nothing is certain." I reached for the vial.

Thorne pulled it back. "We can't give this to her."

The words landed like stones in still water. Ripples spread out. Made everything feel unstable.

"What do you mean we can't?" My hand was still outstretched. The emptiness crept up my stomach.

"We don't know what this will do." Maren came around the counter as she stood between me and Thorne. "We mixed ingredients based on guesswork and hope. That's not medicine. This is gambling."

"Then we gamble." The heat in my chest was building again. "We have nothing else."

"We have patience." Thorne set the vial down carefully. Like it was precious. Or dangerous. Maybe both. "We wait for a proper witch. For someone with actual power to help."

"And if they can't?" The question scraped out of my throat. "If no one can break this?"

Neither of them answered. They didn't need to. The silence said enough.

"I'm willing to take the risk." I looked between them. "If there's even a chance this works..."

"It's not your risk to take." Maren's hand found my shoulder again. The touch felt heavier this time. "She's not your mother. Only Alpha Cian can speak in this."

The words stung. Sharp. True.

"But she could be saved." I tried to keep my voice level. "If we just try..."

"This was always where it was going to lead." Thorne's weathered face looked sad. Resigned. "We needed to do something. To feel useful. But deep down we all knew we couldn't actually use what we made."

"Then what was the point?" My hands curled into fists. "Why did we waste time?"

"I'm sure it helped ease your mind." His smile was gentle. Understanding. "Mine too if I'm being honest."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to shout that this was different. That we'd figured something out. That the vial of amber liquid sitting on the counter was more than just a placebo for our helplessness. Even if we didn't fucking have the most important ingredient. Magic.

But I couldn't. Because somewhere under the desperation and the hope and the need to fix things, I knew they were right.

"We should all get some sleep." Maren squeezed my shoulder. "It's been a long day."

"You two go." I turned back to the counter. To the bottles and vials and all the things we'd tried to make sense of. "I'll head up soon. I just need to put my headspace right."

Maren studied me for a moment. Then nodded. "Medic omegas will come keep watch soon as Beta Ronan and Elder Moira check their loyalties like the Alpha requested. So you shouldn't be bothered by their presence while you're here."

"No problem." I didn't look at her. I couldn't.

Their footsteps retreated. The door closed with a soft click. Then it was just me, the Grand Luna and the steady beep of monitors that said she was still alive. Still hanging on.

I picked up the vial. Held it to the light the way Thorne had. The liquid swirled slightly. Caught the fluorescent glow and turned it golden.

My feet carried me to the bed. To where Luna Morrigan lay surrounded by wires and tubes and machines that helped breathe for her. Thought for her. Kept her tethered to this world.

"I'm sorry I can't help you." The words came out whispered. Broken. "You were one of the kindest people I ever had in this pack."

Her face was so still. Peaceful almost. Like she was just sleeping. Like she might wake up any moment, smile and ask me how I was settling in.

"I guess I'm simply not magic." I set the vial on the bedside table and traced my fingers along the edge. "None of us have power or a gift from the Goddess."

The monitors beeped. Constant. Unchanging.

"Cian is terrified for you." My throat felt tight. "I understand his predicament. I know what it is to be powerless. To have nothing that can change things."

I looked at the vial again. At the liquid that represented hours of work. Of hope. Of desperate need to do something. Anything.

"This bottle can't save you. Just like I couldn't save my mother."

Tears formed. Hot. Unwelcome. I tried to blink them back but they came anyway.

"Did you know..." I had to stop just to swallow. "The night before she died, I cooked up something I was sure would work. I was so sure my knowledge and all my studying could make it possible. That I could develop something that would lift my mother's rot."

The memory tasted bitter. Felt heavy.

"I had faith in the Goddess. I prayed she would shine her light on me." A tear rolled down my cheek. I didn't wipe it away. "But I wasn't lucky. She died the following morning. And I was bitter."

A laugh escaped. Small. Humorless. "Cian is already the way he is. If you die..."

I couldn't finish. I didn't want to imagine what he'd become. How much further he'd fall into that darkness I'd seen in his eyes.

"You're one of his guiding lights." I reached out. Let my fingers hover over her hand. "He'll lose his way if he cannot save you."

There was another pause but the machines beeped regardless.

"I guess I don't want that."

I started to stand. To leave before the tears became something I couldn't control. Then her finger twitched.

Small. Barely there. But I saw it. At least I was sure that I did. The chances that it was all in my head was astronomical.

"Grand Luna?" I leaned closer. "Can you hear me?"

Nothing. There was no more movement. No change in the monitors. Just the same steady rhythm.

I stared at her hand. Waited. Watched. But nothing else happened.

"I'm imagining things." The words were for me. A reminder that exhaustion did strange things to perception.

But my eyes found the vial anyway. That golden liquid that couldn't save her. That we'd mixed knowing we'd never use it.

"Lady Selene." I looked up at the ceiling. At nothing and everything all at once. "Will you surprise me this time? Or will another good person suffer needlessly again?"

My hands moved before my brain could catch up. I knew better but I couldn't help myself. I unscrewed the vial. Found a needle. Drew the liquid into it with hands that only shook a little.

The feeding tube was right there. Easy to access. All I had to do was inject it.

"Please." I didn't know who I was talking to anymore. The Goddess. Myself. The universe. "Please let this work."

I pushed the plunger. Watched the amber liquid disappear into the tube. Into her.

Then I waited. Eyes fixed on the monitors. Watching for any change. Any spike or drop or sign that I'd just made things worse.

But nothing happened. The numbers stayed steady. Her breathing remained assisted. Everything was exactly the same.

"Of course." I set the empty needle aside. "Of course it didn't work."

Exhaustion hit like a wave. Pulled at my bones. Made standing feel like too much effort.

I needed to sleep. To stop pretending I could fix things I had no power to fix.

The hallway was quiet as I left. Empty except for shadows that stretched long under the dim lights.

But my mind wasn't quiet. It dragged me back. To another room. Another bed. Another woman I couldn't save.

My mother's room had smelled different. Rot had its own scent. Sweet, sickly and wrong. The kind of smell that clung to everything. Got in your clothes. Your hair. Your throat.

She couldn't stand anymore by then. Could barely speak. Every word came out like broken glass. Raspy. Painful. Forced through flesh that was falling apart from the inside.

I'd sat beside her bed. Held a bottle similar to the one I'd just used. Believed with everything in me that it would work.

"Why would you marry him?" The question had burst out. Sharp. Angry. "Father is cruel. Heartless. He should be here with you while you suffer."

She'd turned her head. The movement was slow. Careful. "He can't bear to see me in pain."

"And I can?" My voice had cracked. "I'm supposed to watch this?"

"Of course not." Her hand had lifted. Trembling. Shaking like a leaf in wind. "But I know your nature. And I know his. This family's politics and his dread for what's coming for me eats him alive. But you're not like that."

I'd held up the bottle. "I made this. I believe I finally crafted what will work."

She'd chuckled. A sound that became a cough. Blood had leaked from crusted spots on her skin. Places where the rot had dried and cracked. Made her look like a tree that was dying from the roots up.

"I don't want you to suffer needlessly, my Fi." Her hand had reached for mine. Fingers cold. Too cold. "I've accepted what will be will be. There is no point drinking more potions and concoction."

"The Goddess is cruel." Tears had streamed down my face. "Why would she do this to you? Is it a crime to be born an omega?"

"This is no fault of the dazzling Selene." She'd smiled. Sad. Resigned. "And it's not about being an omega. This is a crime of my blood. Our flesh was not meant to be crafted."

"What does that even mean?" I'd leaned closer. "Just take it, Mom. Please."

She'd hesitated. Then accepted the bottle. Drank what I'd made with hands that shook so badly I had to help her.

The memory faded. Left me standing in the empty hallway with tears on my cheeks and a hollow feeling in my chest.

I wiped my face and tried to pull myself together.

"Luna Fia. We meet again."

I looked up. Alpha Aldric stood a few feet away. His smile was warm. Kind. Everything his daughter wasn't. But there was still something biting and unnerving about it.

Still I smiled back and hoped he couldn't see the tears as I bowed because that's what you did. "Alpha Aldric."

Chapter 104: Alchemy 3

ALDRIC

The hallway stretched before me. Empty. Quiet. The kind of quiet that came after midnight when most people had sense enough to be sleeping.

I turned the corner and stopped.

The Luna Omega stood there. Her back was to me. Shoulders hunched like she carried weight she wasn't built to hold. When she turned, I saw the tears. Fresh ones that left tracks down her cheeks. She tried to hide them. Failed.

My intel had been clear. The medic omegas would be getting their loyalties tested by the spiritually inclined freak that called herself an elder. The doctor and healer were supposed to be gone by now. Yet here she was. Still lingering. Still inserting herself where she didn't belong.

The sentinels at the door wouldn't see me as a threat. They knew who I was. What I meant to this pack. But this omega. This unexpected variable. I didn't like that she was here and I didn't know why.

"Luna Fia." I let warmth color my voice. Let my smile reach my eyes. "We meet again."

She straightened. Wiped at her face with quick, furtive movements. "Alpha Aldric." Her bow was proper. Respectful. Everything it was supposed to be. But the issue was that she shared my air. Her nose was strung high like a challenge. And I like challenges.

I moved closer, studying her. "You're up late."

"I couldn't sleep." She met my eyes for a moment then looked away. "I've been in the infirmary with Grand Luna Morrigan."

"I see." I tilted my head. Kept my expression soft. Concerned. "That's very dedicated of you."

"It's guilt." The words tumbled out of her in a raw and honest manner. It was repulsing to see in real time. "And worry. For her. For Cian. For all of it."

"Guilt?" I raised an eyebrow. "What could you possibly feel guilty for?"

"Not being able to help." Her hands twisted together. "We tried making a cure. If you would even believe that. Thorne, Maren and I. We spent hours mixing things. Testing. Hoping. But in the end it was just..." She trailed off and shook her head.

Interesting. They'd been playing at alchemy. Mixing herbs like children playing at being witches. The thought would have been amusing if it weren't so pathetic.

"We don't know each other much." I stepped closer. Let my voice drop. Became gentle. Understanding. "But you seem like a decent person."

She looked up at me. Those tear-stained eyes searching for something. Comfort maybe. Hope.

"So don't lose hope." I reached out. Let my hand hover near her shoulder without quite touching. "Cian and I... We will never let Morrigan just die like this."

"Thank you." Her voice cracked slightly.

"I'll tell you what I told Cian." I pulled my hand back. "Take a rest. Tomorrow will come. And I promise the possibilities that it brings are endless."

She nodded. Then tried for a smile that didn't quite work. "Are you going to see her?"

"I am."

"Alright." She moved past me. Her footsteps soft on the tile floor.

I turned. Watched her go. Watched the way she carried herself. Small. Unassuming. Completely unaware of how much she didn't belong here.

Repulsion curled in my gut. Sharp and immediate. She really was a piece in the game I hadn't seen coming. Cian marrying her had caught me completely off guard. Marrying at all had been unexpected. But marrying an omega?

It was best I chopped whatever this was as soon as possible. Having an omega on the seat of Luna was just sickening. The thought of it made my skin crawl. Made everything feel wrong and out of place.

I continued down the hallway. The infirmary door came into view. One sentinel stood guard. He straightened when he saw me and bowed.

I waved back. Casual. Like this was just another visit. Nothing unusual.

The door opened under my hand. Closed behind me with a soft click. The room was dim. Quiet except for the steady beep of monitors and the mechanical hiss of the ventilator.

Morrigan lay there. Still. Peaceful. Dying.

"How have you been, sister in law?" I moved to her bedside. Looked down at her pale face.

My hand slipped into my pocket. Found the two needles I'd prepared. The tips were covered. Protected. One held dark liquid. The other golden.

I pulled them out. Held them up to the light. The golden one caught the glow. Seemed to shimmer.

"It is horrid the state that you are in." I set the needles on the table. "But something will be done about it soon. I promise you."

I reached for her wrist. Found her pulse. Counted the beats.

My body went cold.

I checked again. Pressed my fingers harder against her skin. Felt the rhythm.

Wrong. It was all wrong.

I knew this alchemized poison well. Had studied its effects using several Omegas and a few sentinels. Watched how it worked before I decided this was the one I wanted. Her heartbeat was supposed to be irregular. Musical in its chaos. But this wasn't right. The pattern was different. Stronger.

I lifted her hand and examined her skin in the dim light for the tree bark lesions. The marks that mimicked the rot so perfectly. They were fading. The edges were lighter. Less defined.

My eyes widened.

Was her body fighting the poison now? How? The witch who had strengthened it was powerful. Even if she wasn't, this shouldn't be possible.

Movement caught my eye. A bottle on the table across the room. Empty.

I walked over. Picked it up. Brought it to my nose.

The scent hit me immediately. Sharp. Familiar.

I ripped the covering off my golden injection. The cure I'd brought. The one meant to keep Morrigan more alive than she was now just long enough before Madeline came to perform the miracle. I held it to my nose.

They smelled almost identical.

"No." The word came out quiet. Disbelieving.

That fucked me up. Completely. The whole reason I'd come here tonight was to give Morrigan a trickle of the cure. She'd had a cardiac arrest after all and I needed her alive enough for Madeline to play hero. Cardiac arrests were no good for my plans.

So how had Morrigan gone from cardiac arrests to looking like she was rising above a poison strengthened by a powerful witch?

I looked back at the empty bottle in my hand. A laugh escaped. Small. Sharp. Wrong sounding in the quiet room.

"Am I going crazy?" I turned the bottle over. Examined it from every angle. "There is no way a gaggle of powerless fools created a cure to combat magic."

But the evidence was right here. In my hands. In Morrigan's improving vitals. In the fading lesions on her skin.

I didn't have time to linger on this. There was tomorrow. If Morrigan woke up now, my entire plan would be ruined. Everything I'd worked for. Every compromise I had to make since the exposure of the poison and Bo. Everything I'd carefully constructed.

My eyes scanned the room. I found more bottles. Vials and containers lined up on shelves. Some were labeled.

I moved closer. Read the names. Most meant nothing to me. Herbs and tinctures I had no knowledge of.

Then I saw it. Silver Thorn Draft.

My small knowledge of herbology kicked in. A tonic brewed from the bark of a silverthorn tree and powdered wolfsbane petals. When injected or swallowed, it overrode a wolf's regenerative reflexes. Slowed brain activity.

Perfect.

I grabbed the bottle. Moved back to Morrigan's bedside. Found her feeding tube. The liquid poured in easily. Disappeared into the tube. Into her.

But it wasn't enough. Not after what that omega had done. Not after she'd willingly stumbled into something that could ruin everything.

I picked up the dark injection. The one filled with alchemized poison. The one I'd only brought as insurance. In case I was too generous with the cure.

My hands were steady as I found a vein in Morrigan's neck. The needle slid in easily. I pushed the plunger. Watched half the contents disappear into her bloodstream.

Then I thought of the fucking Omega and her fucking audacity. Of her tear-stained face. Her guilt. Her pathetic attempt at playing healer.

She'd done this. She'd created and done something that threatened my plans. Again. Maybe accidentally. Maybe through sheer luck. But she'd done it.

And I wanted to punish her for it.

I pushed the plunger all the way down. Every last drop of poison flooded into Morrigan's system.

The needles went into my pocket. I walked to the bathroom. It was small, clean and most importantly utilitarian. I held both injections over the toilet and dropped them in before pressing the handle.

The water swirled. Pulled them down. Erased the evidence.

When I stepped back into the room, everything changed.

The monitors screamed. High pitched. Urgent. Morrigan's body jerked. Convulsed. Her back arched off the bed.

I ran to the door. Yanked it open. The sentinel turned. His eyes widened when he saw my face.

"Get help!" I let panic color my voice. Made it shake. Made it desperate. "Something is wrong with the Grand Luna!"

He ran. His footsteps echoed down the hallway. Faded into distance.

I turned back to the room. To Morrigan coding on the bed. To the machines that screamed and screamed and screamed.

And I smiled. This would be fun.

Chapter 105: The Lecherous Guide to Man Eating

HAZEL

I sat at my vanity, staring at my reflection. The mirror showed me what I already knew. Perfect skin. Perfect hair. Perfect everything. The broken pearls sat in their box beside me. A reminder of the day's disaster.

A knock interrupted my thoughts.

"Come in."

The door opened and Baruch stepped inside. Despite the late hour of the night, his uniform was still crisp. He bowed slightly.

"I heard you called for me, Luna Hazel."

"Yes." I turned to face him fully.

His eyes met mine. Then dropped as they traveled down. His jaw tightened when he saw what I was wearing and He looked away quickly. It was funny seeing him fix his gaze somewhere over my left shoulder.

I glanced down at myself. The nightdress was innocent enough. Pale pink silk. Short, yes, but nothing scandalous. The lace at the edges caught the lamplight.

A smile tugged at my lips.

I stood and crossed the room toward him. Each step was deliberate.

"You really have to stop doing that."

His eyes stayed fixed on the wall. "Luna Hazel, I—"

"It makes a girl self conscious." I kept my voice light. Teasing.

"I did not mean to." His throat bobbed as he swallowed.

I stopped in front of him. Close enough to see the tension in his shoulders. The way his hands clenched at his sides.

"I know that."

He finally looked at me. His eyes were guarded. Careful.

I smiled. Let it reach my eyes. "Thank you for earlier."

"It was not a big deal." His voice came out rougher than usual.

"Is that why you called me here?" He paused. "Luna Hazel."

"No." I tilted my head. Let my gaze travel over him. Down his chest. His arms. Back up to his face. "Why did you do it? Why did you lie for my sake?"

He shifted his weight. "It seemed like something you didn't want out. I believed I didn't have to speak if it really didn't matter."

"My mother sort of threatened your life." I raised an eyebrow. "Are you foolish?"

A laugh escaped him. Short and surprised. He scratched the back of his head. "Maybe."

The gesture was boyish. Charming in a way I hadn't expected.

"But I guess I also knew it wouldn't get to that," he added.

"Well, thank you." I let sincerity color my tone. Just enough. "Fia is a very sensitive subject in this house."

"I can only imagine."

Something in his voice made me pause. Understanding, maybe. Or sympathy. I wasn't sure which.

He cleared his throat. "Will that be all?"

"Yeah." The word came out soft.

I took a step closer. His body went rigid.

He took a step back.

But that wasn't going to stop me. I took another step forward. And he took another step back in response. It was like we were dancing. A slow, deliberate game.

"You are making me self conscious again, Sentinel."

"I don't think we should be doing this." His back hit the wall.

I tilted my head and let genuine confusion crossed my face. "What are you talking about?"

"I thought..." He stopped and then started again. "I apologize. I thought..."

I closed the remaining distance. My body nearly pressed against his. I leaned in. Breathed him in. Pine and something earthier. Clean sweat and leather.

I leaned back, meeting his frozen gaze.

"You thought I was going to kiss you?"

His throat worked. No words came out.

"But would you hate it though?" I kept my voice low. Intimate. "I have seen how you react around me. How your body reacts around me. Why you do stupid things like lie to my mother."

"Luna Hazel." My name came out strangled.

"I feel the same way too." I let my fingers brush against his chest. Just barely. "Is it wrong?"

"I don't know what to say to that."

I could feel his heart hammering under my palm. Fast and hard. His chest rose and fell with shallow breaths.

"You should probably make me pay for teasing and torturing you." I looked up at him through my lashes. "Start with my lips and perhaps my body."

His jaw clenched. "Luna Hazel, I apologize but I..."

Frustration bubbled up. Hot and sharp.

I scoffed. My hand shot out and I grabbed his collar. The fabric bunched in my fist. I yanked him down and brought his mouth to mine.

His lips were warm. Firm. They didn't move at first. They just stayed there. Frozen in shock.

I pressed harder and opened my mouth against his. I tasted him as I let my tongue trace the seam of his lips.

He made a sound. Low in his throat.

I broke the kiss and pulled back just enough to see his face. His eyes were wide. His pupils blown and his chest heaved.

"See?" My breath ghosted across his lips. "It wasn't that hard. I'm sure it felt good as well."

He gasped for air. His eyes stayed locked on mine.

I watched the shift happen. Saw the exact moment something changed. A fire sparked in his gaze. Raw and hungry. The same look I had seen in countless men before. The one thing that drove them all.

Lust.

His hand shot up. Tangled in my hair. His grip was tight. Almost painful. Just the way I liked it as he yanked me toward him.

This kiss was different. Demanding. His mouth crashed against mine. Claimed it. His other hand gripped my waist. Pulled me flush against him.

I smiled against his lips. This was exactly what I wanted. What I needed.

Control.

His tongue swept into my mouth and he explored and even tried to conquer me. I let him think he was in charge. He had to believe he was the one taking what he wanted.

Men were so predictable.

My hands slid up his chest. Felt the hard muscle beneath the uniform. Felt his heart still racing. I curled my fingers into his collar. Used it for leverage as I kissed him back.

He groaned. The sound vibrated through both of us. His hand in my hair tightened and he used that to angle my head exactly where he wanted it.

I let him.

His other hand moved from my waist. Slid down. Gripped my hip. Pulled me even closer until there was no space between us.

I could feel everything. The heat of his body. The hardness of him pressed against me. The way he trembled slightly despite his firm grip.

This was power. This was what I understood. What I was good at.

I broke the kiss and pulled back just enough to see his face. His eyes were glazed. His lips were swollen. Red from my lipstick and the force of our kiss.

"Better?" The word came out breathy. Teasing.

He didn't answer at first. He just stared at me. His chest rose and fell rapidly. His grip in my hair didn't loosen.

"Yeah." His voice came out raspy.

I smiled. Slow and satisfied.

This was just the beginning. Baruch had already lied for me once. He had already put himself at risk. And now this. Now he had crossed a line he couldn't uncross.

He was mine.

Just like everyone else I wanted eventually became mine.

His thumb brushed against my hip. The touch was almost gentle. At odds with the hunger in his eyes.

"Luna Hazel." His voice was rough. Wrecked. "We shouldn't..."

"Shouldn't what?" I traced my finger along his jaw. Felt the stubble there. "Shouldn't feel this good?"

He closed his eyes and took a shaky breath.

When he opened them again, the fire was still there. But something else too. Conflict maybe. Or fear.

Good. I liked a challenge. Breaking every fucking wall he had.

I leaned in. Pressed my lips to his jaw. His neck. Felt his pulse jump under my mouth.

"No one has to know," I whispered against his skin.

His grip tightened. On my hair. On my hip.

"This stays between us," I continued. "Our secret."

He shuddered. I felt it run through his entire body.

I pulled back and met his eyes again.

"Unless you want to stop?" I made my voice small. Uncertain. "If you don't want this..."

"I..." He swallowed hard. "I do."

Perfect.

I smiled and made sure it looked sweet. Genuine looking even.

"Good." I kissed him again. Soft this time. Brief. "Because I want this too."

His eyes searched mine. Looking for what, I wasn't sure. Sincerity maybe. Truth.

He wouldn't find it. But he would find enough of what he needed to see. Enough to make him stay. To make him mine.

I had spent years perfecting this. The art of becoming whatever someone needed. Whatever would make them loyal. Make them useful.

Baruch would be no different.

His hand loosened in my hair. Became almost tender as he tucked a strand behind my ear.

"You are beautiful," he murmured.

I already knew that. But I smiled anyway. Like his fucking shallow compliment meant something.

"Thank you."

He kissed me again. Slower this time. Deeper. Like he was savoring it.

I let him. Let him think this was about more than what it was.

Because in the end, this was just another piece on the board. Another tool in my arsenal. Another way to get what I wanted.

And what I wanted was everything.

"Luna Hazel?"

"Yes?"

"I want to fuck you."

Chapter 106: Code Blue

CIAN

I couldn't sleep. The ceiling above me had become familiar in the worst way. Every crack in the plaster. Every shadow cast by the moonlight bleeding through the curtains. I'd memorized them all in the hours I'd spent staring up.

My phone sat on the nightstand. Dark. Silent. Mocking me with its lack of response.

The house settled around me. Creaked and groaned like it was alive. Like it was judging me for every mistake I'd made. For calling Valentine. For leaving that pathetic message. For pushing away the one person who might have actually been able to help.

A sound cut through the quiet. Distant but sharp. Footsteps. Running.

I sat up. My heart kicked against my ribs.

Then I heard more footsteps. They sounded urgent . Like multiple people moving fast. Voices shouted but I couldn't make out the words.

My feet hit the floor before I'd made a conscious decision to move. I crossed the room in three strides. My hand found the doorknob. Turned it and pulled.

The hallway stretched before me. Empty at first. Then a sentinel appeared at the far end. He ran toward me. His face was pale. Panicked.

"What's happening?" I stepped into his path.

He skidded to a stop. His eyes went wide when he saw me. His mouth opened but nothing came out.

Horror bloomed across his features. Pure and undisguised.

My stomach dropped. "What happened?"

He still didn't speak. The fool just stood there looking at me like I was something to be pitied.

I didn't need a seer to tell me what this was about.

I ran.

My bare feet slapped against the cold floor. The hallway blurred past. My lungs burned but I pushed harder. Faster.

The infirmary doors were already open. Light spilled out into the corridor. I could hear the monitors before I even reached the entrance. That sound. That horrible, frantic beeping that meant everything was wrong.

I burst through the doorway.

Thorne stood over my mother. His hands moved quickly across her chest. Pressing down in steady compressions. Maren worked beside him. Her fingers flew over the machines. Adjusting. Checking. Her jaw was tight.

"What the fuck happened now?" The words ripped out of me.

My uncle stood at the side of the room. He paced back and forth. Three steps one way. Three steps back. His hands were clasped behind him.

He looked up when I spoke. "I couldn't sleep." His voice was strained. Rough. "I came over to see Morrigan. One minute with her and she just started coding." He stopped pacing. "It is a good thing they all came in time. I couldn't imagine what could have happened."

I moved closer to the bed. My legs felt unsteady. The world tilted and I had to grip the footboard to keep from swaying.

The markings on my mother's skin had spread. What had been isolated patches of tree bark lesions now covered her arms. Her neck. They crept up toward her face in twisted, organic patterns that looked like roots burrowing under her skin.

They'd tripled. At least.

A shudder ran through me. "It's even getting worse."

Maren stepped back from the bed. Her shoulders sagged. "I don't understand how it happened."

"Are you sure about that?" Aldric's voice cut through the room.

Everyone turned to look at him. Maren and Thorne exchanged glances. Their expressions shifted. Became wary.

"We are, Alpha Aldric." Maren's words came out carefully.

Aldric moved closer. "When I came in..." He paused and let the silence stretch. "Fia was just leaving. She mentioned something about a cure. Was that tried? Because last I checked... This was alchemy poisoning. It cannot be fixed without the involvement of magic."

The color drained from Maren's face. Thorne's throat worked as he swallowed.

Ice flooded my veins. "What the fuck is my uncle talking about?"

Thorne bowed his head. "We tried to make a cure with the herbs we had and what you brought back from the dead witch."

The world seemed to stop. The monitors beeped. My mother breathed. But everything else went still.

"It was my call to give it to her despite Maren and Fia's objecting." Thorne's voice was quiet. Defeated. "After all, we did not have magic in our arsenal. But I was just as desperate as you." He bowed lower. "Forgive me, Alpha Cian. I didn't think she would react this way."

A scoff escaped me. Sharp and bitter. "Does my mother look like a fucking lab rat?"

Thorne bent even further. His spine curved until his head was nearly level with his waist. "I have no words to defend myself Alpha Cian. I am sorry."

My hands clenched into fists. Nails bit into my palms. The pain felt distant. Unimportant.

I wanted to lash out. Wanted to grab him by the throat and shake him until he understood what he'd done. What he'd risked. I wanted to hurt him. But the words I'd shouted earlier in this same room came back to me. The demands I'd made. The anger I'd thrown at everyone for not doing enough.

This was what I'd wanted. For them to get off their ass and be useful. For them to stop making excuses and do something.

Thorne had taken a risk. A stupid, dangerous, reckless risk. But he'd taken it because I'd backed him into a corner with my rage and desperation.

I turned to my uncle. "I want a witch or warlock you can vouch for." The words came out flat. Empty of everything except exhaustion. "With each second that passes, goodness knows what could happen next."

Aldric stepped forward. His hand landed on my shoulder. Warm and steady. "Of course." He squeezed gently. "As soon as dawn breaks, I'll start making calls. I have made some already and it seems someone... perhaps Gabriel is sharing the unsightly agenda that you killed the witch that has a hand in this mess in response to what she did to your mother." His expression darkened. "So they are wary about coming and our reputation doesn't help."

Of course. Of course Gabriel was out there poisoning whatever wells he could reach. Making sure I couldn't get help even if I begged for it.

"Well find someone." I pulled away from his hand.

"I will." Aldric's voice held certainty.

I moved to my mother's side. The chair scraped against the floor as I pulled it closer. I sat. Reached for her hand. Her skin felt cold. Too cold. Like she was already slipping away.

I rested my forehead against our joined hands. "I'm sorry, mother." The words burned my throat. "I hate being useless."

Maren coughed softly. "Excuse me." Her footsteps retreated. The door opened and closed.

"I will be going now, kid." Aldric's voice came from behind me. "But I promise you, it might not seem like it now. But you'll get over this. It will get better."

I nodded without lifting my head. I didn't trust myself to speak.

His footsteps faded. The door clicked shut again.

Silence settled over the room. Just the steady beep of monitors and the mechanical hiss of the ventilator. The sounds of my mother barely holding on.

"Alpha Cian." Thorne's voice was small. Broken. "I... I apologize again. I know it means nothing but—"

"I understand." The words surprised me. They felt heavy coming out. But true. "What you did was fucking stupid."

"Yes." He agreed immediately.

"But I understand why you did it." I lifted my head. Looked at him. He still stood with his head bowed. His whole body curved in submission and shame. "I backed you into a corner. I demanded results without caring about the cost."

"That doesn't excuse—"

"No. It fucking doesn't." I cut him off. "But it explains it." I looked back at my mother. At the lesions spreading across her skin like a disease. Like death taking its time. "We're all desperate. All of us. And desperate people do stupid things."

Thorne straightened slightly. Not all the way. But enough that I could see his face. "Thank you, Alpha Cian."

I didn't respond. I couldn't. I just sat there holding my mother's cold hand and watching her chest rise and fall with each mechanical breath.

The night stretched on. Minutes blurred into hours. Thorne stayed. Working quietly. Checking vitals. Adjusting dosages. Doing what he could to keep her stable.

Stable. That word again. That meaningless word that just meant not dead yet.

My phone stayed silent in my pocket. There was still no calls. No messages. Just the weight of my own failures pressing down until I could barely breathe.

Dawn would come eventually. Aldric would make his calls. Maybe someone would answer. Maybe they'd agree to help despite Gabriel's poison. Maybe we'd find a way out of this nightmare.

But right now, in this moment, all I could do was sit here. Hold my mother's hand. And pray that stable would be enough to keep her alive until help arrived.

If it arrived at all.

Chapter 107: An unsightly Variable

ALDRIC

I left the infirmary with measured steps. Not too fast. Not too slow. Just a man tired from a late night visit with his dying sister in law.

The hallway stretched ahead of me. Empty except for the sentinel who'd run for help earlier. He stood at attention now. Back straight. Eyes forward. Playing at being professional while the fear still clung to him like cheap cologne.

I nodded as I passed. He nodded back.

Then I saw her. Maren. Walking away from the infirmary. Her shoulders were hunched. Her steps quick but unsteady. Like she was running from something or heading toward someone.

Perfect.

I picked up my pace and closed the distance between us. My footsteps were quiet on the tile but she must have heard them because she glanced back.

Her eyes widened slightly when she saw me.

I moved to block her path. Positioned myself so she'd have to push past me or stop. She stopped.

"Alpha Aldric." She bowed slightly. The motion was proper. Respectful. But her eyes told a different story. They were wary. Questioning. Why was I blocking her path? What could I possibly want?

"Did Thorne lie?" I kept my voice gentle. Concerned even.

Her brow furrowed. "I'm confused. What do you mean?"

I let a small smile touch my lips. It was supposed to read as sad. Perhaps understanding if you looked into it deeply. "Doctor, I saw your face when Thorne made that statement." I paused. Let the weight of my words settle between us. "It wasn't him who gave my sister in law that cure, was he?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." The words came out too quickly. Too practiced.

"If that will be all, I have to go, Alpha Aldric." She moved to step around me.

I held out my hand and proceeded to block her path again.

The urge to slam her skull against the pavement hit me hard and just as fast. The thought was so visceral I could almost feel the impact. Almost hear the crack. But I couldn't. Not here. Not now. Scoping and molding her was all I could settle for. But even she seemed adamant.

Why were they protecting the omega? What spell did the bitch cast?

"What I mean is it isn't fair that Thorne suffers for a sin he knows nothing about." I kept my tone reasonable. Like I was doing her a favor by bringing this up. "It would be understandable if it was Fia. She has no medical knowledge. She's Cian's mate and bride. Of course she would want her mother in law to be fine." I tilted my head and studied her face. "My nephew would understand. You know that, right?"

Maren sighed. Long and tired. She took a good look at me. Really looked. Like she was trying to see past the words to whatever lay beneath.

"I have no idea what you mean, Alpha Aldric." Her voice was flat now. Empty of the nervousness from before. "Luna Fia didn't do anything. Or am I missing what you seem to be implying? Because it seems like you are accusing Luna Fia of something. Did you pray tell see something?"

I smiled wider and let it reach my eyes. "Perhaps I was wrong."

"Perhaps." She held my gaze and didn't flinch. She didn't even look away. The lowerbombs on these grounds had some nerve.

"Can I go now, Alpha Aldric?"

I dropped my hand and stepped aside.

She walked past me. Her footsteps steady now. Confident. Like she'd won something.

"Fucking bitch." The words whispered out of me. I meant all the venom that came along with it.

I watched her turn the corner and disappear from sight.

Disappointment settled in my chest. Heavy and sour. I'd wanted to crack her. Wanted to see that moment when the facade broke and she admitted what I already knew. That the omega had fed the cure to Morrigan. That Thorne was covering for her.

But no worries. There was still ample opportunity to make her suffer.

The part that bothered me more was how the cure they made had actually been working. How three powerless fools had managed to create something that fought back against magic. Against alchemy. Against everything that should have made it impossible when they didn't have magic.

I pulled out my phone. The screen glowed in the dim hallway light. I opened my messages and typed quickly.

'Are you up?'

I waited while I stared at the screen. I watched the little dots that would indicate she was typing.

There was nothing.

I started to pull up her contact and my thumb hovered over the call button when the phone buzzed.

'What do you want now?'

I smiled as I typed back.

'It's late and you're up. Why the sleepless night? No sleep for the wicked?'

The response came faster this time.

'Makes both of us I guess. What do you want?'

I leaned against the wall and let my fingers move across the screen.

'Can alchemized poison be cured with a cure that has no magical composition?'

The dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again. Like she was thinking about her answer. Choosing her words carefully.

'No. I have never heard of such.'

Dread flooded through me.

'Good to know.'

'Is there a reason you asked?'

I typed back quickly.

'I like being up to date. That is all.'

I ended the conversation. I didn't wait for a response. I just locked the phone and slipped it back into my pocket.

My thumb tapped against the hollow part of my cheek. A nervous habit I'd never quite broken. The rhythm was steady as I wandered in my head.

Did the omega have secrets? Had she somehow stumbled onto knowledge she shouldn't possess? Was she magic? Or had Thorne been divinely blessed with some stroke of genius that defied explanation?

All options bothered me. All meant variables I hadn't accounted for. Pieces on the board I couldn't predict.

I pushed off the wall and started walking again. My footsteps echoed in the empty corridor.

It lingered even heavier now that the omega was a big problem. She had been from the moment Cian married her. But now she was a even bigger issue. Because now she'd done something that almost threatened everything I'd built. Everything I'd planned.

And she didn't even realize it.

That made it worse somehow. The idea that she'd created a cure through sheer dumb luck. Through trial and error. Through playing at being a healer with Thorne's little herb garden and her pathetic attempts at being useful.

I'd have to find out. I had to know if this was luck or something more. I needed to understand what I was dealing with before I could neutralize it properly.

Chapter 108: Suspect 1

FIA

I woke to pounding on my door. The sound drove straight through my skull and dragged me from whatever shallow sleep I'd managed to find.

My body felt heavy. Wrong. Like I'd been drugged or hit by something large and unforgiving. I pushed myself up and swung my legs over the side of the bed. The room tilted for a moment before settling.

The knocking came again. Harder this time. More insistent.

"Coming," I called out. My voice came out rough and cracked.

I stumbled to the door. My fingers fumbled with the handle before I managed to pull it open.

Maren stood in the hallway. Her jaw was tight. Her eyes blazed with something that made my stomach drop even before she spoke.

"Maren?" I stepped back. "What's wrong?"

She pushed past me and into the room. The door slammed shut behind her. She turned to face me and the expression on her face made me want to step back further. Made me want to run.

"What did you do?" The words came out sharp. Accusatory.

My heart kicked against my ribs. "I... what do you mean?"

"Don't play stupid with m, Luna Fia." Her voice rose. "What did you do?"

The cure. That had to be it. She'd figured out about what I had done with the cure. She'd found out that I'd given it to Grand Luna Morrigan despite her objections. Despite Thorne's warnings.

I swallowed hard. "I know you and Thorne were against it." The words tumbled out quickly. "But I had to do it. I needed peace. I needed to know I'd tried everything." I spread my hands. "Nothing happened though. I don't know why you're so angry. She is fine. I made sure of that .

Maren's face went red. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides. "Nothing happened?" She took a step toward me. "Nothing happened?"

I flinched back.

"Except something did happen, Luna Fia." Her voice shook. "Luna Morrigan almost died. Again."

The world seemed to stop. The air left my lungs in a rush and I couldn't pull more in. "What?"

"Why would you do that?" Maren's voice cracked. "Why would you give her an untested cure in the window when there was no medic omega around? If Alpha Aldric hadn't been there..." She shook her head. "It would have been very bad. Regardless of the alarms. Regardless of anything."

My legs felt weak. I reached out and braced myself against the wall. "When I gave it to her, she didn't react at all. I'm sure. I stayed. I watched. There was nothing."

"Except you weren't sure." Maren's words cut through me. "You might have knowledge in herbology and poison. But it shows you're not a healer at the end of the day because your ethics are all over the place."

The accusation stung. It burrowed under my skin and settled there with sharp edges. But was she wrong?

"We all feel bad," Maren continued. "We all feel useless. But that doesn't mean we put the Grand Luna's life on the line. Having a hero complex will most likely get people killed." She paused. Drew in a shaky breath. "Thorne had to take the fall for what you did too."

Horror flooded through me. Cold and absolute. "What?" The word came out barely above a whisper. "Why would he do that?"

"Because he understands what could happen if it came out that it was you." Maren's expression softened slightly. Just barely. "When you came here, everyone was against you because of the basis of your marriage with Alpha Cian. It took a lot for people to start warming up to you. Some still don't even trust you." She met my eyes. "He knew this would decimate your chances here. That Cian would be hurt. Or worse."

My throat tightened. Guilt pressed down on me until I thought I might collapse under the weight.

"As much as I hate that he put himself in the line of fire," Maren said quietly, "I might have done the same thing if I hadn't hesitated as well."

"I'm sorry." The words felt pathetic. Inadequate. But they were all I had.

"I don't need that, Luna Fia." Maren shook her head. "It would have been polite if you'd listened to what we had to say instead of playing hero. I know you've been helpful to this pack two times now. But that's not what you were born to do here. You're a person at the end of the day. Not a god or a savior." Her voice dropped. "What you did could have really put Alpha Cian, me, and Thorne in a very horrible place."

Each word landed like a physical blow. I wanted to defend myself. Wanted to explain that I'd just been trying to help. That I couldn't sit by and do nothing while the Grand Luna suffered.

But Maren wasn't wrong. I'd been reckless. Selfish. I'd put my need to feel useful above the safety of everyone involved. Especially Maren and Thorne.

"Just... Please do everything in your power to ensure that Elder Thorne doesn't needlessly suffer for this." Maren turned toward the door. "It's the least you can do. That's all I came to say."

She reached for the handle.

My hand shot out and grabbed her shoulder. "I really am sorry."

She paused but didn't turn around.

"But you also have to believe me when I tell you nothing really happened." The words spilled out faster now. "I was there during the window she should have had an adverse reaction like you just mentioned. But she was just there. Unconscious and fine. I left and..." I trailed off as the thought took shape. "And Alpha Aldric came in."

The pieces shifted in my mind. Rearranged themselves into a pattern I didn't want to see. But I couldn't ignore.

Maren turned slowly. Her eyes narrowed. "You cannot be serious." Her voice was flat. Dangerous. "You think Alpha Aldric did something?"

"I'm not saying he did something vile." I released her shoulder and stepped back. "But emotions are high. Maybe he tried something as well. Maybe he—"

"This is unbelievable." Maren cut me off. She stared at me like I'd transformed into something unrecognizable. Something ugly. "I didn't think this was the kind of person that you were. Perhaps I put you too high on a pedestal."

"Why won't you believe me?" My voice rose. Desperation clawed at my throat.

"It's not that I don't believe you." Maren's expression hardened. "It's just that I see what I see. We made that cure. We knew it would most likely not work because we didn't have magic. Goodness knows what reaction she would have with that poison in her system. Yet you gave it to her." She took a step closer. "Alpha Aldric would never do anything to hurt his nephew or the Grand Luna. He loves them. He's made sacrifices for them."

The certainty in her voice made me want to scream.

"So for your sake, Luna Fia," Maren continued, "if you want things to remain semi normal on these grounds, do not imply that Alpha Aldric could ever do wrong."

She turned and walked out. The door closed behind her with a soft click that sounded like finality.

I stood there in the silence. My heart hammered against my ribs. My hands shook.

Maren wasn't entirely wrong. I knew that. I'd been reckless. I'd ignored their warnings and done what I thought was right without considering the consequences. Without thinking about what would happen if something went wrong.

But something else gnawed at me. Something I couldn't shake loose.

The Grand Luna had been fine when I left. I'd stayed longer than I should have. Watched her breathing. Monitored her for any sign of distress. There had been nothing.

And then Aldric had arrived.

And then she'd coded.

I moved to the side of the bed and found my slippers. Pulled them on with trembling hands.

This was stupid. Probably dangerous. Maren had just warned me not to imply anything about Aldric. Told me it would destroy any shaky goodwill I'd built here.

But I couldn't let it go. I couldn't silence the voice in my head that whispered something was off. That the timing was too convenient. That Aldric had been too ready with his explanation about not being able to sleep. About coming to visit his sister in law.

I opened my door and stepped into the hallway. The air felt colder than it should. The corridor stretched ahead of me. Empty and silent except for the sound of my footsteps.

I headed toward the infirmary. Each step felt heavier than the last. Each breath came harder.

This could backfire. This could make everything worse. This would again prove Maren right about me being reckless and impulsive.

But if I was right. If Aldric had done something.

I couldn't live with myself if I stayed silent and pretended like this didn't gnaw the depth of my person.

The infirmary doors appeared ahead. Light still spilled from beneath them. I could hear the faint beep of monitors. The mechanical hiss of the ventilator. I could also feel the thrum of the mate bond. Cian was inside.

I reached for the handle.

My hand hesitated. But I couldn't let that linger. I swallowed and then I pushed through.

Chapter 109: Suspect 2

FIA

I pushed through the infirmary doors. The hinges gave a soft groan that seemed too loud in the quiet hallway behind me.

The room opened up before me. Bright lights. The steady beep of monitors. The mechanical hiss of the ventilator breathing for someone who couldn't do it themselves.

Cian sat beside his mother's bed. His shoulders hunched forward. His elbows rested on his knees and his hands hung loose between them. He looked up when I entered. His eyes found mine and something flickered there. Surprise maybe. Or exhaustion so deep it had worn grooves into his features.

Thorne stood on the other side of the bed. He adjusted an IV line with careful fingers. Two medic omegas moved quietly near the far wall. They checked equipment and made notes on clipboards. Their movements were precise. Practiced.

No sign of Aldric.

I moved closer to the bed. My feet felt heavy. Each step took effort I didn't think I had left in me.

Grand Luna Morrigan lay still beneath the thin hospital blanket. Her chest rose and fell with the ventilator's rhythm. The lesions on her skin had spread further than I remembered. They crawled up her neck now. Dark patches that looked like bark trying to swallow her whole.

I scanned her body. Looked for anything that seemed out of place. Any sign of what had gone wrong after I left.

Nothing stood out. Nothing screamed tampering or foul play. Just a woman dying by inches while her son watched helplessly.

But my gut wouldn't settle. It twisted and churned with the certainty that something wasn't right.

"What are you doing here?" Cian's voice cut through my thoughts. Flat. Empty of everything except bone-deep weariness. "You should be asleep."

I turned to face him. "I'm worried about her too."

He studied me for a moment. His gaze moved across my face like he was searching for something. Truth maybe. Or lies. I couldn't tell which he expected to find.

I walked to Thorne. Reached out and touched his arm. "Can we talk?"

His eyes widened slightly. He glanced at Cian, then back to me. "Luna Fia, I—"

"Please." I kept my voice low. Gentle.

He nodded after a moment and let me guide him away from the bed. We moved to the corner of the room. Far enough that the others wouldn't easily hear but close enough that Cian could watch us. Which he did. His stare felt like a physical weight on my back.

"You're being suspicious," Thorne whispered. His shoulders curved inward. Protective.

"I'm sorry you had to do that for me." The words tumbled out. "I promise. I will tell Cian about this but I need you to—"

"No." He cut me off. But his tone stayed kind. Almost gentle. "Don't do that."

I blinked. "But—"

"It was my choice to lie." He met my eyes. Held them steady. "And lying is a grave offense in matters like this. To disprove what I said would just put me in a more uncomfortable situation."

My throat tightened. "Thorne."

"I did what I did because I wanted to." He straightened slightly. "Because I owe you my life."

"No, you don't."

"Well, I also did it because I knew you did it without malice in your heart." His expression softened. "No matter how rash it had been, to have you suffer for one ill-made choice didn't seem right."

Guilt pressed down on my chest. Made it hard to breathe. "I'm sorry regardless."

"You don't have to be." A small smile touched his lips. Sad but genuine. "Alpha Cian somehow forgave me."

I swallowed hard and nodded. "I dragged you here for something else as well."

His eyebrows rose. "Oh?"

"Can you take a blood sample of Luna Morrigan and test it for anything strange?"

The smile faded. His expression turned cautious. "Is there a reason why?"

"Yes." I glanced back at the bed. At Morrigan lying there with machines keeping her alive. "I believe it wasn't the cure that caused her to have such a violent reaction."

Thorne's jaw tightened. "Luna Fia—"

"I know it sounds off." The words came faster now. Desperate. "But I beg you to trust me."

He was quiet for a long moment. His gaze moved from me to Morrigan and back again. "Okay." He finally said. "But it might take some time. Because Alpha Cian will definitely still be wary of me. Perhaps getting Maren would be better."

Maren's face flashed in my mind. The anger. The disappointment. The way she'd looked at me like I was something she needed to scrape off her shoe.

"No." I shook my head. "It has to be you."

"Luna Fia—"

"I'll convince Cian if I have to." I squared my shoulders. "By any means."

Thorne studied me for another beat. Then he sighed. "Okay."

We walked back to the bed. Cian tracked our movement the whole way. His eyes never left us.

"Are you two done plotting?" His voice held an edge. Sharp and cutting.

I opened my mouth. Closed it. What could I say? How could I explain this without revealing too much? Without making things worse?

The mate bond hummed between us. I could feel his fear. His exhaustion. His wariness that sat just beneath the surface like something waiting to strike.

And he could feel me too. I hadn't been shielding. He'd felt every bit of my guilt. My anxiety. My desperate need to fix what I'd broken.

I decided to just come clean. Or at least mostly clean.

"I want Thorne to take a blood sample from the Grand Luna."

"I think not." Cian's response came immediately. Cold and final.

"The cure we made was put in her system." I pushed forward despite the warning in his tone. "We could see what went wrong if we do a few tests with her blood."

"In case you didn't know." Cian leaned back in his chair. His posture deceptively relaxed. "Thorne is currently walking on thin ice. The last thing that needs to be done is give him new ideas on what 'went wrong' and how to make it 'better.'"

"I'll do it then."

That made his eyes widen. Just a fraction. Just enough that I knew I'd surprised him.

"You're shielding now." He tilted his head and studied me like I was a puzzle he couldn't quite solve. "I wonder why."

Because I didn't want him to feel the real reason. I didn't want him to sense my suspicion about his uncle. I didn't want to deal with that explosion on top of everything else.

"Being open is still a little uncomfortable." The lie came easier than it should have. "And I could tell you were reading me."

He didn't respond. He just watched me with those dark eyes.

"You're just going to have to learn to trust me." I lifted my chin. "Mate bond or no mate bond."

Cian sighed. The sound came from somewhere deep in his chest. "What really do I have to lose."

I turned to Thorne. "Can I get a needle?"

"Thorne can do it." Cian's words stopped me cold.

Both Thorne and I turned to stare at him.

"Alpha Cian?" Thorne's voice came out uncertain.

"You heard me. Or do you still plan on killing my mother?"

"Goddess no."

Thorne moved quickly after that. Like he was afraid Cian might change his mind. He gathered supplies. Prepared the syringe. His hands stayed steady despite the tension radiating through the room.

I fidgeted with my thumbs. Twisted them together and pulled them apart. Over and over while Thorne worked.

Cian's gaze was burned into the side of my face. I could feel it even without looking at him.

"How was your shopping?" He finally spoke.

The question caught me off guard. I glanced over at him. "You're still on about that?"

"I'm distracting myself. Help me."

Something in my chest loosened. Just a fraction. "It was good. I guess."

One eyebrow rose. "You guess?"

"Shopping isn't really my thing." I shrugged. "But it was nice to have Maren around. She really pushed me and I did get some nice clothes."

"That's why I coupled you with her."

"Thanks." The word came out softer than I meant it to.

"But if you're still talking about shopping." I turned to face him fully now. "Surely you have no plans to go to the wedding."

"Oh I do." His lips curved into something that wasn't quite a smile. "Julius and I have been at each other's necks for a while now. And since he was the first to offer a white flag, I intend to take it."

I waited. There was more coming. I could hear it in his voice.

"If it's for other nefarious purposes like..." He paused. Let the silence stretch. "The existence of you in my life as well... I also intend to take it."

A scoff escaped me. "You intend to parade me about to prove a point?"

"Yes?"

"I guess I had to pay for the shopping somehow."

That pulled a real smile from him. Small but genuine. He even laughed. A quiet sound that barely made it past his lips but still counted as something resembling lightness.

"Well..." His eyes held mine. "That's certainly an outlook on life."

We both looked at Thorne. He'd positioned the needle against Morrigan's arm. Found a vein with practiced ease and he slowly drew blood with steady hands that didn't shake despite everything.

"But surely you could send a subordinate." I said. "Your Beta."

"I know I can." Cian shifted in his chair. "But I don't want to."

I waited for him to explain. He would. He always did eventually.

"My mother's situation has been hidden from most of the public." His voice dropped lower. "When it was the rot. And even now that it's poison, I try not to let a lot of people know that much."

He ran a hand through his hair. The strands fell back into place around his face.

"That witch's death does not seem to be helping matters." Bitterness crept into his tone. "As most magic practitioners think I killed her. The good thing about that whole mess is that story will never be told straight."

I nodded. Stayed quiet and let him talk.

"Me not showing up there after our peculiar marriage and the rumor that I killed a witch in a fit of rage will definitely breathe life to new rumors." He looked at his mother. "Unfavorable ones for me and yourself."

"That does make sense."

"I've gotten it." Thorne held up the vial. Blood swirled inside the glass. Dark and thick.

"Do a test." I turned to him. "On any and everything."

"I got it."

He moved toward the deeper part of the infirmary. His footsteps faded into the background noise of machines and monitors.

I turned back to Cian. "I don't mind a party or helping your agenda. As long as I don't have to dance."

"It's a wedding." He said it like I should have known better. "There will be dancing. I will be dancing. Do you have a thing against dancing or what..."

His eyebrows rose slowly. Realization dawned across his features.

"Goddess..." A note of disbelief entered his voice. "You can't dance..."

Chapter 110: No good thoughts

FIA

He laughed. The sound rang through the infirmary and bounced off the sterile walls. This time the tension in his shoulders actually left him. His whole body seemed to uncoil.

"I cannot believe this." He shook his head. Genuine amusement lit his features. "You are an Alpha's daughter. Surely you must have been to multiple events where you had to dance."

"Not really." The admission came easier than I expected. "When I was younger, my mother tended to avoid events along with me because..."

I paused. The words caught in my throat.

"She was my father's second wife and also an Omega." The truth tasted bitter. "I guess the scrutiny and judgement were too much for her and she didn't want that for me as well."

The memories surfaced unbidden. My mother's careful smile that never quite reached her eyes at pack gatherings. The way she'd find excuses to leave early. How she'd hold my hand a little tighter when Isobel swept past us with Hazel trailing behind like a golden shadow.

The small sacrifices she made. The way she'd step aside. Defer. Fade into the background so my stepmother could shine.

Life wasn't always simple for her at Silver Creek. And I'd never really let myself see it clearly until now.

I cleared my throat. "That part just stuck. So even when I was older and things were a bit more lax, I didn't like going myself."

Cian studied me for a moment. Something shifted in his expression. Understanding maybe.

"Well, do you want to practice?" He stood from his chair and stretched his arms above his head. "Even if you don't want to dance, there will be some weirdo who will want to. And the last thing you want to be referred to in high society is snobbish and rude."

"Here?" I glanced around the infirmary. "There is no music."

"We have a hall, you know." His lips quirked. "And there is some beautiful classical music as well."

I wanted to refuse. The words formed on my tongue. But Cian looked like he really wanted to help. Like he needed this distraction as much as I apparently needed the lesson.

And maybe I did need it. The wedding loomed ahead whether I liked it or not. But was a few hours enough to learn something?

"Yes." I said finally. "Alright."

He got up immediately. "Alright."

We left the infirmary together. I realized as he led me through the corridors that I'd never really checked Skollrend since I arrived. Not properly. I'd been too caught up in everything else. The hatred most of them had for me. The poison. The accusations. The weight of it all pressing down.

The hallways opened into larger spaces. High ceilings appeared above us. Ornate fixtures caught the light.

Cian pushed open a set of double doors. They swung wide to reveal a massive room. Polished floors stretched out before us. Windows lined one wall and let in receding moonlight that painted everything silver.

So this was the hall. Or maybe it was the ballroom.

He ran to a corner. Bent down and fiddled with something I couldn't see. Music started to play. The classical kind. Strings and piano that filled the space with something beautiful and melancholy.

"Let us begin." He turned back to me. "Lose the slippers."

I kicked them off. They skidded across the floor.

He toed off his shoes as well. Left them in a neat pair by the wall.

We met in the center of the room. His hand extended toward me. Palm up. It was an invitation.

I took it. His fingers closed around mine. Warm and steady.

His other hand settled on my waist. Light but firm. "Just follow my lead."

I nodded and tried to focus on the steps instead of the way my heart had started hammering against my ribs.

He moved and I tried to follow but my two left foot tangled. I stepped directly on his toes.

"Sorry." I winced.

"Imagine those were heels." He said it without any real heat.

I laughed despite myself. "That makes it worse."

"Here." He adjusted his grip slightly. "Feel where I'm going to step before I do it. Through the bond if you have to."

I tried again and paid attention to the shift in his weight. The subtle pull of his hand guiding mine.

This time I only stepped on him twice.

"Better." He said. "What helps is thinking of it like sparring. Action and reaction. I move, you counter."

I applied that logic and let my body respond to his movements like we were circling each other in a training ring instead of a ballroom.

My feet found the rhythm and I started to anticipate instead of just react.

"You are a fast learner." Approval colored his voice.

"I try."

"But that was simple." His eyes gleamed with something that might have been mischief. "Let us go for a more complex one."

The score ended and another immediately began. This one faster and more intricate.

He raised his hand at me. "Take it."

I did.

"This is my favorite." He said as he pulled me closer. His hand spread wider on my waist.

"Why?" I asked.

"Mads..." He paused. Stopped moving entirely.

Madeline... The name hung between us. Heavy with everything unsaid.

I realized what this was about. What song this must have been. What memories it carried for him.

"It is no problem." I said quietly. "You are allowed to linger."

"No." His voice came out rough. "I am not."

I wanted to know more about Madeline. Maren had told me a little. Enough to sketch the outline of who she'd been. But not enough to fill in the details.

"I think about mine sometimes." The confession slipped out before I could stop it.

Cian scoffed. "The one who cheated and betrayed you?"

We started moving again. Slower this time. Like we were both testing something fragile.

"Well yes." I met his eyes. "Before Milo revealed the depths of his depravity, he was really quite nice. He was going to take me to his mother. He told me his brother would love me."

The memories came back. Milo's smile. The way he'd held my hand. How I'd believed every word he said.

"It really is hard getting over the best version of someone you once knew." My throat tightened. "I'm sure you feel that way."

Cian was quiet for a moment. His grip on my hand shifted slightly. "I can't complain. It was me who shattered what we had."

I waited. But all that seemed to happen for a long while was that the silence just stretched.

"She was convinced I was going to choose a mate that was a werewolf if I contested for my father's seat and won." His voice dropped lower. "It didn't help that we weren't fated from the jump. And she had no faith that the moon goddess would accept her when we tied the knot."

He pulled me through a turn. My body followed without thinking.

"And she was right." He added. Somber now.

I wondered. Was it because the goddess blessed ours? Or because he married me?

"Because you married me?" I asked.

"Partly." He said. "But she was right in the sense that she wasn't the highest priority. I chose Skollrend over her."

The admission settled between us. Honest and raw.

"If you could..." I started. I tried to choose my words carefully. "If there was a chance your paths would cross again and you could make things right, would you choose her?"

"I choose to reside in reality." His jaw tightened. "And there is no way it happens in this world."

"If." I pressed.

"Are you scoping the chances you can get free of me?" Something sharp entered his tone.

I chuckled. The sound came out lighter than I felt. "No. But if I was, it wouldn't be such a bad thing. Would it? This union is a sham built on punishing me anyway."

The words landed wrong. I felt it immediately.

The mate bond on his side slammed shut. His shields went up so fast I barely registered the movement.

Before I could focus on why, his grip on my waist tightened. He pulled me close. So close I could feel his hot breath against my face.

"Is it?" His voice came out low. Dangerous.

My heart stuttered. "Cian—"

"Is it?" He repeated. His eyes held mine. Dark and intense and burning with something I couldn't name.

The music swelled around us. We'd stopped moving and stood frozen in the middle of the ballroom with his hand pressed against my waist and mine still caught in his.

"That's what you said." My voice came out quieter than I meant it to. "That this was punishment."

"I say a lot of things." His thumb moved against my side. Small circles through the fabric of my shirt. "Most of them when I was angry."

"And now?" The question barely made it past my lips.

"Now." He said. Then stopped. His gaze dropped to my mouth and I could swear they lingered there.

The mate bond hummed between us. Alive and electric despite his shields. I could feel it pulling. Urging.

"Now I don't know what this is." He finished. Honest again. Raw again.

I should have stepped back. I should have put distance between us. But my feet wouldn't move.

"Neither do I." I admitted.

His hand slid higher on my waist. Not quite an embrace but close. So close.

He exhaled like I had just cracked something open inside him. His thumb finally slipped under the hem of my shirt, hot against my skin, a slow stroke that stole my breath. He felt the way I reacted, you could not hide everything from the bond, and something in him shivered, then gave way.

He edged closer, nose brushing my cheek, his mouth hovering right over mine, close enough my lips tingled with the heat of him. Testing the fire. Tempting himself with it.

Then he finally broke.

His lips met mine slow at first, tender and careful, like he was not sure I would let him. Then I kissed him back, wanting, needing, and that tiny hesitation vanished as he pulled me fully into him. His mouth deepened against mine, warm and sure, heat spilling through me as his fingers clutched my waist and dragged me flush to his body.

I let out a soft hungry sound into his mouth and he swallowed it hungrily, tilting my head with his hand at my jaw so he could kiss me harder, deeper, tongue sliding against mine in a hot, shaky stroke that made my knees weaken.

My fingers clung to his shoulders, pulling him closer, and he answered with a low, rough grunt from his chest that vibrated right through my lips as he kissed me again and again, each kiss wetter, needier, the kind that left my breath tangled with his.

His mouth tugged at my lower lip, teeth catching gently, pulling a soft ahh from me before he sealed his lips back over mine, kissing me like he had been aching for this, like he had finally stopped fighting the bond and wanted every inch of me he could reach.