

## **To ruin an Omega**

### **#Chapter 11: Left Behind - Read To ruin an Omega**

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###### **CIAN**

I picked up the tablet again. Held it out to her.

"Do you accept my terms?"

Her hands shook. Just slightly, but I noticed. The fear was winning now. Reality was setting in. She was stuck here with me whether she liked it or not, and the sooner she accepted that, the easier this would be.

For both of us.

She stared at the tablet. At the cracked screen. At the contract that would define the rest of her life.

Then she looked at the window again. At the miles of empty land waiting for her.

I could see her breaking. Could see the exact moment when her resolve started to crack. Her shoulders sagged. Her breathing got faster. Her eyes went glassy with tears she was too proud to shed.

She was going to sign it. I was sure of it.

"I will leave."

The words came out quiet. Defeated.

She reached for the door handle.

I blinked. Stared at her. Waited for her to change her mind. To bend that knee. To grab the tablet and sign the damn thing so we could move on with our lives.

She opened the door.

Sunlight flooded into the limo. Hot and bright and unforgiving. The temperature outside had to be pushing ninety. The kind of heat that made the air shimmer above the road.

Fia stepped out.

She stood there on the side of the road in her wedding dress. That white gown that had been meant for her sister. It was already dirty at the hem from where she'd been kneeling at the altar. Her hair was falling out of whatever style it had been in. She looked small out there. Fragile.

Stubborn.

I stared at her through the open door. Tried to make sense of what was happening. This girl who had supposedly schemed and manipulated and done everything in her power to end up married to me was now choosing to walk away. To face certain danger and possible death rather than sign a contract that would give her some safety and security despite the fact that she deserved none of that.

It didn't make sense.

For someone who put so much effort toward ensuring she ended up with me, she sure did protest a lot.

I'd been certain she would bend over backwards for me. That she'd submit the second I pushed back. That all this defiance was just an act she'd drop once she realized she was not losing what she had plotted for.

But she was standing outside my car. In the middle of nowhere. With nothing but the clothes on her back and her pride.

Garrett looked at me. His expression was uncertain. Waiting for orders.

I leaned back into my seat, let the leather cushions support my weight. Took another sip of whiskey.

This was a ploy. It had to be. She was playing some kind of game. Trying to make me feel guilty. Trying to manipulate me into treating her better by acting like she didn't care.

Rather than act like the obsessed Omega she was, she was playing a different angle.

I smiled.

Fine. If she wanted to play games, we'd play games.

I could be patient. I could wait her out. She'd come crawling back within the hour, begging me to let her back in the car. Begging me to take her to Skollrend where she'd be safe and fed and protected.

And when she did, I'd make sure she understood exactly what her little stunt had cost her.

I took another drink. The whiskey was smooth. Perfect. I savored it while I watched Fia standing there in the sun.

"Lock the door and drive."

Garrett's head snapped around. "Alpha—"

"Did I stutter?"

"No, Alpha."

He reached for the door. Started to pull it closed.

I saw the exact moment Fia realized what was happening. Her eyes went wide. Her mouth opened like she was going to say something. Probably to take it all back. To beg me to stop.

I smiled at her. Made sure she could see it. Made sure she understood that I knew exactly what game she was playing.

The door clicked shut.

Garrett hit the lock button. The sound echoed in the quiet of the limo.

"Drive."

The driver put the car in gear. We started moving forward.

I watched Fia through the tinted window. Watched her take a step toward the car like she was going to chase us. Then stop. Like she'd remembered her pride.

She stood there in the middle of the road. Getting smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror. Her white dress was bright against the dark pavement and the green trees.

Garrett turned around in his seat. His face was pale. Worried.

"Alpha, she's an Omega. She cannot—"

"I know exactly what she is."

My voice came out cold enough that Garrett flinched. He turned back around and didn't say another word.

I finished my whiskey. Set the glass down in the cup holder. The ice clinked against the crystal.

In the distance, Fia was just a white speck now. Still standing there. Still too stubborn to run after us like she should have.

Part of me expected to feel something. Guilt maybe. Or concern. She was my chosen mate after all, even if I didn't want her. The bond was supposed to make me protective. Supposed to make me care about her wellbeing.

But I felt nothing.

Just a cold satisfaction that she'd finally understand what it meant to defy me. What it cost to say no when I expected compliance.

She'd learn.

One way or another, she'd learn.

And if she didn't make it back to civilization? If something happened to her out there in the heat and the wilderness?

Well. That would solve a lot of my problems, wouldn't it.

The limo picked up speed. The road stretched out ahead of us, leading toward Skollrend. Leading home.

I poured myself another whiskey and tried not to think about the girl in the white dress standing alone in the sun.

At least, that's what I told myself.

Because the moment the glass touched my lips, something shifted. A faint pressure at the edge of my mind—the mate bond, the one I'd been pretending didn't matter—flickered. One heartbeat it was there, faint but steady, the irritating hum of her presence. The next heartbeat, nothing. Like someone had cut a cord clean through my chest.

I blinked and sat up straighter. My hand tightened around the glass. Cold whiskey sloshed over my knuckles, but I didn't feel it. I reached inward again, instinctively, to the bond. Still nothing. Just a strange emptiness where she should be.

"She's shielding," I muttered. The words came out lower than I meant them to, almost to myself. "Little Omega thinks she can still play games."

But my stomach didn't believe me. It clenched hard, cold and tight. What if that wasn't a shield? What if that wasn't a sulk. What if this was...gone.

I snapped my head toward Garrett. "Stop the car."

He twisted in his seat, eyes wide. "Alpha?"

"I said stop the car!" My voice cracked like a whip. The whiskey glass hit the floor, spilling dark amber across the carpet. "Now!"

The driver jumped at the sound. The limo screeched as it slowed, tires crunching gravel on the edge of the road. Garrett fumbled for the lock button, but I'd already leaned forward and hit it myself.

The door clicked open. Hot air flooded in, carrying the smell of sun-baked asphalt and pine.

I shoved out of the seat, scanning the road behind us. It curved out of sight between the trees, empty except for shimmering heat.

"Alpha," Garrett said carefully, "you told me to drive. We're miles out already."

I ignored him. My pulse pounded against my throat, loud enough to drown out the engine's idle. The mate bond still wasn't there. Not even a whisper. Just dead space.

She should have been a speck on the horizon by now, but I couldn't see her. No white dress. No movement. Nothing.

I grabbed Garrett by the collar, dragging him halfway out of his seat. "Turn the car around," I said, each word slow and precise. "Now."

He swallowed hard and nodded. "Yes, Alpha."

The limo swung in a sharp U-turn, tires spitting gravel. My eyes stayed fixed on the road ahead, hunting for any glimpse of her. The sun glared off the windshield, making my vision blur, but I didn't blink.

All I could think was, She shouldn't be able to shield like that. Not her. Not an Omega.

And if it wasn't shielding...

## **Chapter 12: Blocked**

### **FIA**

I didn't look back.

The car drove away, and I stood there in the middle of that empty road watching the black limo disappear around a curve. The engine noise faded. Then it was just me and the heat and the trees pressing in from both sides.

Good riddance.

My hands were shaking. Not from fear. From pure rage. The audacity of that man. The complete and total arrogance. He actually thought I'd crawl back to him. Thought I'd sign his degrading contract and play along with whatever sick fantasy he had about breaking me.

He didn't know me at all.

I looked down at the wedding dress. The white fabric was already dusty at the hem, and sweat was starting to collect under my arms and along my spine. The sun beat down on my head, and I could feel my skin beginning to burn. This dress was going to be a nightmare to walk in, but I'd manage. I always managed.

The road stretched ahead and behind. Empty in both directions. Heat shimmered off the pavement, making the air look like water.

Following the road would be the obvious choice. It had to lead somewhere eventually. Either back to Silver Creek or forward to Skollrend. But obvious was stupid. Cian would expect me to stick to the road. When I didn't come crawling back like he expected, he'd probably send someone to pick me up. To drag me to his pack territory and make an example of me.

I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction.

Besides, the sun was brutal out here in the open. No shade. No cover. Just miles of black pavement soaking up heat and radiating it back at me. I'd be dehydrated within hours. Sunburned and delirious by nightfall.

The forest was right there. Dense and dark and cool looking. Old Thomas had taught me better than this. Survival wasn't about taking the easy path. It was about taking the smart one.

I gathered up the skirt of the wedding dress and headed for the tree line.

The first step into the shade felt like heaven. The temperature dropped at least ten degrees. My skin stopped prickling with heat. I could breathe without feeling like I was inhaling fire.

I kept walking.

The forest floor was covered in pine needles and dead leaves. They crunched under my bare feet. I'd lost my shoes somewhere. Probably left them at the wedding hall. Or maybe they'd fallen off in the limo. It didn't matter. Shoes were a luxury I couldn't worry about now.

Old Thomas used to take me out into the woods when I was younger. Before everything went wrong. Before Milo. Before Hazel and Isobel decided I was convenient target practice for their schemes. He'd been a sentinel for forty years, and he knew forest terrain like other people knew their own homes.

"A good tracker thinks three steps ahead," he'd say. His voice was gravel and smoke, worn down by years of shouting orders. "You look at where you are. You look at where you're going. And you look at where trouble might be hiding."

I wasn't a great tracker. But I'd learned enough. Enough to know that staying parallel to the road would keep me from getting completely lost. Enough to know that heading east would eventually get me back to Silver Creek. Enough to survive.

Maybe.

I pushed through low hanging branches. Stepped over fallen logs. The wedding dress caught on thorns and brambles, and I heard fabric tear. Good. The thing was ridiculous anyway. Who designed a dress that was more hindrance than help?

The mate bond was still there in my chest. That artificial connection the healer had reached out to the goddess to force into existence. I could feel it humming. Could feel Cian on the other end of it, distant but present.

I focused on it. Wrapped my mental hands around it and pushed. Hard.

The bond flickered. Dimmed. Then disappeared completely behind a wall I'd built in my mind.

Shielding had been Milo's idea. Back when we were still together. Back when I thought he loved me and we were going to have a future. He'd taught me how to block the bond when we needed privacy. When we didn't want feeling everything we felt to affect our daily lives.

"It's like closing a door," he'd said. His hands had been gentle on my shoulders. His smile had been warm. Everything about him had been a lie, but the skill was real. "You just picture a barrier between you and the bond. Make it solid. Make it real. And push."

I'd practiced for weeks until I could do it without thinking. Until the shield went up automatically whenever I wanted it.

Now it was second nature.

I didn't want Cian feeling where I was. Didn't want him tracking me through the bond like I was some lost pet. He could figure out on his own that I wasn't coming back.

My phone was still in the pocket of this ridiculous dress. It was a good thing I'd grabbed it this morning before that sham of a wedding. Before everything went to hell. The battery had to be nearly dead by now, but it was worth checking.

I pulled it out. The screen was cracked from where I'd fallen at the altar, but it still worked. Barely. Three percent battery. No signal.

Of course there was no signal. We were in the middle of nowhere. Private territory that probably didn't have cell towers within miles.

But I had to try.

I kept walking and held the phone up, watching for bars. Nothing. Still nothing. The battery ticked down to two percent.

Then one bar appeared. Weak and flickering, but there.

I stopped walking. Held my breath. Dialed my father's number.

It rang once. Twice. Then a recorded message. "The number you are trying to reach is not available."

Not out of service. Not disconnected. Blocked.

### **Chapter 13: Mourning Moon 1**

#### **FIA**

I stared at the screen. Tried again. Same message.

My father wouldn't block me. He barely knew how to use his phone. I'd watched him struggle to figure out texting for years. There was no way he'd gone into his settings and blocked my number.

Which meant someone else had done it for him.

Hazel or Isobel. Had to be. They'd probably convinced him I was dangerous. That I'd tried to hurt Hazel. That I needed to be cut off completely for everyone's safety.

The phone died in my hand. The screen went black, and I was alone again.

I shoved it back in my pocket and kept walking.

The plan was simple. Get back to Silver Creek. Find my father. Make him listen. He'd believe me if I could just talk to him face to face. If I could explain what really happened.

Hazel and Isobel could spin all the lies they wanted, but I was still his daughter. That had to count for something.

It had to.

The forest got denser the farther I walked. The trees grew closer together. The underbrush got thicker. My feet were bleeding from a dozen small cuts, and the wedding dress was in tatters. I'd torn off most of the skirt just to make walking easier. The bodice was still intact, but barely.

Hours passed. Or maybe minutes. Time felt strange in the forest. The sun moved across the sky, filtering through the canopy in shifting patterns of light and shadow.

I should have found a road by now. Or a stream. Or some sign of civilization.

Instead there was just more forest. More trees. More endless walking.

My head started to hurt. Just a dull throb at first. Then sharper. Like someone was pressing their thumbs into my temples.

Dehydration probably. I hadn't had water since the wedding. Since before the wedding actually. I'd been too nervous to eat or drink anything that morning.

I needed to find water soon. A stream or a pond. Something.

The dizziness hit me without warning. One second I was walking fine. The next the world tilted sideways. I stumbled. Caught myself against a tree trunk. Pressed my forehead against the rough bark and waited for everything to stop spinning.

Something was wrong.

This wasn't just dehydration. This felt different. Worse.

I looked down at where I was standing. The ground was covered in small purple flowers. They had five delicate petals each, pale lilac at the edges but darkening toward the center, and they swayed slightly even though the air was still. For a moment I stared at them, dazed. They were pretty in an odd way, soft against the harsh browns and greens of the forest floor. Then something sharp flickered at the back of my mind.

Recognition.

I blinked, trying to focus through the fog pressing in on my skull. Mourning moon. The name crawled up from memory like a snake out of a hole. I'd seen it before, in a dusty field guide Thomas kept locked in his old shed, the kind of book he never wanted me touching. Poisonous carnivorous blooms, rare but dangerous, their pollen hung heavy in

the air, sweet and faint, designed to lull prey into confusion before they realized they were being hunted.

My chest tightened. My breath came shallow. This wasn't just a headache. This was poison. It had been seeping into me for miles, and I hadn't even noticed.

This was Tracker 101. A basic trap, one I should have recognized instantly. How had I not realized? How had I missed it until now, when my vision was already blurring and my legs felt like they belonged to someone else?

My stomach lurched. How had I been so stupid? The dizziness wasn't dehydration. It was the flowers. I'd been walking through them for Goddess knew how long, inhaling their poison with every breath. The headache, the spinning world, the strange sense of time slipping past me, all of it made sense now.

I staggered back from the patch, but it didn't matter. The flowers weren't just here. They were everywhere. Dotting the moss, tucked beneath ferns, lining the narrow path I'd been following for hours. Their pollen clung to the air like mist. Every inhale burned a little more. My throat felt tight.

Panic jolted me awake like a slap. I turned and started running. Branches whipped against my arms and snagged the shredded skirt of the wedding dress. I yanked at the fabric, tore more of it away, and kept going. My lungs burned. My heart slammed against my ribs. All I could think was *get out*. Out of the trees, out of the flowers, out before it was too late.

The forest blurred past me, trees dissolving into streaks of green and brown. My breath came in ragged gasps. The path dipped and rose and twisted, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. If I stopped now, I'd never get up again.

Somewhere in the chaos of running, hope sparked. There was a break in the canopy ahead. A sliver of something gray between the trunks. Not sky. Not more trees. Pavement. A road.

I pushed harder, legs shaking. My vision tunneled. The edges went black, but the gray strip stayed ahead, beckoning. Just a little farther. Just one more step.

My foot caught on a root. I went down hard, hands scraping against the dirt. The impact knocked the breath out of me, but I crawled forward anyway. The scent of mourning moon clung to me, sweet and sickening. My fingers brushed gravel.

The road.

Relief hit me so hard it felt like another blow. Someone would find me here. Someone had to. A car, a truck, anything. I just had to stay awake long enough to be seen.

I tried to lift my head, to drag myself farther onto the asphalt, but my arms gave out. The sky tilted overhead, a bright slash of blue through the trees. My eyelids fluttered.

Then everything went dark.

## **Chapter 14: Mourning Moon 2**

### **CIAN**

The bond snapped back into place like a rubber band pulled too tight and released.

One second there was nothing. Empty space where she should have been. The next second, panic slammed into me so hard I couldn't breathe. Not my panic. Hers. Raw and animal and drowning in something that felt wrong. Felt like poison.

My body moved before my brain caught up. I shoved Garret aside, yanked open the door, and dragged him out of his seat. He hit the ground with a grunt. I didn't care. I couldn't.

I was already behind the wheel, throwing the limo into drive.

"Alpha Cian, what—"

"Shut up."

Garrett's voice died in his throat. Smart man.

I slammed my foot on the gas. The limo surged forward. Too slow. This thing was built for comfort, not speed, but I pushed it anyway. The engine roared. Trees blurred past the windows.

The bond pulled at me like a fishhook lodged in my chest. This way. Faster. She's dying.

I should have felt satisfaction. Should have felt vindicated. This was exactly what she deserved, wasn't it? She'd schemed her way into my life. Hurt her sister. Manipulated everyone around her. And now she was facing the consequences of her own stupidity despite the chance that I had given her.

But the bond didn't care about any of that. It just screamed danger, danger, danger with every pulse of my heartbeat.

How the fuck did she even harm herself so quick? Was she a fish out of water?

My knuckles went white on the steering wheel. The speedometer climbed. Sixty. Seventy. Eighty on a private road that wasn't meant for this kind of driving.

I took a curve too fast. The tires squealed. The back end fishtailed, but I corrected and kept going.

Then I saw it.

There. A white shape on the side of the road ahead. Too still. Too crumpled.

I hit the brakes. The limo skidded to a stop sideways across both lanes. I was out of the car before it finished moving.

She was face down in the gravel. Her wedding dress was shredded. Covered in dirt and blood. Her feet were bare and torn up. Dark hair spread around her head like a funeral shroud.

I dropped to my knees beside her. Grabbed her shoulder and rolled her over.

Her face was pale. Lips tinged blue. She wasn't breathing right. Shallow gasps that barely moved her chest.

That's when I saw the flowers.

Purple petals stuck to her dress. Caught in her hair. Ground into the fabric like they'd been growing on her. My stomach dropped.

Mourning moon.

"No. No no no."

I knew these flowers. I'd ordered them planted along the borders of my territory four years ago after a rival pack tried to send assassins through the forest. The flowers were perfect for what I needed. Beautiful. Deadly. Their pollen would incapacitate anyone who didn't know to avoid them. Made you dizzy first. Then sick. Then it shut down your organs one by one until your heart just stopped. My pack members knew. Everyone who had legitimate business on Skollrend land knew.

But she didn't know.

Of course she didn't know. She was from Silver Creek. She'd never set foot on my territory before today. And I'd thrown her out into a forest full of poison because I wanted to teach her a lesson about defiance.

.She must have walked through miles of them. Been breathing in the poison for a long while.

I scooped her up. Her head lolled against my shoulder. She weighed nothing. Felt like bones and torn fabric and desperation.

The pollen on her dress brushed against my face. It had a sweet smell. A wrong smell. I knew what it meant. Knew what I'd just done to myself by touching her.

But it did not matter. It couldn't matter.

I carried her to the limo and laid her across the back seat. Her breathing was getting worse. More ragged. Like her lungs were filling with something thick.

Then I got to the driver's seat. My hands gripped the steering wheel hard enough that my knuckles went white. My feet went down the second the engine started and the speedometer climbed. Sixty. Seventy. Eighty. The limo wasn't built for this kind of speed on these roads but I didn't slow down.

I grabbed my phone with one hand. Kept the other on the wheel. Hit Garrett's number.

He answered on the first ring. "Alpha Cian, what—"

"Run." I cut him off. My voice sounded like it was coming from somewhere far away. Like it belonged to someone else. "North on the main road. Run as fast as you can. I'm coming back for you but I might not make it."

"What do you mean you might not—"

"Mourning moon." The words came out flat. Final. "She walked into a field of mourning moon."

"What?" He was apprehensive.

"I've been poisoned too by contact." The words felt strange in my mouth. Too real. Too final. "Maybe I'll reach you. Maybe this car will crash before that. But you better be running toward me right now."

"I'm running." His breathing was already hard. Fast. "I'm running, Alpha."

"Good."

I hung up.

The next call went to my pack's head healer. Dr. Maren. She'd been with Skollrend for twenty years. Knew her stuff. If anyone could fix this, it was her. After all, there was no way I dropped a lethal poison in my grounds with no means of controlling its power.

She answered on the second ring. "Alpha Cian?"

"Three severe cases of mourning moon poisoning are coming your way." My tongue felt thick. The words came out slurred. "You better be ready."

"Three? Alpha, what—"

"Just be ready."

I ended the call and threw the phone onto the passenger seat.

The limo surged forward again. I pushed the gas pedal to the floor. The engine screamed. The whole car shook with the speed.

My vision started to blur around the edges. Just slightly. Just enough to notice.

I blinked hard. Focused on the road. On the white line down the middle. On keeping the car straight.

Fia made a sound in the back seat. A whimper. Broken and small.

"Shut up," I said. My voice echoed in the empty car. "You don't get to make sounds. You did this to yourself."

She didn't respond. Probably couldn't hear me. Probably didn't care.

The bond pulsed between us. Weaker now. Flickering like a candle in the wind. I could feel her slipping away. Feel death creeping closer to both of us.

My hands cramped on the wheel. The shaking was getting worse. Spreading up my arms. Into my shoulders.

The road curved ahead. I took it too wide. The tires hit gravel on the shoulder. The car jerked. I corrected that shit and kept going.

Why was I doing this?

The question surfaced through the fog creeping into my brain. Why was I risking my life for a woman I hated? A woman who deserved exactly what she was getting?

The bond pulled at me. Insisted. Demanded.

But that wasn't enough. The bond was just biology. Just the goddess playing her fun games with people's lives. It didn't mean much. It didn't change what Fia had done.

So why?

My vision doubled. The road split into two paths. I aimed for the middle and hoped I was on the right one.

Another sound came from the back seat. Wet. Choking.

I glanced in the rearview mirror. Fia's lips were moving. Like she was trying to say something. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth.

"Don't you dare die." The words came out harsh. Angry. "You don't get to die until I say so. You hear me?"

No response. Just more of that terrible wet breathing.

My chest hurt. Not from the poison. From something else. Something that felt like panic but tasted like guilt.

I'd done this. I'd left her on the side of the road. Driven away. Smiled while I did it.

This was my fault.

The thought hit me like a blow to the chin. My foot slipped off the gas. The car slowed.

No. No, this was her fault. She chose to walk away. She chose to defy me. She chose pride over safety.

But I'd given her no choice. I'd backed her into a corner and then acted surprised when she fought back.

The road ahead shimmered. Heat waves or poison, I couldn't tell anymore.

My arms felt heavy. Like they were made of lead instead of muscle and bone. Each movement took more effort than the last.

I was going to pass out soon. Could feel it coming. The darkness creeping in from the edges of my vision. The way my thoughts were starting to scatter and reform in strange patterns.

But I couldn't stop. Not yet. Not while she was still breathing in the back seat.

Then I saw some movement ahead. Something dark against the pavement. Running toward me.

A wolf. Big. Gray and white fur. I knew that wolf.

Garrett.

Relief hit me so hard I almost laughed. He'd actually done it. Ran fast enough to meet me halfway.

I aimed the car straight at him. Let my foot ease off the gas. The world was tilting now. Spinning slow like a carousel winding down.

The wolf got bigger. Closer. His paws ate up distance impossibly fast.

My foot found the brake. Pressed down. The car slowed. Stopped.

I reached for the door handle. Missed twice. Got it on the third try.

The door swung open. Hot air rushed in. Or maybe I was just cold. Everything felt wrong. Backwards.

I tried to move. Tried to slide over to the passenger seat. My body didn't respond. Just slumped against the steering wheel like a puppet with cut strings.

Fur brushed against my arm. Then Garrett was there. Naked and human. He grabbed me under the arms and hauled me sideways. Shoved me into the passenger seat.

"Hold on, Alpha Cian." His voice sounded far away. Underwater. "I got this."

He slammed my door shut. Ran around to the driver's side. The car rocked as he threw himself behind the wheel.

The engine roared back to life. We surged forward again.

I tried to keep my eyes open. Tried to focus on something. Anything. The dashboard. The windshield. Garrett's hands white knuckled on the wheel.

But the darkness was winning.

My last thought before I slipped under was bitter and sharp and completely honest.

Why the hell did I save her?

She wasn't worth this. Wasn't worth dying for. She was manipulative and scheming and she'd hurt her own sister.

But my hands still smelled like the flowers in her hair. My arms still remembered the weight of her. The way she'd felt small and broken and so terribly fragile.

The bond whispered *mine* even as everything else went dark.

I hated her.

I hated her so much.

So why did saving her feel like the only choice I could have made?

The answer slipped away before I could catch it. Everything slipped away. Just darkness and the distant roar of the engine and Garrett's voice saying something I couldn't quite hear.

Then nothing at all.

## **Chapter 15: Apothecary 1**

### **FIA**

I woke up to voices that sounded like they were coming from underwater. Muffled and distant. My head felt like someone had stuffed it full of cotton and then set it on fire.

The ceiling above me was unfamiliar. White tiles. Fluorescent lights that hurt to look at. It was not my room. It was not anywhere I knew.

Memory came back in pieces. The road. The flowers. The purple petals everywhere. The sweet smell that had made my head spin. Me running and falling. The gray strip of pavement under my bleeding hands.

Then nothing.

I tried to sit up. My body screamed in protest. Every muscle felt like it had been wrung out and left to dry. My skin burned under what felt like bandages soaked in something slick and herbal.

"She's waking up."

The voice was sharp. Female. I turned my head toward it and immediately regretted the movement. The room spun.

A woman stood a few feet away. She wore scrubs and had her dark hair pulled back in a severe bun. Her face was hard. Unfriendly. She stared at me like I was something unpleasant she'd found on the bottom of her shoe.

"About time," another voice which happened to be male and older said. "Thought she'd sleep through the whole damn crisis."

I blinked and forced my eyes to focus. The room came into sharper detail. White walls. Medical equipment. Beds lined up in rows. An infirmary.

Other people stood around. Most of them wore the same hostile expression as the first woman. Their eyes tracked my every movement like I was a threat they needed to contain.

"Where..." My voice came out as a croak. I swallowed and tried again. "Where am I?"

"Skollrend's healing ward," the older man said. He stepped closer and I slowly drank in his features. Gray hair. A weathered face. Traditional healer's robes. Was he... "You're lucky to be alive, girl."

Skollrend. This was Cian's territory. His pack. The memories clicked into place faster now. The wedding. The limo. Being thrown out on the road. Walking through the forest. The flowers.

*The mourning moon.*

"How long..."

"Almost twelve hours." This voice was different. Warmer. I turned my head the other way and saw the sentinel that had been driving us, Garret standing near the foot of my bed. His face was the only one in the room that didn't look like he wanted to throw me back out into the forest. "Your fever broke not too long ago."

He had bandages too. Around his forearms. The same slick sheen of herbal oils darkening the white fabric.

"You're hurt," I said.

"Contact exposure." He shrugged. "Not as bad as you or..." He trailed off. His eyes shifted to something behind me.

I followed his gaze.

There was another bed right next to mine. And in it...

Laid Alpha Cian.

He lay perfectly still. His skin was pale. Too pale. Almost gray. His chest rose and fell in shallow movements that looked wrong. Labored. Bandages covered his arms and neck. The same oil stained wrappings I wore.

"He found you," Garrett said quietly. "Carried you to the car. Drove you back here himself."

The room tilted again. Not from the poison this time but from understanding.

Cian had saved me.

After everything. After throwing me out. After telling me I could rot for all he cared. He'd come back, found me dying on the side of the road and gotten himself poisoned in the process.

"He's not getting better." The woman in scrubs spoke up. Her voice was clinical but I caught the edge of worry underneath. "The antidote isn't working fast enough."

"It should have worked by now," the old healer said. He moved to Cian's bedside. Placed a hand on his forehead. "I've treated mourning moon poisoning before. The fever should have broken hours ago considering we attended to him first."

"Maybe it's because he had direct contact with so much of it." Garrett stepped closer to Cian's bed. "He carried her. The pollen was all over her dress. Her hair. He breathed it in for miles while he drove."

"The antidote should still work." The woman crossed her arms as she sent me a stare that screamed professional curiosity. "If she is breathing and alive despite being the last to be treated while being the first one to make contact with the poison, I don't understand why it's not taking effect for Alpha Cian."

"This is your fault." Another voice sneered. This one came from a younger woman standing near the door. She glared at me with open hatred. "He wouldn't be dying if not for you."

"That's enough," Garrett said.

"It's true." The woman's voice rose. "She walked into those flowers like an idiot. He had to save her. Now he's could die because of her stupidity. This is supposed to be a great day for our pack... But no..."

The words hit like physical blows. She wasn't wrong. This was my fault. I'd been careless. Hadn't paid attention. Walked right into a field of poison because I'd been too angry and stupid to think straight.

And now Cian was paying for it and even if he happened to be a vile man, he did not deserve that.

I looked at him again. At the shallow rise and fall of his chest. At the gray tinge to his skin. At the way his jaw was clenched even in unconsciousness like he was fighting something invisible.

He'd called me manipulative. A schemer. Someone who hurt her own sister. And maybe he was right about some of that. Maybe in his eyes, I had been those things in ways I didn't fully understand.

But he'd still saved me.

My mother's voice echoed in my head. Lessons taught in secret. Late nights in her workshop while everyone else slept. She'd been teaching me about herbs and poisons since I was old enough to grind roots in a mortar.

"Some plants kill," she'd said. "Some plants heal. And some plants do both depending on how you use them."

The antidote they used wasn't wrong, just incomplete. Mourning Moon was a deceptive poison. It didn't strike all at once. It seeped through the body in layers, each more dangerous than the last. The usual antidote only treated what showed on the surface—the fever, the tremors, the paralysis—but it couldn't touch the deeper toxins that settled in the blood. I was lucky my fever broke at all. That might have been less about their medicine and more about the remedies and vaccinations my mother had given me long before this.

But there were other herbs, the kind my mom used to talk long before she passed. Most healers today wouldn't even recognize their names, or maybe they'd pretend not to. Back in the old days, omegas were experts with poison. They had to be. Some were made to taste the king's meals first, others were used to test the stuff meant for him. There were even those who learned how to poison quietly, helping whoever wanted the throne next. They knew how to dance that line between life and death better than anyone. I guess some of that knowledge survived, passed down through people like my mom.

"I can help." The words came out before I'd fully thought them through.

Every head in the room turned toward me.

"What?" The old healer's voice was sharp.

"I can help him." I pushed myself up to sitting. The room spun again but I forced through it. "I know what he needs."

"You're an Omega," the healer said. The disdain in his voice was thick enough to choke on. "You know nothing about healing."

"My mother was an Omega as well with knowledge on healing." I met his eyes. Held his gaze even though every instinct screamed at me to look away. To submit. "She taught me about poisons. About how they work. About how to counter them."

"Your mother." He scoffed. "Let me tell you girl, Omegas produce other Omegas and failures. Not healers. You are either born with this talent or not and I do not think..."

"Elder Thorne." The woman in scrubs stepped forward. "We're running out of options. If she knows something..."

"She knows nothing, Dr. Maren." The old healer waved a dismissive hand. "She's a desperate Omega trying to seem useful because she understands the severity of what she has done."

I looked at Cian again. His breathing had gotten worse even in the few minutes I'd been awake. More ragged. More strained.

He was dying.

The bond between us flickered, faint and uneven, like a candle fighting against wind. I had kept it walled off since the forest. It had snapped while I was unconscious, and when I woke, I must have mended it without realizing. Now, I lowered the shield, just a little, just enough to reach him.

What came through wasn't thought or sound—only pain. It burned through me, raw and endless, followed by the weight of darkness pressing in, swallowing everything.

"I need wolfsbane root," I said. My voice came out steadier than I felt. "The purple variant. Not the common kind. And silver touched nettle. Fresh if you have it. And moonwater."

Silence filled the room.

"Wolfsbane?" Elder Thorne stared at me like I'd grown a second head. "That's poison."

## **Chapter 16: Apothecary 2**

### **FIA**

"Yes." I swung my legs over the side of the bed. My feet touched cold tile. "Some poisons counter other poisons. Mourning moon builds toxins in the blood that normal antidotes can't reach. But wolfsbane in the right dosage can bind to those toxins and pull them out."

"That's insane," Thorne said.

"That's brilliant." Dr. Maren was staring at me now with something that looked like reassessment. "The chemical composition would work. I should have thought of that."

"You're not seriously considering this." Thorne turned to her. "She's an Omega. She has no medical training."

"She clearly has knowledge we don't." Maren moved toward a cabinet against the wall. Started pulling out jars and bottles. "And Alpha Cian is dying. We've tried everything else."

"This is madness." Thorne's face had gone red. "An Omega does not have a say in the healing ward. This goes against every tradition."

"She's the honorary Luna now." Maren's voice went cold. Hard. "She has more say in this room than anyone except Alpha Cian himself."

The words hung in the air. Honorary Luna. Because of the mate bond. Because I'd been married to Cian in that sham ceremony before everything went wrong.

I wasn't his Luna. Wasn't his anything really. But the title gave me authority I didn't actually possess.

Maren set three jars on a nearby table. "Is this what you need?"

I stood on shaking legs and walked over. Examined the labels. The wolfsbane was the right variant. Purple tinged roots preserved in oil. The nettle was fresh enough. The moonwater looked pure.

"Yes." I reached for the jars but my hands were trembling too badly to grip them properly.

"Tell me what to do," Maren said. "I'll measure."

"Three parts wolfsbane to one part nettle." I steadied myself against the table. "Grind them together until they're a fine paste. Then add moonwater until it's thin enough to drink but still thick enough to coat the throat."

Maren worked quickly. Her hands were steady where mine would have fumbled. She ground the herbs in a stone mortar. The smell that rose up was bitter and sharp. Wrong in a way that made my stomach turn.

"This could kill him," Thorne said. His voice had lost some of its edge. Now he just sounded tired. "If you're wrong about this..."

"He's already dying." I didn't look away from the mortar. From Maren's hands working the pestle in steady circles. "This gives him a chance."

The paste formed slowly. Dark green and viscous. Maren added moonwater drop by drop. Stirred after each addition. The consistency shifted from solid to liquid. From thick to thin.

"That's enough," I said.

She stopped. Poured the result into a small cup. Handed it to me.

The cup felt impossibly heavy in my hands. This was it. Either this worked or I'd just created the thing that would finish killing him.

I walked to Cian's bed. Stood there looking down at him. At the man who'd thrown me out. Who'd saved me. Who was dying because I'd been stupid and careless and too proud to give in to his cruelty when it was the only semblance of safety I had out there.

"You have to sit him up," I said. "He needs to be able to swallow."

Garrett moved immediately. Slipped his arms under Cian's shoulders and lifted him carefully. Propped him up against pillows.

Cian's head lolled to the side. His eyes stayed closed.

I knelt on the bed beside him. Brought the cup to his lips. Tilted it slowly.

"Come on," I whispered. "You don't get to die. Remember? You literally implied that I don't get to die until you say so. Same goes for you."

The liquid touched his lips. For a horrible moment nothing happened. Then his throat worked. A swallow. Small and reflexive but there.

I tipped more into his mouth. Another swallow. Then another.

The cup emptied.

I sat back. Handed it to Maren and then waited.

Nothing changed. Cian's breathing stayed labored. His skin stayed gray. The room held its collective breath.

One minute passed. Then two.

Then his chest rose in a deeper breath. Fuller. Less strained.

Color started to creep back into his face. Not much. Just a faint flush across his cheekbones. But it was there.

"It's working," Garrett said. His voice was tight with something that might have been relief.

Maren moved forward with her stethoscope. Pressed it to Cian's chest. Listened. Her eyes went wide.

"His heart rate is stabilizing." She looked at me. Then at Thorne. "His breathing is clearing."

Thorne pushed forward. Put his own hand on Cian's forehead. Jerked back like he'd been burned.

"The fever." His voice came out strangled. "It's breaking."

We watched as the color continued to return to Cian's face. As his breathing steadied. As the tension in his jaw slowly relaxed.

He was getting better.

"What sorcery was that?" Thorne stared at me now with something between horror and wonder.

"It was not sorcery." I climbed off the bed. My legs were shaking again. "Just chemistry. Some poisons can neutralize others if you know how to combine them."

"Who taught you this?" His voice had lost all its earlier dismissiveness. Now he just sounded curious. Hungry for information.

"Like I said," I looked down at my hands. They were still trembling. "My mother. She knew things. Old things. Remedies most healers don't learn anymore."

Thorne opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. Whatever he'd been about to say died unspoken.

Cian made a sound. A low groan at first that grew and then his eyelids fluttered.

Everyone in the room tensed.

But I was already moving away. Already putting distance between us. Because when he woke up, when he saw me standing there by his bedside, he'd remember. Remember that this was all my fault. Remember that he hated me.

And I couldn't watch that realization cross his face.

Not after watching him almost die for me.

## **Chapter 17: Mistress Of The Game 1 (M)**

### **HAZEL**

The moment I heard the limo pull away from the pack grounds, I let myself relax. Every muscle that had been wound tight all day finally loosened. I stood at my bedroom window and watched until the car disappeared down the road, taking Fia and her pathetic existence away from Silver Creek forever.

Good riddance.

The scratching at my door came maybe thirty seconds later. I didn't need to look to know who it was. Milo never could wait. Always desperate. Always eager to please. It made him easy to manipulate, which was really the only useful thing about him.

"Come in," I called out.

He entered like he owned the place, which was almost funny. Almost. One day he'd realize that nothing about him warranted that kind of confidence. For now, I'd let him keep his delusions. They made him more cooperative.

Milo crossed the room in a few quick strides and pulled me against him. He kissed the top of my head, breathing in like I was something precious. Something worth keeping around. His hands moved down my back, tracing the curve of my spine through the thin fabric of my dress.

"We did it," he whispered against my hair. "She's gone. We actually did it."

I made a small sound of agreement and let him hold me. This was part of the performance. Part of the dance I had choreographed so carefully. If I pulled away now, if I showed even a hint of what I was really thinking, he might start asking questions. Might start thinking too hard about things better left alone.

"I wouldn't be alive without you," I whispered. The words came easy, soft, believable. They always did when I needed them to. My voice broke just enough to sound real. "You saved me."

His hand came up to my face, thumb catching the edge of a tear that didn't matter. His touch lingered like I was something fragile, something worth saving. I let him look at me that way. It made what came next easier.

"I couldn't lose you," he said, his voice low, full of ache.

Perfect.

When his mouth met mine, I didn't pull away. I leaned into it, let him think it was love, let him think I was trembling because I needed him. His kiss was desperate, almost painful, and I swallowed it like penance. My hands slid under his shirt, palms over his chest, tracing muscle and heat while my mind stayed cold, calculating. He lifted the shirt off, tossed it aside, and I smiled against his lips, small and grateful. It was the kind of smile that made men blind.

I watched the way his muscles flexed when he was undressed. He was beautiful in that simple, uncomplicated way that sentinels often were. Strong. Physical. Useful. For a while, anyway.

Goddess, I loved his body. I always had, even when I told myself I didn't. The ridges of muscle, the way he tensed when he breathed deep. His tattoos, black ink scattered across his skin like someone had tried to write a map of every sin he'd ever committed. I ran my palms over his chest, tracing them all, mouth dragging along his collarbone as I stepped back toward the bed and pulled him with me.

We crashed down into the sheets, mouths tangling again, hands everywhere. He didn't ask before gripping the back of my hair and pulling it tight, tilting my head so he could kiss down my throat. I moaned for him, legs already spreading to let him settle between them, hips grinding up as he bit at the soft skin of my neck.

"Milo—fuck, I need it," I said, breath hot and shaky, my hands already tugging at his lace panties, desperate.

"You'll get it," he growled into my ear, and then his hand wrapped around my throat.

My breath caught. I could still breathe, but just barely, and that was the point. His fingers were strong, sure, pressing in enough to make me feel caged, controlled. My thighs clenched around his hips as my pussy throbbed under the heat of it, need dripping through me like honey gone too hot.

He grinned when he saw my eyes roll back.

"Yeah, that's right," he muttered, tightening just a little more. "You like being choked, huh?"

"Y-yeah," I gasped, voice barely there, but fuck did I mean it.

He released my throat just long enough to slide down between my legs. His hands grabbed my thighs, forced them wider, and he didn't waste time with teasing. His tongue dove into me, hot and thick and greedy. I bucked up into his mouth with a cry, toes curling, hips chasing every lap of his tongue.

"Ahhn—fuckfuck, Milo—"

He sucked at my clit until my vision blurred, his hands holding me still like he knew I'd try to squirm away from how good it was. I was dripping down his chin, whimpering, grabbing at his hair, grinding on his tongue like I was going to lose my mind.

But I didn't come. He pulled away just before it hit.

"Turn over," he said, voice low, gravel under fire.

I obeyed instantly, climbing onto my hands and knees, ass raised. I looked back at him over my shoulder, breath hitching when I saw him stroke himself. His cock was thick,

veiny, flushed dark at the tip. I could never look at him without feeling this tight ache in my gut, this dizzy heat that made my mouth water.

"Let me taste it," I begged, voice rough with need.

He didn't even hesitate. Walked right up to the side of the bed, grabbed a handful of my hair, and guided me down to him. My lips parted around the head of his cock, tongue swirling, spit sliding down my chin before I even had him halfway in.

"Mmmph—fuck, you're so big," I slurred around him, drool dripping from my mouth.

He groaned deep, pushed further. I gagged, choked, tears stinging my eyes, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. I needed him buried in my throat. His hand twisted tighter in my hair, pulling my head back, then shoving me down again until my nose was pressed to his skin.

"Yeah, choke on it," he hissed. "Take it all, Hazel."

My throat spasmed around him, spit running down my neck, my hands fisting in the sheets for balance. He used me like a toy, fucking my face with slow, brutal strokes. Every sound I made was wet and desperate. Every moan vibrated against his cock. I was nothing but mouth and need, drooling all over myself while he used my throat like it was made for him.

When he finally pulled out, I gasped for breath, tongue hanging out, jaw sore and soaking.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Yes," I breathed. "Please, please, I need you to fuck me—"

He didn't go for my pussy.

Instead, he grabbed the lube from the drawer like he'd done a hundred times before, poured it over his fingers and shoved two deep into my ass without warning. I cried out, hips jerking, face pressing into the sheets.

"Ahhhn—fuck—goddess, yes—"

"You'll take me here tonight," he said, voice dark. "You want it rough?"

I nodded fast, shameless. "Yes, choke me, hurt me, I want it, I want *you*—"

He pushed in.

The stretch was insane. My ass clenched tight, trying to keep him out, but he didn't let up. He held my hips and drove in inch by inch until I could feel every ridge, every pulse of his cock inside me.

"Fuuuck—" I sobbed into the mattress.

"Goddess, you're so tight back here," he grunted, hands gripping me harder.

He pulled out, slammed back in. My whole body rocked with the force of it. He grabbed my neck again, squeezed hard while his hips pounded into me. The sound of skin slapping echoed through the room, loud and wet and filthy.

"Say it," he growled. "Tell me whose slut you are."

"Yours," I cried out. "Milo—yours—fuck me harder, please—"

## **Chapter 18: Mistress Of The Game 2 (M)**

### **HAZEL**

He did.

He slammed into my ass like he wanted to rearrange my guts, choking me the whole time, dragging my head back by the throat so he could spit in my mouth and make me swallow it. I came on nothing, screaming, my body convulsing around him.

"You dirty fucking girl," he snarled. "Coming while I'm buried in your ass?"

I nodded, mouth open, moaning like an animal. "I love your cock, Milo—goddess—I love it so much—"

He yanked me up by the hair and turned my face to kiss me, rough and messy, his tongue forcing into my mouth while he fucked me deep. I was drooling again, body limp, ass aching and stretched around him. I wanted him to break me. I wanted to be nothing but this for him.

He didn't slow down.

My pussy dripped onto the sheets, unused but aching with the echoes of my orgasm. I could feel his cock throb, his breath hitching, and then he shoved all the way in and came hard, choking me tighter until the room spun.

"Fuuuck—Hazel—take all of it—"

I gasped, body twitching as his cum filled me, hot and deep and filthy.

When he finally let go of my neck, I collapsed into the bed, boneless, eyes fluttering. He pulled out slow, cum sliding out of me in a sticky mess. I whimpered at the loss.

He dropped beside me, panting, and pulled me into his arms like I hadn't just let him use every part of me. His lips pressed to my temple, and I curled into him, body aching, used, perfect.

"I was thinking," he murmured beside me. "Once things settle down here, once people stop talking about what Fia did or my connection to her. I could ask your father properly. About us. About marriage."

I turned to look at him. His eyes were bright with hope. Pathetic, really, how much he wanted this. How much he wanted me.

"I want to put a ring on your finger," he continued. His hand found mine and he held it like it was something sacred. "Run this pack with you. Raise pups with you."

The image he was painting was so ridiculous that I almost laughed right then. Almost lost control and let the real me show through. A sentinel running a pack alongside a Luna. In what world did that happen? In what fantasy was Milo operating?

But I held it back. I let the smile play at the corners of my mouth instead. Let him see what he wanted to see: a girl who loved him. A girl who was grateful. A girl who might actually want the future he was describing.

"Oh Milo," I said softly. I leaned closer to him, pressing my lips to his neck. Letting him feel wanted. Letting him feel like he'd won something.

Then I pulled back just enough to look him in the eye. And I let the laugh come. It started small, just a quiet breath of amusement. Then it grew. Louder. Harsher. Until I was actually laughing at him, at the absurdity of everything coming out of his mouth.

I couldn't help myself even though I tried.

His face changed. I watched the hope drain away, replaced by confusion.

"What?" he asked.

"You cannot be that delusional."

The words hung in the air between us. I sat up, putting distance between our bodies. I needed him to understand what was about to happen. Needed him to really hear me.

"You think I love you?" I continued. "Milo, you were a tool. Nothing more. A way to hurt my sister. A means to an end."

His mouth opened. Closed. Opened again like he was a fish out of water.

"I never loved you," I said. The words came out crisp and clear. "Not once. Not for a single moment."

"Hazel, that's not..." He reached for me, his hand stretching across the bed.

I pulled away before he could touch me. "With Fia's dowry, Silver Creek is doing well now. Really well. There's money we can set aside. Money that gives me options."

I could see him starting to understand. Starting to see the bigger picture of what had happened and his place in it.

"In a few weeks, I'll be attending the Yearly Mate Ball at the capitol," I said. My voice was almost dreamy now. "You know the one. Where they always looked down on Silver Creek like we were nothing. Like we didn't matter."

Milo was still staring at me, his expression cycling through various stages of shock and pain.

"But Alpha Cian showed interest in me," I continued. "Even though we didn't end up married, everyone saw that. Everyone knows that an Alpha from one of the most powerful packs wanted me. Do you understand what that means?"

"Hazel..." he started.

"It means I'll have actual options now. Real Alphas will be interested. Powerful ones. The kind of Alpha that a Luna actually belongs with." I smiled at him, and I made sure he could see exactly how false it was. "Not a sentinel who somehow thought he could run a pack. My pack for that matter."

He tried to move toward me again. His hands came up, and I thought for a moment he might actually try something. The rage in his eyes was bright and hot and ugly.

His hands wrapped around my throat.

I didn't panic. Didn't scream. I just looked at him while his fingers pressed into my neck, and I laughed. The sound came out strangled, but it was still a laugh.

"Do not ruin what we have," I said between gasps of breath. My voice was different now. Dangerous. "One word from me and you are finished. You understand that? Your entire life ends because I say it does."

He was shaking. The rage was still there, but underneath it was fear. That was the moment he really understood the game he'd been playing.

I let the silence stretch for a moment. Let him feel the full weight of his situation.

"You are only permitted to lay hands on me when I need you to," I said quietly. "And right now, you are getting on my nerves. So fuck out, Milo."

His hands dropped like I'd burned him. He scrambled off the bed, his chest heaving. He grabbed his shirt from where he'd thrown it, pulling it back on with shaking hands.

"I loved you," he said. His voice was broken. Hollow.

I didn't even bother answering. Just turned away from him like he'd stopped mattering the second the words left his mouth. Which, really, he had.

The door slammed behind him a moment later.

I waited until his footsteps faded down the hallway before I let myself smile. The real smile. The one that showed exactly what I was.

Fia was gone. Milo was broken and compliant. The pack had money for my shit now. And I had a future that actually meant something.

The Mate Ball was going to be so much better now. All those Alphas who'd ignored Silver Creek before would be watching me. Wanting me. And this time, I wouldn't settle for a political arrangement or a sentinel with delusions of grandeur. This time, I'd find someone truly worthy.

Until then, Milo could still serve his purpose. He was good at one thing at least. And for a girl like me, sometimes that was enough.

I lay back on the bed and looked up at the ceiling, already thinking about what I would wear to the ball. Already imagining the way other Alphas would look at me. The way they'd want me.

It felt good to finally have a future worth looking forward to.

It felt even better to have destroyed my sister to get it.

## **Chapter 19: Poison and Pride 1**

### **CIAN**

The first thing I was aware of was pain. Not the sharp kind that meant something was broken. This was deeper. Duller. Like my entire body had been wrung out and left to dry in the sun. My throat felt like I'd swallowed gravel and ash.

I opened my eyes.

White ceiling. Fluorescent lights. The sterile smell of a healing ward that meant nothing good. My body was bandaged from neck to wrist, and whatever they'd slathered under the wrappings smelled like burnt herbs and bad decisions.

I tried to sit up. Immediately regretted it. Every muscle screamed. I fell back against the pillows hard enough to jar something loose in my chest, and I coughed. I even tasted blood.

"Easy, Alpha." That was Dr. Maren's voice. She appeared in my line of sight, moving fast. "You need to stay still."

"What happened?" The words came out scraped raw.

"You nearly died." Thorne stepped into view next. The old healer looked like he hadn't slept in days. His robes were stained. His gray hair stuck up at odd angles. "The mourning moon toxin was in your system for a significant time. Longer than hers."

Hers. The word triggered something. A memory of white fabric. Of purple flowers. Of carrying something that weighed almost nothing and felt like everything.

I turned my head. There was another bed next to mine. For a moment I thought she was there, but the bed was empty. Just rumpled sheets and the faint smell of herbal oils.

Then I saw her.

She stood near the foot of my bed, far enough away that I couldn't touch her if I tried. Which I wouldn't. Far enough away that she could run if she needed to. Her clothes still looked fresh, but she wore them like they didn't belong to her. Her eyes had that hollow look that came from exhaustion. From nearly dying. From whatever she'd done to herself in that forest.

She looked at me like she was waiting for the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

"How long was I unconscious?" I kept my voice flat. Clinical. The way an Alpha spoke when his pack was watching and his weaknesses didn't matter or need to show.

"A little over six hours," Maren said. "Your fever broke about some minutes ago. We weren't entirely sure you were going to make it."

That landed like a punch. I'd nearly died. The thought was strange. I'd been trained my entire life to be too dangerous to kill. Too valuable to lose. And yet here I was, poisoned and helpless and dependent on healers and the goddess's good humor.

"I feel horrible." The admission cost me something. Alphas didn't complain about pain. But this wasn't complaining. It was just stating fact.

"The known antidote didn't work on you," Thorne said to me. His voice had that edge to it. The one he used when he was disappointed in someone. "Not with the concentration in your system. The toxin was building too fast. It was the fault of one person anyway."

I looked at the old healer. Saw something in his expression that made my stomach turn over. He was looking at Fia. Not angry exactly. But not friendly either.

"But she concocted something," Maren intercepted. Her tone had changed. It had weight to it now. The kind of weight that meant respect. "An herbal remedy using wolfsbane and nettle. It counteracted the toxin that the standard antidote couldn't touch."

Fia? She'd done something? To help me? The realization pulled at me through the fog. She'd been conscious enough to do something while I was burning up and dying.

"I'm surprised Silver Creek has medical talent like her," Maren continued. She was looking at Fia now with the kind of interest she usually reserved for new research subjects. "It was fascinating to learn something new. She saved your life and for that, we should be grateful."

Fia didn't answer. She was watching me like I might explode.

I faced her fully. The movement cost me. Pain shot through my shoulders and down my spine, but I pushed through it.

"Have you anything to say?" The question came out hard. Demanding.

"Like what?" She didn't look away but her hands curled into fists at her sides.

"You put me in this state on the day that is supposed to be the happiest of my life." The words spilled out before I could stop them. Before I remembered that anger and poison didn't mix well. "Everything was planned. Everything was perfect. And then you destroyed it."

"You believed lies against me. You said all those horrible shit and made all those horrible demands, expecting that I just take it and you abandoned me on grounds I know nothing about..." Her voice was low but steady. "...Knowing you had potent poison around. You threw me out of a car in the middle of nowhere and drove away."

"And you left like a fool!" I raised my voice and immediately coughed blood into my hand. The taste was copper and broken plans.

She moved toward me. I saw it. Saw her take a step forward like she was going to help me. Then she caught herself and stopped. Pulled back like the very idea of touching me was repulsive.

"You should control yourself." Her voice was carefully neutral. "I battled poison with poison and you need to rest to stabilize your body."

I was about to ask what the hell she thought she was doing playing healer when the door exploded open. Ronan came through first. My Beta. His face was all rage and protective fury, the way it got when he thought the pack was under threat. Behind him came more sentinels. A whole crowd of them. Enough to fill the small space and make the air feel tight.

"Is it true?" Ronan's voice was a growl. "Is it true that she nearly killed you?"

"I'm fine." The lie tasted like the blood still in my mouth.

Thorne didn't let me finish. He turned to face Ronan and launched into the whole story. How I'd been poisoned. How the antidote didn't work. How I nearly died. With every word he spoke, he managed to make it sound like it was her fault. Like she'd walked into the flowers on purpose. Like she'd done it to hurt me.

Ronan's face went dark. He looked at Fia like she was vermin. Like she was something he'd found under his boot.

"You vile woman." His voice was barely controlled. "Do you understand what you've done? Our Alpha was poisoned on his wedding day because of your stupidity. Because you couldn't follow a single direction. You trapped him into this bond, nearly got him killed shortly after bringing shame to all of Skollrend. How could we ever accept you as our pack's Luna?"

Fia didn't move. Didn't react. Just stood there and took it.

Then she whispered. "I do not want to be anybody's Luna. I want to go home."

## **Chapter 20: Poison and Pride 2**

### **CIAN**

Those words seemed to send Ronan off the deep end. "You should have thought about that before you successfully stole your sister's place."

"I did not..." She did not finish. Ronan would not let her.

"She should be in the dungeons!" Ronan continued. He was pacing now, agitated. "Until we can figure out what her game really is. An Omega that was calculating enough to deceive our Alpha into marrying her doesn't just stumble into poison and then know exactly how to treat it shortly after being treated herself. This reeks of manipulation."

I wanted to tell him to stop. Wanted to tell the room that she'd saved me and that was it. Whatever happened in that forest, as much as I hated to admit, I had been willing to risk my life to make sure she did not die just as she'd been willing to risk her own recovery to help mine. That the bond had brought me back to her not out of cruelty but because it was stronger than whatever beef we had going on.

But I didn't say any of that. I was thinking of way to say it 'right'. So she did not think I cared at all.

So Fia decided to speak instead. Her voice was quiet but it cut through the room like a blade.

"I do not mind the dungeons."

The 'right' words immediately fled my mind. I opened my mouth to disagree. To assert my authority. To say something. Anything. Because what the fuck was wrong with her?

She beat me to it.

Her eyes met mine for a second. Just a flash of something I couldn't read. Pride. Defiance. Maybe even understanding.

She did not need my help. No. It was worse. She did not *want* my help.

Then she looked away.

The coldness that had always come easy to me settled back into place. The part that ruled a pack. The part that couldn't show weakness. The part that understood that sentiment was a luxury I couldn't afford.

"Take her," I said to Ronan. My voice was ice. "A day in the dungeons will teach her that pride has no place here."

The sentinels moved. They grabbed her by the arms, not rough but firm. Professional. She went with them without resistance. Without complaint. Like she'd expected this. Like she'd accepted it the moment she decided to save me.

I watched her disappear through the door.

Then I turned back to Ronan. He stood there looking satisfied. Looking like he'd protected me. Like he'd done something right.

"How is my mother?" I asked.

"Fine. She was not in pain today." He pulled a chair over and sat down like he was settling in for a long conversation. "She was really expecting to see your bride today."

There was a question in his tone. A judgment. Why hadn't I killed the girl and taken the Luna like I intended. Why had I let her live.

"I have a bride," I said flatly. "That is what matters. They can meet tomorrow."

"She humiliated you." Ronan leaned forward. "This will spread. Every pack will hear about how an Omega stole the place of her sister to marry you, then walked into poison to infect and nearly kill you... On your wedding day. They will laugh."

"I am not a tyrant." The words came out harder than I meant them to. "We can protect ourselves. We do not need to be the boogeyman in every story."

"But she is an Omega." He said it like it explained everything. "Skollrend cannot have a weak heir."

"Skollrend is not having an heir." I turned my head away from him. "I am not having kids with the Omega. She is just here to be a decoration around my arms. Her sister would have been the same thing. At least a vile Omega like her will have no complaints once I am done with her."

The words felt heavy. Like I was trying to convince myself as much as him.

"Regardless, my mother will be satisfied," I continued. "I now have a bride."

"Luna Morrigan will want grandchildren though." Ronan smiled like he'd caught me in something. "How will that be handled?"

I closed my eyes. I thought about the contract I had forced upon Fia the moment I realized I had gotten the wrong bride. The Contract I would still force her to sign, come hell or highwater. But my thoughts lingered on the clause where I was supposed to present my seed to her on the first night, and on the nights after, so she could inseminate herself and give me a child—a child my mother expected, the heir Skollrend wanted to dote on.

But no self-respecting woman would agree to that. I had known she wouldn't. That was why I had written it, expecting her to refuse. It would eventually sink in for anyone who cared to wonder why. It wasn't my fault. *I was trying to get what was needed from the union, but it just wasn't working out.*

Plausible deniability.

"We will cross that bridge when we get there." I opened my eyes. "For now I just need to fucking rest."

Ronan nodded and stood. "We will take our leave."

He left with the others. The room fell quiet except for the sound of Dr. Maren moving around. Checking vitals. Making notes. Pretending she hadn't heard any of it.

I lay there in the silence and felt the poison still moving through my veins. Felt the exhaustion pulling at me like hands trying to drag me under.

Somewhere beneath it all, I could feel the bond. It was still there, connecting me to her. Even separated by stone and distance, I could feel her. The fear. The resignation. The strange pride that had made her accept the dungeons without a fight.

The thought of her down there in the dark made something in my chest twist. But I pushed it away. Locked it deep deep down.

She'd saved me. *That meant something to me apparently.* I would figure out *what later.* When I wasn't still half-poisoned and weak and confused about my own motivations.

For now, I just needed to sleep.