

To ruin an Omega

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FIA

I sat on my bed, staring at nothing. My mind kept circling back to the same question: why had the cure worked the first time but not the second?

The answer felt obvious now that I thought about it. The ingredients. We had not used Thorne or Maren's stash. At least not all. It was mostly the dead witch's stash. Most of the herb, most of the powder, and even the root had belonged to her. That was from a real witch. Someone who could actually do magic.

Of course they'd worked. They probably still had traces of her power in them. Some of them had to have been alchemized. Magic clinging to dried leaves and crushed petals like residue. That was the only explanation that made sense.

I adjusted my bedsheet. It had bunched up under me. The fabric pulled tight across the mattress as I smoothed it down. Outside my window, the sky was darkening. Purple bleeding into deep blue. Stars were starting to prick through.

My stomach growled. I ignored it. Food could wait. Everything could wait while I tried to figure out what the hell I was supposed to do next.

That was when I heard a knock at the door.

I groaned. If this was someone else coming to linger close at the request of Cian, I was going to lose my mind. I dragged myself off the bed and crossed to the door before pulling it open.

Elara stood there. That was a surprise.

"What do you want?" I said flatly. "Come to drown me in my own room?"

She swallowed. Her throat worked visibly. "I came to apologize."

I waited and said nothing. If she wanted to get on with it. She had a free terrain.

"I'm sorry for hitting you," she continued. Her voice was steady. Practiced. "It was stupid, vain, and wrong. I ignored your station, used classist remarks, and ignored the privilege I had to say all that bullshit."

"This sounds rehearsed."

Elara shot me a look. Sharp. Annoyed. But then she adjusted her expression. Smoothed it out into something almost pleasant. She even smiled. "I am quite prideful. It took a lot for me to come here and I didn't want to get on your nerves. I merely practiced." She paused. "I'm sure I sounded real. Like my father's did."

"No," I said. "Your father was a better pretender."

Her smile didn't waver but something cold flickered in her eyes. "I take it I am forgiven then?"

"Perhaps if you got on your knees I would consider it."

I watched her carefully. Watched the way her jaw tightened. The way a vein in her temple pulsed with barely contained rage. She was furious. Good. Let her be furious. Let her feel what it was like to be talked down to. To be treated like she was less than.

"Of course," she said through her teeth. "If that is what it takes to earn your forgiveness."

She reached down. Fixed her gown. Smoothed the fabric over her knees. Then she lowered herself down. Slowly. Deliberately. Her knees hit the floor with a soft thud.

"Is this enough for you?" she asked. Her voice was tight.

I raised an eyebrow, showing that I expected her to refer to my station. She wasn't stupid. She got what I was throwing right away.

"Luna Fia, " she swallowed.

I stepped closer and looked down at her. She had to tilt her head back to meet my eyes. The position made her look smaller. Younger. Vulnerable in a way I'd never seen her before.

"Did you see how easy it was to tear you down from your high horse?" I said quietly. "I don't want to have to do this again. So get off my back and tell your father to tread these floors like he is walking on eggshells."

Her eyes widened. Just slightly.

"I am just like you think," I continued. "A manipulative Omega bitch who would do anything to stay afloat."

I reached out and touched her hair. It was soft under my fingers. Carefully styled. Probably took her an hour to get it just right. I let my hand linger there. Let her feel the weight of it.

"As long as I fall with someone, I don't mind what I need to do or the hell I need to cross." I met her gaze and held it. "Be better and stay in that gilded cage. Mess with me again and you will have no wings to make another attempt."

I hated how I sounded. I hated the venom in my voice. The cruelty. But this was the only language Elara understood. Power. Dominance. The willingness to destroy someone if they got in your way.

She stared up at me. Her eyes were wide now. Really wide. There was fear there. Genuine fear. And shock. Like she'd never expected me to push back this hard.

"Is that clear?" I asked.

She nodded in a quick and jerky manner. She couldn't seem to find her voice.

"Then we are good. See you around, Elara."

I held out my hand. She looked at it for a moment. Hesitated. Then took it. Her palm was clammy against mine. I pulled her up. She stumbled slightly but caught herself and she was upright, she fixed her gown again.

I waved her off. A casual little gesture. Like we'd just finished a pleasant chat about the weather.

Elara backed away. She kept her eyes on me. That look was still there. Fear mixed with shock mixed with something else I couldn't quite name. Then she turned and walked away. Fast. Not quite running but close.

I closed the door and leaned back against it as I took a deep breath.

My hands were shaking.

I pressed them flat against the wood behind me and tried to ground myself. I tried to calm the racing of my heart and the sick feeling in my stomach.

That wasn't me. That person who'd just spoken. Who'd made Elara kneel. Who'd threatened her with such cold precision. That wasn't who I wanted to be.

But it was who I needed to be. At least for now. At least until I figured out how to survive in this place where particular people around Cian hated me and wanted me to fail.

I pushed off the door and walked back to my bed. I sat down heavily. The mattress dipped under my weight. Outside, the sky had gone fully dark. Night had settled in properly. Stars scattered across the black like someone had thrown diamonds at velvet.

My stomach growled again. Louder this time. Insistent. I sighed. I should probably eat something.

Chapter 132: An anxious man

CIAN

I stood in the center of my quarters while two Omegas circled me with pins and measuring tape. The suit they'd tailored fit almost perfectly. The deep charcoal fabric caught the light when I moved. The jacket sat smooth across my shoulders. The trousers broke just right over my shoes.

One of the Omegas tugged gently at the sleeve. "Just a quarter inch here, Alpha. The cuff should sit at your wrist bone."

I held my arm out and let her work. She marked the fabric with chalk with quick and precise strokes.

The other Omega held up three ties. "Which would you prefer?"

I studied them. One was navy silk with a subtle pattern. The second was burgundy with gold threading and the last was a beautiful silver that would probably wash me out under the lights. I pointed to the navy. "That one."

She nodded and set the others aside. Then she opened a velvet-lined case on the table. "And for the brooch?"

There were five options. All noble looking and especially appropriate for a wedding. But my eyes went straight to the aquamarine piece. The stone was set in white gold and the delicate filigree work that surrounded it made it all the more pleasant to look at. I took a longer look at it, watching as the blue-green caught the lamplight and threw it back like water under sun.

"That one," I said.

"Excellent choice." She set it aside with the tie.

I glanced at them both. "Did you find what I asked for?"

The Omegas exchanged a look. The one with the pins spoke first. "It was quite expensive, Alpha."

"I didn't ask about the cost."

"Of course." She reached into a leather satchel at her feet and pulled out a box. It was larger than the brooch case and covered in black silk.

She handed it to me. I took it carefully and lifted the lid.

The necklace inside made me pause.

It was stunning. It was a white gold chain. It looked delicate but strong. The kind of thing that looked fragile but would last generations. The pendant was the real prize though. Three stones arranged in a cascade. Aquamarine. The same blue-green as the brooch but deeper somehow. Richer. The center stone was the largest. Probably three carats. The two smaller stones flanked it. Set slightly lower so they caught different angles of light.

The craftsmanship was flawless. Each stone was held by tiny prongs that looked like flower petals. The metalwork between them was so fine it was almost invisible. Just enough to connect everything without overwhelming the gems.

I turned the box slightly. The stones shifted and threw light across my hands in shades of ocean and sky.

"This is perfect," I said.

The Omega who'd brought it relaxed slightly. "We'll adjust it to fit the Luna and bring it before dawn."

"Good." I closed the box and handed it back. "Make sure the clasp is secure. I don't want any risk of it coming loose."

"Of course, Alpha."

They gathered their supplies. Pins and chalk and measuring tape disappeared into bags. The Omega with the brooch case tucked it under her arm. The other cradled the necklace box like it might shatter.

"We'll return tomorrow morning for final adjustments on the suit," one of them said.

I nodded. They bowed and left. The door clicked shut behind them.

I walked to the table and picked up the brooch case. Opened it again. The aquamarine glinted up at me. I'd chosen it because it would complement the necklace. Because seeing her wear something matching alongside me would satisfy something I didn't want to examine too closely.

I set the case down and pulled open the drawer of my desk. Moved some papers aside. The box fit perfectly in the space underneath. I closed the drawer and stood there for a moment. Imagining how the necklace would look against her skin. How they'd rest in the hollow of her throat. How the color would bring out the warmth in her eyes.

I smiled despite myself.

"Is someone there?" I called toward the door.

"Yes, Alpha," came the muffled reply.

"Do me a favor and find out where the Luna is."

"Right away sir." The sentinel replied.

When I heard his footsteps faded down the hall, I headed for the bathroom. The tile was cool under my feet. I turned on the tap and let the water run cold before splashing it over my face.

Once.

Twice.

The shock of it helped clear my head.

I braced my hands on either side of the sink and looked at my reflection. Water dripped from my jaw. My hair was disheveled from trying on the jacket.

The thought came to my mind unbidden.

Fia thought Aldric was dangerous.

The thought settled over me like a weight. I'd been trying to ignore it. Trying to rationalize her fear as paranoia or misunderstanding. But the terror I'd felt through the bond earlier had been real. Visceral. The kind of fear that didn't come from nowhere.

But it was hard to rationalize.

When I thought about uncle. When I really thought about him for the first time in years without the lens of gratitude and affection clouding everything.

I still couldn't look at him with such a vile lens.

He could have joined Gabriel when his brother was gathering support. When the council was divided. When half the sentinels weren't sure which of us to follow. Aldric could

have sided with the most sensible outcome. My father's immediate younger brother. The one most people expected to take the throne.

But he hadn't.

He'd supported me instead. Publicly. Vocally. His backing must have even swayed others. He had given me legitimacy I wouldn't have had otherwise.

Why would he do that if he seemingly wanted me in pain and my mother dead?

I grabbed a towel and dried my face. The rough fabric helped ground me.

Aldric could have also killed me before I took power. It would have been easy. An accident. Poison in my food. I'd have had enemies but nothing would have been done about it. I wasn't Alpha yet. It wouldn't have been treason. Just kin slaying. Terrible but not unforgivable.

He'd had opportunities. Time. Access.

He'd done nothing.

So why was Fia so afraid and sure that he was a vile person?

I hung the towel back up and straightened it on the rack even though no one would care if it was crooked.

Maybe I'd been smart to handle things the way I did earlier. Insisting Ronan stay instead of Aldric. Playing it off as concern about appearances at the wedding. Better to be cautious than careless.

But the thought made my stomach turn.

Treating Aldric with suspicion when he'd done nothing to deserve it. When he'd been nothing but loyal and supportive. When he'd stood by me when others hadn't.

What kind of nephew did that make me?

I pressed my palms against the cool tile of the wall. I made a conscious effort to breathe in slowly. I tried to settle the sick feeling crawling up my throat.

Gabriel was the enemy. Not Aldric. Gabriel and whatever allies he'd managed to scrape together. Gabriel and his bitterness about losing the throne. Gabriel who'd actually tried to undermine me. Who'd made his intentions clear.

Not Aldric.

Never Aldric.

A knock at the door pulled me from my thoughts. I pushed away from the wall and walked back into the main room.

"Come in."

The sentinel from earlier stepped inside. "The Luna is in her suite, Alpha."

I glanced at the clock on the mantle. "It's almost time for dinner. She's not coming down?"

"It doesn't appear so."

I frowned. I wondered if she still had thought about Aldric lodged in her mind and if it was bothering her so much that she refused to have dinner.

"Get me an Omega from the kitchen," I said.

The sentinel bowed and left again. I heard his footsteps fade down the corridor then return a few minutes later with lighter steps accompanying his.

The door opened and a young Omega stepped inside alongside the sentinel. She bowed quickly. "You asked for me, Alpha?"

"My mate isn't coming down for dinner. Make something homely for her. Something warm and comforting."

"I'll get that done right away and deliver it to her suite."

"No." I shook my head. "Bring it here. I'll deliver it myself."

Her eyebrows rose slightly. Just for a micro second. Then her expression smoothed back into professional neutrality. "Understood, Alpha Cian."

She bowed again and left.

Chapter 133: Cupcake 1

CIAN

I waited in my quarters while the minutes ticked by. The aquamarine brooch sat in its case on my desk. Everything was ready for tomorrow. Everything except the knot in my chest that wouldn't loosen.

The knock came soft but clear.

"Come in."

The young Omega from earlier pushed open the door. Behind her, a trolley rolled across the threshold. The wheels made almost no sound on the stone floor. Silver domes covered the dishes. Steam curled from beneath the edges and carried the scent of roasted vegetables and fresh bread.

"Everything you requested, Alpha." She arranged the items with practiced efficiency and moved a napkin half an inch to the left after adjusting a spoon. "Will there be anything else?"

"No. Thank you."

She bowed and left. The door clicked shut.

I stood there for a moment looking at the trolley. At the careful arrangement of dishes and the small vase with a single white flower tucked into the corner. Someone had added that touch. Someone who understood that comfort came in small gestures.

I gripped the handle and wheeled it into the corridor.

The walk to Fia's suite felt longer than it should have. My footsteps echoed. The trolley wheels hummed against stone. A sentinel nodded as I passed. I nodded back and kept moving.

When I reached her door, I stopped. Listened. No sound came from inside. No movement. No indication she knew I was standing here like an idiot with a dinner cart.

I knocked twice.

"Come in."

Her voice sounded tired. Not the bone-deep exhaustion I'd felt through the bond earlier but something quieter. This was more resigned.

I pushed the door open and wheeled the trolley inside.

Fia sat on the edge of her bed. She'd changed from the dress she'd worn earlier into something simpler. A loose shirt that fell off one shoulder. Her hair was down. Unbound. The dark waves spilled over her shoulders and caught the lamplight.

"Hey," she said.

"You didn't come down for dinner." I kept my tone light. Neutral. "I thought maybe you still wanted to avoid my uncle and cousin."

She shook her head. The movement was slow. Deliberate. "I'm just a bit tired."

I studied her face. Looked for the telltale signs of a lie. The slight tension around her eyes. The way she might bite the inside of her cheek. But there was nothing. She was being honest. This was just exhaustion.

"You didn't shield," I said. "So I guess that must be true."

Her gaze shifted to the trolley. "What is that?"

I wheeled it closer. The silver domes gleamed under the light from her bedside lamp. "Dinner in bed."

"How sweet."

The words were simple but something in her tone made my chest tighten.

I smiled, reached for the largest dome and lifted it. Steam rose in a white cloud and revealed roasted chicken with herbs. The skin was golden and crispy. The smell filled the space between us.

"I don't know what you like," I said. I moved to the next dome and lifted it to show glazed carrots and potatoes. Then another. Fresh bread torn into chunks. Butter in a small ceramic dish. "So I asked them to give you options."

Fia leaned forward slightly. Her eyes scanned the offerings. "I don't have a favorite food so you don't have to worry."

She reached for a bowl of porridge that sat near the edge. The steam rising from it carried the scent of cinnamon and honey. She cradled it in both hands.

That bothered me for some reason.

"Everybody has one," I said.

"Well." She met my eyes. "I must be different."

"Different how?"

She shrugged. The movement was easy. Casual. But I caught the slight hitch in her breath. The way her fingers tightened around the bowl. "As long as it tastes good, I'm fine."

I pulled the chair from her writing desk and sat down. The wood creaked under my weight. "Come on, there must be one."

"I just told you. I don't have one."

"That's not an answer."

She took a spoonful of porridge and blew on it. The steam dissipated in the air between us. "Forget me, what is your favorite food?"

"It's more like a sweet baked treat."

Her eyebrows rose. She swallowed the porridge and set the bowl on her lap. "Well, what is it?"

I leaned back in the chair and crossed my arms. "I'll tell you. If you tell me yours."

"I'm not shielded. I really do not have a favorite food."

"But I can tell you're being dishonest."

"I wouldn't call it being dishonest." She picked up the spoon again. Stirred the porridge in slow circles. "It's more like I haven't had it forever because I only like it one way... When a certain someone makes it."

The grief hit me through the bond before she finished speaking. It rolled over me in waves. Heavy, cold and thick like fog. I felt it settle in my chest and press against my ribs.

"Oh," I said. "Your mother."

Fia nodded. She didn't look at me. She just kept stirring the porridge in those same slow circles. "If you must know, it's beans cooked soft with palm oil. No one else seems to make it right."

"Your father doesn't know your mother's recipe?"

"He does." She set the spoon down first then picked up the bowl again and took another bite. "At least a rendition of it that I can still appreciate. But it's been so long since he's made one for me."

She shook her head. The movement was sharp. Quick. Like she was trying to dislodge something stuck in her thoughts. "Well, that was depressing."

The grief was still there. I could feel it humming through the bond. But she'd tamped it down. Pushed it back into whatever corner of herself she kept those feelings.

"What is your sweet treat?" she asked.

I shot her a look. Let my eyes trail down to her lips then back up. "You?"

She chuckled. The sound caught in her throat and she coughed. She even brought her hand up to cover her mouth.

I reached for the water glass on the trolley and handed it to her. She took it. Drank. Her throat worked with each swallow.

"I wish that would work on me," she said. She set the glass down and looked at me with those eyes that always seemed to see too much. "But for real, what is yours?"

"A promise is a promise." I uncrossed my arms and leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "I love ube cupcakes. If you wanted to poison me, you would probably succeed using that."

She smiled. The expression was small but genuine. "Cupcakes..."

"There you have it. My Achilles heel."

Fia turned her attention back to the trolley. Her gaze swept over the remaining dishes and landed on something near the back. "I take it you don't like red velvet with buttercream icing?"

I followed her line of sight. A generous slice of cake sat on a small plate. The layers were deep red. Almost burgundy. The frosting was thick and white and swirled into perfect peaks. "Not enough. You want some?"

"Yeah."

I stood and moved to the trolley. Cut a portion from the slice. The knife slid through the layers with ease. The cake was moist. The kind that left crumbs on the blade. I set the piece on a clean plate and handed it to her.

She took it, set her porridge aside, picked up the fork and took a bite.

"I thought about what you said," I said. "About my uncle."

She paused mid-chew and looked up at me.

"I guess there's a disconnect." I sat back down. The chair creaked again. "But if you have your doubts, I guess it's smart that I harbor a little too."

I watched her swallow. Watched her set the fork down on the plate.

"But trust me," I said. "My uncle... This one at least... Would never."

Peace flooded through the bond. It was sudden, warm and so different from the grief that had been there moments ago. It wrapped around me like sunlight after rain.

"That does lighten my heart a little," she said.

I smiled. Felt the tension in my shoulders ease. Then I noticed the smudge of buttercream icing around her cupid's bow. It was just a small dot of white against her skin. But it bothered me.

"You have something." I gestured to my own mouth. "Right there."

She touched her lips and licked at the spot. But the icing stayed. She missed it by a fraction of an inch.

I stood and crossed the distance between us. The space was smaller than I remembered. I leaned down and pressed my thumb to the spot. Then I brought it to my mouth and licked the icing away.

It was sweet and rich, with that slight tang of cream cheese.

Fia stared at me. Her eyes had gone wide. "What are you doing?"

"You know damn well what I'm doing."

"It's not even heat season." Her voice had dropped lower. Softer. "Do you have to be this way?"

"I have self-control." I straightened slightly and immediately attempted to put distance between us even though everything in me wanted to close it again. "If you don't want this, I don't want this either."

I made to step back. To give her space. To let her breathe.

Her hand shot out and caught my wrist. Her fingers wrapped around the bone. Held tight.

"I don't hate it," she said.

Chapter 134: Cupcake 2 (M)

CIAN

In the soft glow of her bedside lamp, Fia's eyes held me captive. The scent of buttercream and cinnamon hung heavy in the air, a sweet promise of what was to come. Her grip on my wrist was firm, a silent command that sent a jolt of electricity straight to my cock.

"I don't hate it," she repeated, her voice barely above a whisper. Her thumb traced circles on my skin, a motion that was both soothing and maddening.

I let out a low growl, a sound that rumbled in my chest and echoed in the space between us. "You don't have to say that, Fia. I can feel it. Your heart races when I'm close. Your breath hitches when I touch you. Your body responds to mine, even if your mind tries to fight it." I leaned closer, my voice dropping to something darker, more primal. "You're mine to affect. Mine to make tremble."

Her eyes flashed, a spark of defiance that only served to fuel the fire within me. "And what if I do? What if I don't want this?"

I leaned in, my voice dropping to a low rumble. "Then you wouldn't be holding onto me like your life depends on it. You wouldn't be looking at me like you want to devour me. And you certainly wouldn't be making that little noise in the back of your throat that drives me fucking wild." My hand covered hers on my wrist, pressing her palm flat against my pulse. "You feel that? That's what you do to me. Only you. No one else gets to make my blood race like this."

Her lips parted, a soft gasp escaping. I took advantage, capturing her mouth in a searing kiss. My tongue slid against hers, tasting the remnants of the red velvet cake. She moaned, her fingers tightening around my wrist, pulling me closer.

I deepened the kiss, my free hand cupping her cheek, tilting her head to give me better access. Her skin was soft, her hair like silk against my fingers. I explored her mouth, my tongue dancing with hers, our breaths mingling. When I pulled back, I bit her lower lip gently, possessively. "Mine," I whispered against her mouth.

When I finally pulled back fully, we were both breathless. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, her cheeks flushed. She looked like a dream, a temptation I couldn't resist.

"Tell me to stop, Fia," I whispered, my voice ragged with desire. "Tell me you don't want this, and I'll walk out that door right now." Even as I said it, something feral in me rebelled at the thought. The very idea of leaving her, of not claiming what was mine, made my Alpha instincts roar in protest.

She swallowed hard, her throat working with the motion. Her eyes searched mine, looking for something. I held her gaze, letting her see the truth of my words—and the possessive hunger that burned beneath them.

"I... I can't," she admitted, her voice barely audible. "I can't tell you that, Cian."

A slow, predatory smile spread across my face. "Good. Because I don't think I could have walked away. Not from you. Not ever." I leaned in, my lips brushing against her ear. "You're mine, Fia. I'm going to make sure you feel that in every fiber of your being."

I let my hand trail down from her cheek, my fingers tracing the line of her jaw, her neck, her collarbone. I felt her shiver under my touch, her breath hitching again. My eyes caught on the plate beside her, the remaining slice of red velvet cake with its thick white frosting.

An idea formed, dark and delicious.

I reached for the plate, my movements deliberate. Fia watched me, confusion flickering in her eyes. I dipped my finger into the buttercream icing, gathering a generous amount, then brought it to her lips.

"Open," I commanded softly.

She obeyed, her lips parting. I slid my finger into her mouth, feeling her tongue swirl around it, tasting the sweetness. My cock twitched at the sensation. I withdrew my finger slowly, watching her eyes darken with desire.

"You taste even better with it," I murmured. I gathered more icing, but this time I traced it along her collarbone, leaving a white trail across her skin. "I want to taste every inch of you. Mark you with something sweet, then claim it all back with my mouth."

Her breath hitched. "Cian..."

I continued my exploration, my hand moving to the hem of her shirt. I slid my fingers underneath, feeling the soft skin of her stomach, the curve of her hip. "I'm going to cover you in this cake, Fia. I'm going to make you a feast that only I get to devour. No one else. Just me."

She watched me, her eyes following my hand, her lips parted. I could see the pulse at the base of her throat, quick and steady. I leaned down, licking the trail of icing from her collarbone, feeling her heart race against my tongue. The combination of buttercream and her skin was intoxicating.

I pulled back, my hand still under her shirt. I looked at her, waiting for a sign, a word, anything to tell me she was ready for more. She nodded, her eyes never leaving mine.

I slid my hand up, my fingers brushing against the underside of her breast. She gasped, her back arching slightly. I took the opportunity to pull her shirt up and over her head, leaving her in nothing but a thin, lacy bra.

Her nipples were hard, pressing against the fabric. I reached for the cake plate again, breaking off a piece of the red velvet. I held it above her chest, letting crumbs fall onto her skin, then pressed the moist cake against the swell of her breast, smearing it slowly.

"Cian," she breathed, her voice thick with desire and something like disbelief.

"Shh. Let me play with what's mine." I leaned down, my tongue following the path of cake and frosting, licking it from her skin. The taste of red velvet mixed with the salt of her skin was divine. I reached behind her, unhooking her bra with practiced ease, and pulled it away.

Her breasts were perfect, full and round. I took more buttercream frosting and painted circles around her nipples, watching them harden further under the cool cream. "So fucking beautiful. And all mine."

I captured one nipple in my mouth, sucking away the frosting, feeling her arch beneath me. The sweetness of the icing contrasted with the taste of her skin, creating a flavor I knew I'd crave for the rest of my life. I moved to the other breast, giving it the same attention, my teeth grazing the sensitive peak.

"Every inch of you belongs to me," I growled against her skin. "Your pleasure, your sighs, these perfect breasts—mine."

She squirmed beneath me, her hands tangling in my hair, pulling me closer. I could feel her body responding, her hips moving, seeking friction.

I reached for more cake, breaking off pieces and creating a trail down her stomach. I followed with my mouth, licking and sucking, claiming every inch. When I reached the waistband of her shorts, I looked up at her, my eyes dark with possessive hunger.

"I'm going to taste all of you, Fia. Every. Single. Inch." I hooked my fingers into the waistband of her shorts and panties, pulling them down in one smooth motion. She was bare to me now, her pussy glistening with her desire.

I took a dollop of buttercream on my finger and traced it along her inner thigh, so close to where she needed me most. She whimpered, her hips lifting.

"Please, Cian..."

"Please what?" I licked the frosting from her thigh, my breath hot against her skin. "Tell me what you want. Tell me who you belong to."

"You," she gasped. "I belong to you."

"That's right." I spread more frosting along her other thigh, then higher, barely grazing her folds. "Say it again."

"I belong to you, Cian. Only you."

The words ignited something primal in me. I dove in, my tongue sliding through her folds, tasting the mixture of buttercream and her own sweetness. The combination was

obscene, intoxicating. She tasted like dessert and desire, like everything I'd ever craved.

I explored her with my tongue, feeling her body respond to my touch. I found her clit, sucking it into my mouth, feeling her squirm beneath me. "No one else gets to taste you like this. No one else gets to make you come. Only me."

I slipped a finger inside her, feeling her clench around me. She was tight, so fucking tight. I added another finger, stretching her, claiming her. My tongue never stopped its assault on her clit.

She moaned, her hips moving against my mouth, seeking more friction. I obliged, my tongue moving in time with my fingers, drawing out her pleasure. I could feel her body tensing, her muscles tightening as she neared her peak.

"That's it, baby. Come for me. Come on my tongue, so I know you're mine." I pulled back just enough to speak, then returned to my feast, my fingers pumping faster, my tongue relentless.

Her eyes flew open, meeting mine. She bit her lip, her body trembling as she came undone. I felt her clench around my fingers, her body convulsing with her release. Her taste flooded my mouth, and I continued to move my fingers, drawing out every wave of pleasure, until she slumped back against the bed, her body boneless.

I stood, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, but not before licking my lips, savoring every drop. I looked at her, her body flushed and decorated with remnants of our play, her eyes heavy-lidded. She was a sight to behold, a temptation I couldn't resist.

"My turn," she whispered, her voice hoarse.

I raised an eyebrow. She sat up, reaching for the cake plate, and broke off a piece. Her eyes held mine as she pushed me back onto the bed. I went willingly, curious, aroused beyond measure.

She straddled my hips, still gloriously naked, and pressed the cake against my chest. The moist crumbs stuck to my skin as she smeared it across my pecs, down my abs. Then she leaned down, her tongue following the trail, licking and sucking.

"Fuck, Fia," I groaned. My hands gripped her hips, fingers digging into her soft flesh. "You're killing me."

She smiled against my skin, a wicked glint in her eyes. She took more frosting and painted it down the V of my hips, right above the waistband of my boxers. My cock strained against the fabric, aching for her touch.

She hooked her fingers into my boxers and pulled them down, freeing my cock. It sprang up, hard and aching. She looked at it, then at the frosting on her fingers, then back at me.

"Don't you dare," I warned, but my voice was rough with want.

She smiled, that same wicked smile, and wrapped her frosting-covered fingers around my shaft. The cool cream contrasted with the heat of her hand, and I groaned, my hips bucking into her touch.

"You said every inch of me was yours," she murmured, stroking me slowly. "Well, every inch of you is mine too."

She leaned down, her tongue licking the frosting from my cock, and I nearly came undone right there. Her mouth was warm, her tongue skilled, and the sight of her, naked and covered in cake, her lips wrapped around me—it was almost too much.

"Fia," I growled, my hand tangling in her hair. "If you keep doing that, I'm going to come, and I need to be inside you when I do."

She pulled back, her lips swollen, her eyes dark. "Then take me, Cian. Make me yours."

I didn't need to be told twice. I flipped her onto her back, my body covering hers. I reached into my discarded pants, pulling out a condom and rolling it on with shaking hands.

I positioned myself at her entrance, feeling the heat of her. I looked at her, our eyes locked. "You're mine, Fia. Say it one more time."

"I'm yours, Cian. Always."

And slowly, so fucking slowly, I pushed inside her. She was tight, so fucking tight, her body still pulsing from her earlier release. I felt her stretch around me, her body accommodating mine. I paused, giving her time to adjust, my breath coming in short gasps.

"You feel perfect," I whispered, my voice strained. "Like you were made for me. Only me."

She moaned, her hips moving against mine, seeking more. I obliged, pulling back and pushing inside her again. I set a slow pace, but it was torture. I wanted to pound into her, to claim her so thoroughly she'd feel me for days.

"Faster, Cian," she begged. "Please."

I growled, my control snapping. I gripped her hips, my fingers digging into her flesh hard enough to leave marks—and I wanted to leave marks. I wanted her to wake up tomorrow and see the evidence of my possession.

I thrust into her harder, faster, each stroke deliberate and claiming. "Mine," I growled with each thrust. "Mine. Mine. Mine."

"Yes," she gasped, her nails raking down my back. "Yours. Only yours."

I leaned down, capturing her mouth in a fierce kiss. Our tongues tangled, our breaths mingled, and I could taste the remnants of cake and frosting and us. I reached between us, my fingers finding her clit, rubbing the sensitive bud.

"Come with me," I commanded against her lips. "Come on my cock, Fia. Show me who you belong to."

Her body tensed, her muscles tightening around me. I felt her clench, her inner walls rippling, and it pushed me over the edge. I thrust deep, grinding against her as my release tore through me. I came with a roar, my body shuddering, my cock pulsing inside her.

We clung to each other, our bodies trembling, our breaths coming in ragged gasps. I stayed inside her, not wanting to break the connection, not wanting to leave the warmth of her body.

Finally, I rolled to the side, pulling her with me. I disposed of the condom and pulled her back into my arms, our bodies sticky with sweat and frosting and cake crumbs. I didn't care. All I cared about was that she was here, in my arms, where she belonged.

I traced lazy patterns on her skin, my fingers following the trails of frosting we hadn't yet licked away. "You're mine, Fia," I whispered into her hair. "You always have been. You always will be. And I'm never letting you go."

Chapter 135: Buttercream and Battlelines 1

FIA

I woke to the sensation of fingers tracing lazy patterns across my shoulder blade. The touch was feather-light, almost reverent, and it pulled me slowly from sleep like being drawn up from warm water.

My eyes fluttered open to find Cian propped on one elbow beside me, his gaze fixed on where his fingers moved across my skin. The bedside lamp still glowed softly, casting everything in amber.

"Welcome back, sleeping beauty," he murmured.

I was so tired. My body felt heavy, languid, like I'd run a marathon. I started to turn away, to burrow into the pillows and escape back into sleep, but his hand pressed gently against my hip.

"It's four," he said.

I blinked at him, confused. "What?"

"By six, the servants will come flurrying in to get us dressed."

"Dressed for what?" The words came out thick with sleep.

Then it slammed into me. My eyes flew open wide. "Today is the wedding."

"And we smell like sex, spit, and cake." His mouth curved into that infuriating smirk.

Heat flooded my cheeks. I could feel the stickiness of dried frosting on my skin, the lingering scent of what we'd done hanging in the air between us. But he was right. It was Alpha Julius Knight's wedding. One of the prominent Alphas in the territory, and we were expected to attend looking dignified and composed.

"It's good policy we spare them the sight." He leaned closer, his breath warm against my ear. "We should shower."

He glanced back at the clock on my nightstand. "We have less than two hours. What do you say? Should we shower together?"

"Go back to your room, you dog," I said, trying to sound stern even as my traitorous heart picked up speed.

"I'm an Alpha." He sat up, the sheet pooling at his waist. "The last thing I need is to let the world see what kind of horn dog I was last night."

Before I could protest, he stood and scooped me up in his arms, carrying me bridal style toward my bathroom suite.

"Cian!" I struggled halfheartedly, my hands pushing against his chest, but he didn't stop. His grip was secure, and there was something in his expression—determination mixed with playfulness—that told me resistance was futile.

He didn't stop until we were in the shower, and he'd closed the glass door behind us.

The water came on in a rush of warmth, and I gasped as it cascaded over both of us. Cian reached for my shampoo bottle, squeezing some into his palm.

"Turn around," he said softly.

I did, and his fingers sank into my hair, massaging my scalp. I couldn't help the small sound of pleasure that escaped me. His touch was gentle but firm, working the lather through every strand. When he tilted my head back under the spray to rinse, his other hand cupped my forehead to keep the water from my eyes.

It was such a simple gesture. But it meant so much.

"Your turn," I said when he was done, reaching for the shampoo.

He crouched slightly so I could reach, and I worked my fingers through his hair. It was softer than I expected, and I found myself taking my time, dragging my nails lightly against his scalp the way he'd done for me.

He let out a low sound that I felt all the way to my toes.

When I rinsed his hair, water ran down the planes of his face, over his shoulders, following the lines of muscle down his chest. I forced myself to look away.

He reached for the body wash next, lathering his hands. "Arms up."

I obeyed, and he started at my shoulders, his palms sliding over my skin with slow, deliberate movements. He washed the remnants of cake and frosting from my collarbone, his touch lingering.

"You had buttercream here," he murmured, his fingers tracing the hollow of my throat.

"I wonder whose fault that was."

His laugh was low and rich. "No regrets."

His hands moved lower, washing my arms, then my sides. When he reached my ribs, I flinched—ticklish—and he grinned like he'd discovered a secret.

"Don't," I warned.

"Wouldn't dream of it." He swore. But his eyes glinted with mischief.

He turned me gently, washing my back with the same attention he'd given the rest of me. His hands moved in broad strokes down my spine, then lower. When he reached the small of my back, he paused, his thumbs pressing into the muscles there.

I bit back a moan.

"Tense," he observed.

"I wonder why," I managed.

He worked the knot with patient pressure until I felt it release. Then he continued washing, efficient but thorough, until every trace of our night together had been rinsed away.

"My turn," I said, taking the body wash from him.

I started at his shoulders, marveling at the breadth of them. My hands looked small against his frame. I washed his chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat under my palm, then moved to his arms. His muscles flexed under my touch, and I wondered if he was as affected by this as I was.

When I washed his back, I took my time, tracing the strong lines of his shoulder blades, the dip of his spine. There was a small, almost invisible scar near his left shoulder, and I let my fingers drift over it.

"How did you get this?"

"Training accident when I was sixteen," he said. "I made the mistake of telling a trained sentinel not to hold back."

I made a soft sound of sympathy and continued my work. When I moved lower, to his sides and then his stomach, I felt him tense under my hands.

"Fia," he said, and there was a warning in his voice.

"What?" I kept my tone innocent. "I'm just washing."

"You're playing with fire."

"Maybe I like the heat."

His hand caught my wrist, stilling my movements. When I looked up, his eyes were dark, intense. "If you keep touching me like that, we're never making it to this wedding."

Something in his expression—the raw want barely held in check—made my breath catch. But he was right. We didn't have time. Julius Knight's wedding would be packed with prominent Alphas and their families. Missing it wasn't an option. Especially with everything he has told me.

"Fine," I said, stepping back under the spray to rinse off.

He did the same, and we stood there for a moment, water streaming over both of us, the air between us charged with everything we weren't saying.

Then he shut off the water and stepped out, reaching for a towel.

"See you in a couple of hours," he said, wrapping the towel around his waist in a way that somehow made him look more indecent than if he'd been naked. The fabric hung low on his hips, emphasizing the sharp V of muscle that disappeared beneath it.

He shot me one last look—something between a promise and a threat—and left.

I stepped out a minute later, wrapping a towel around myself, and padded back into my bedroom. My eyes went immediately to the bed. His clothes were gone. The messed-up cake still sat on the trolley along with the other food I hadn't touched last night.

A smile tugged at my lips despite myself.

I moved to the mirror and started working the tangles from my damp hair. Ten minutes later, a knock sounded at my door.

"Who is it?" I called.

"I'm here to help you get dressed, Luna Fia."

The title still felt strange, unearned somehow.

"Come in."

An Omega entered, her eyes going straight to where I stood working my hair. "Oh, we'll do that."

Three more Omegas filed in behind her. One immediately took over my hair, gentle hands replacing mine. Another approached with a bright smile.

"I helped put the clothes you bought in your closet," she said. "Did you have anything in mind?"

She disappeared into my closet and emerged with three gowns draped over her arms. "These were the most striking."

My eyes went to the pink one first. It had a modest neckline and a skirt that fell in soft, romantic waves. I'd fallen in love with it the moment I tried it on at the boutique.

But then I remembered Hazel. The way she'd watched me, her eyes tracking the dress I was wearing with a sneer.

It wouldn't be below her to actually take a similar style for herself.

It wasn't the first time she'd done something like this. Hazel had a talent for taking things I loved and making them into weapons. If I wore that pink dress today, she'd

show up in something similar and spend the entire wedding letting everyone make subtle comments about who wore it better.

With my public reputation, it would be a stellar attack.

I couldn't give her that satisfaction. Not today. Not at this wedding, where half the territory's elite would be watching.

My gaze shifted to the second option. Silver fading into midnight blue, like twilight captured in fabric. Soft glitter caught the light when the Omega moved, and I could see the mid-open back that would show just enough skin without being scandalous.

"That one," I said, pointing to the ombre gown.

The Omega's smile widened. "Wonderful choice."

As she went to prepare it, I caught my reflection in the mirror. My hair was already being worked into something elegant, though my skin still flushed from the shower from Cian's hands on my skin.

I pushed the thought away and focused on the dress being brought toward me. Alpha Julius Knight's wedding would be the social event of the season. Everyone who mattered would be there, watching, judging, measuring us all against each other.

And somehow, after last night, that felt less daunting than it should have.

Chapter 136: Buttercream and Battlelines 2

CIAN

I stood in front of the mirror while the Omegas finished fussing over my suit, tugging fabric here, smoothing it there, their hands quick and practiced like they had done this a thousand times before. The charcoal jacket finally sat right on my shoulders, no pulling, no creases. The navy tie pressed close to my throat, neat and exact, and the aquamarine brooch caught the light every time someone shifted behind me. I barely noticed them until one of the Omegas stepped back and gave a slow nod, satisfaction clear on her face.

"It's Perfect, Alpha."

I inclined my head and thanked her, already feeling the familiar weight settle in my chest. The expectation. The performance.

There was a knock at the door before I could linger on it.

"Come in."

Ronan walked in like he owned the space, eyes flicking over me once before his brow lifted in mild amusement. "You called for me?"

"Yes," I said, turning fully toward him. "You'll be staying back instead of joining us for the wedding."

If he was bothered, he hid it well. In fact, he looked like he had expected it.

"You'll have to forgive me," I added, more out of courtesy than guilt.

"I really don't mind," he said easily. "I had a heads up anyway."

I studied him for a moment. "Fia?"

He nodded, mouth twitching like he found the whole thing faintly entertaining.

I couldn't stop the small smile that crept in. Of course she had already handled it. Of course she had already thought three steps ahead and put Morrigan's safety first. That was who she was.

"Have fun pretending you can tolerate them," Ronan said as he turned toward the door.

"That's my strongest skill."

He laughed and left, the door closing softly behind him.

One of the Omegas approached then, holding out a velvet lined case as if it were something fragile, something sacred. I knew what it was long before she opened it carefully and angled it so the light hit just right.

"It's ready, Alpha."

The necklace lay inside, white gold gleaming, three aquamarine stones arranged in a gentle cascade. It was even more striking now than it had been during the fittings, every detail perfected.

"It's beautiful," I said, and meant it.

They helped me into my jacket, adjusted the shoulders until they sat exactly where they should, straightened my cuffs, and adjusted the brooch in place. The aquamarine flared with color under the lamplight, blue and green like deep water. When they finished, they bowed and gathered their things, leaving me alone in the quiet of my quarters.

I stood there for a moment, breathing, bracing myself. Weddings like this were never just celebrations. They were battlegrounds dressed up in silk and wine. Alphas

measuring each other, alliances shifting with glances and half spoken words. I hated every second of it.

At least this time, I wouldn't be facing it alone.

That thought steadied me as I left my rooms and headed up the corridor toward Fia's suite. The hall was unusually quiet, most of the household still caught up in preparations. I knocked once.

"Come in."

I opened the door and stepped inside.

The Omegas were finishing up, gathering brushes and powders, murmuring softly to one another. Fia sat at the mirror while one of them applied the last touches of makeup. When she turned toward me, the room seemed to narrow, like everything else had faded back a step.

The dress was stunning, silver melting into midnight blue, the fabric catching light as she moved like it held stars inside it. The neckline was elegant, restrained, and the skirt fell in soft waves. But it wasn't the dress that stole my breath. It was the way she wore it. The quiet confidence in her posture, the small, knowing smile she gave me.

She stood. "Hey. You're back."

I forgot how to speak for a second. I just stood there, staring.

"You look nice," I managed eventually, and felt ridiculous for how inadequate it sounded.

Color rose in her cheeks, soft and warm. "I like your brooch," she said. "And your suit does do it for me."

Pride settled heavy and pleasant in my chest. I stepped closer and opened the case in my hand. "If you like the brooch, you'll love this."

Her eyes widened as she leaned in. The aquamarines glinted between us.

"It's beautiful," she said quietly.

"And it matches your dress."

She turned without hesitation, lifting her hair to expose the smooth line of her neck. My hands stayed steady as I lifted the necklace out, draped it around her throat, and fastened the clasp. I checked it twice, more careful than strictly necessary. The stones settled perfectly at the hollow of her collarbone, like they belonged there.

She looked at herself in the mirror. "How does it look?"

"Like the one thing everyone will be talking about," I said. "Alpha Julius's bride might have some competition today."

She turned back to me, eyebrow raised. "I wanted a compliment."

"You got one."

"Outshining the bride?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to."

"It'll happen anyway," I said. "You're new to those circles. They'll stare, they'll speculate, and they'll crowd you. So you might as well give them something worth looking at."

Something flickered across her face, nerves maybe, but it passed quickly. She nodded once.

I offered her my hand. "We should head out."

Her fingers slipped into mine, warm and sure, and together we made our way downstairs.

Aldric and Elara were waiting in the entrance hall, both dressed for the occasion. Aldric bowed when he saw us.

"The witch will arrive in about two hours," Aldric said.

"I've already informed Ronan," I replied. "There's nothing to worry about."

Elara stepped forward like she was bracing herself. "Good morning, cousin."

I looked at her and said nothing. I let the silence hang there, long enough to grow awkward, long enough that she had to feel it press in around her. She noticed. I saw it in the way her expression tightened, the flicker of something like guilt or hurt passing through her eyes. It did nothing for me. Whatever sympathy I might have had was spent already. She had made her choice the moment she let Hazel turn her into a weapon against Fia.

Elara shifted her attention instead. "You look nice."

"You too," Fia replied, her tone even and distant, polite in the way that kept doors firmly closed.

"That's enough," I said. "Let's go."

Outside, the cars waited in the drive, black paint polished so well they reflected the morning light like water. Sentinels moved efficiently, opening doors, already knowing where each of us would sit. I guided Fia toward the first car, my hand light at her back, and let her slide inside before following. The door closed behind us with a muted thud. The interior smelled of leather and polish, a familiar scent that usually grounded me. Today it only reminded me how long the day ahead would be.

Aldric and Elara took the second car. I watched through the window as they climbed in, Aldric first, Elara after him, her posture stiff. Their driver shut the door and moved around to the front.

Our driver settled into his seat, started the engine, and we pulled away from the estate with a smooth, almost lazy roll, the gates disappearing behind us.

Fia sat beside me with her hands folded neatly in her lap. The necklace rested at her throat, the aquamarine stones catching the morning light as it filtered through the windows, scattering faint blue reflections across the interior. I found myself watching the way it moved when she breathed.

"Nervous?" I asked.

She turned her head slightly. "Should I be?"

"Probably."

She huffed out a quiet breath. "Well... that's reassuring."

I smiled despite myself. "These events always are. Everyone watching everyone else, trying to decide who matters, who doesn't, and who they can use."

"Sounds delightful."

"It isn't," I said. "But you'll be fine. Stay close to me. Don't let anyone pull you aside alone, and don't take anything anyone says at face value without checking it later."

She glanced at me. "You're really selling this."

"I'm being honest."

She was quiet for a moment, eyes drifting back to the window as the road stretched out ahead of us. Then she asked, softly, "Will Hazel really be there?"

The question landed heavier than it should have. Of course Hazel would be there. My father in law's new standing all but guaranteed an invitation, and with the way Fia spoke

about her sister and the little I had found out through Ronan. It seemed like Hazel was the type that would never miss the chance to be seen, to insert herself where she could do the most damage.

"Probably," I said.

Fia nodded once, her gaze dropping to her hands. "I thought so."

"She can't touch you there," I said. "Not with that many eyes on you."

"She doesn't have to," Fia replied. "She just has to exist in the same room. That's usually enough for people to remember the things she's said I did to her."

I reached over and took her hand, threading my fingers through hers. Her skin was warm, a little tense at first. "Let them remember," I said. "Then let them look at you and decide for themselves what's true."

She looked at me then, something unguarded in her expression. "And if they don't?"

"Then they aren't worth worrying about," I said. "Anyone who believes her without question isn't someone whose opinion carries weight. I would know."

Her mouth curved into a small smile, tentative but real. "You make it sound simple."

"It isn't," I said. "But it's survivable. And you're stronger than you think. I also know that."

The car turned onto the main road, the estate giving way to open stretches of land. Forests blurred past, broken occasionally by small settlements and markers of other packs' territories. We had hours of driving ahead of us, plenty of time for nerves to spiral if we let them.

I kept hold of her hand, my thumb tracing slow, absent patterns over her knuckles. Gradually, I felt her relax, her grip loosening just enough to tell me she was breathing easier.

Whatever waited for us at Alpha Julius Knight's wedding, the scrutiny, the politics, the old grudges dressed up as polite conversation, we wouldn't be facing it separately.

We'd walk into it together, and for now, that felt like enough.

Chapter 137: Once upon an Aphrodisiac

HAZEL

I woke with heat pressed along my side and the quiet rise and fall of breathing that did not belong to me. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, for the ceiling to stop

swimming, for the silk sheets tangled around my legs to register as mine. When I turned my head, Baruch was there, sprawled beside me like he belonged.

Sleep softened him. His face had lost that guarded sharpness he carried when he was awake. Morning light traced the line of his jaw and caught in the dark hair falling into his eyes. I reached out without thinking and slid my fingers through it. It surprised me how soft it was. He did not stir.

The clock did.

The red numbers snapped into focus and my stomach tightened. I swore under my breath. The Omegas would be here any minute. I sat up fast and shoved his shoulder.

"Get up."

He groaned, half awake, eyes barely open.

"Get up," I said again, sharper now. "Pack your shit and get out. They're about to arrive."

That did it. He bolted upright, glanced at the clock, and went pale. "Fuck."

The sheets flew back as he stumbled out of bed, grabbing for clothes scattered across the floor. Shirt first, then his trousers, hopping clumsily as he tried to pull them on without falling over. I leaned back against the headboard and watched him with lazy interest. Panic did something almost charming to him, though I would never admit that out loud.

His phone slipped from his pocket and hit the floor with a dull thud.

I leaned forward to help, reaching down from the bed, but he dove for it before I could get close. He snatched it up and pressed it to his chest like it was a weapon or a secret worth dying over. His breathing was uneven when he straightened.

I raised a brow. "Relax. If we were married, I'd think you were hiding an affair."

He glanced at the screen, thumb moving quickly as if checking something important, then looked back at me. "Sorry. Reflex, I guess."

I studied him then, really took him in. The way his shoulders stayed tense even as his voice went casual, the way he tucked the phone away too carefully.

"Why?" I asked. "Got secrets I should know about?"

He slid the phone into his pocket and smoothed his expression into something neutral, practiced. "Everyone does."

I tilted my head. "You don't look like the type."

He smiled, and this time it reached his eyes. "I could come with you. To the wedding. Stay close, make it bearable."

I said nothing, let the silence stretch.

"I'd stay by your side," he added. "Help you enjoy it, as much as that's possible."

I laughed before I could stop myself. "Funny. That sort of thing is usually my role."

The smile fell from my face as easily as I had put it on. "And I don't want a sentinel glued to me."

He froze.

"The last one who got close to me died," I said, my tone flat. "A second would start rumors I don't feel like dealing with."

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood, the nightdress clinging to me, barely decent. I did not bother fixing it as I walked toward him. I stopped close enough to see his throat move when he swallowed.

"I enjoy the sex," I said. "And I'm very fond of your dick."

His breath hitched.

"But that's all this is," I went on, steady and calm. "Sex. Nothing more. Nothing lasting."

He searched my face, like he was hoping to find a crack or a lie. I gave him neither.

"I'm just happy to serve you," he said quietly.

Good.

I rose on my toes and kissed him, gentle enough to feel kind, sweet enough to sell the illusion. When I pulled back, I smiled.

"I'm glad you understand your place," I said. "You're different from the rest. That's why this works."

He checked the clock again and the panic rushed back in. "I should go."

"Yes."

He gathered the last of his things and slipped out. I watched him until the door clicked shut, watched the way sleep and want still weighed his steps.

I collapsed back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. My neck ached faintly, so I rubbed at it, working out the stiffness. Time passed in loose minutes until the knock came, right on schedule.

"Come in."

Delta entered first, followed by another Omega whose name never seemed to stick. They bowed low.

"Good morning, Luna Hazel."

"Good morning," I said, swinging my legs down. "I'll shower. Steam the dress, polish the pearls. I need to look flawless."

I did not wait for confirmation. I walked into the bathroom and shut the door.

The mirror reflected what I already knew. Messy hair, swollen lips, faint marks blooming along my neck that would need careful attention. I grabbed my toothbrush and scrubbed until the mint burned, rinsed away the lingering taste of sex, and spat into the sink.

The bath came next.

I turned the taps and watched steam rise, added soap until the water foamed. From behind my bottles, I pulled out the small vial.

The aphrodisiac perfume.

A witch had sold it to me with a knowing smile, promising subtlety. Not compulsion, just suggestion. Enough to pull eyes, to make interest linger where it might otherwise fade.

I tipped a measured amount into the bath. The scent unfurled slowly, floral at first, then deeper, warmer, the kind that made people lean closer without realizing why.

Men would look today. I was certain of that.

I stepped into the water and sank down, heat wrapping around me. When the door opened again, I did not turn.

"The pink?" Delta asked.

"Yes."

A pause. "It's not your usual choice."

"I know," I said. "That's the point."

"I could alter the bust," she offered. "Make it more you."

"No."

She hesitated. "No?"

"It isn't that kind of event," I said, sitting up slightly. "There will be powerful men there. I want them curious, not distracted. And I want someone else to understand the message I'm sending."

I let the implication hang.

"So it stays exactly as it is."

"Of course, Luna Hazel."

The door closed.

I sank back into the bath and let the heat and scent seep into my skin. Today had to be precise. Fia thought she had won, thought a slap and a marriage I had granted her had elevated her. She was wrong.

This wedding was not her triumph. It was my stage.

By the end of the night, everyone would remember who I was, and Cian would remember what he gave up. I smiled to myself, eyes closing as the water cooled, already rehearsing every glance, every word.

Control was waiting. I intended to take it.

Chapter 138: The Illusion of Welcome

FIA

The car rolled to a stop, and I turned my head toward the window. The Knight Estate stretched out before us like something pulled from a dream someone had too much money to abandon. Towers rose at careful intervals, their stone faces catching the afternoon light. Gardens sprawled in neat, deliberate patterns, every hedge trimmed to perfection, every fountain positioned just so. The driveway curved through it all, smooth and wide, lined with sculptures that probably cost more than most homes.

It was grand. I couldn't deny that. Maybe even grander than Cian's home, though his felt lived in, earned. This felt different. Like someone had built it to be admired from a

distance, to make visitors stop and stare and feel small. It felt big for the sake of being big. Empty despite all the beauty.

We passed through the iron gates, and the car slowed as we approached the front of the estate. Other vehicles lined the drive, sleek and polished, sentinels moving between them with practiced efficiency.

The car stopped. Cian opened his door first, stepped out, then came around to mine. He offered his hand, and I took it, letting him help me out. The dress pooled around my legs as I stood, the fabric catching the breeze. The necklace settled cold against my collarbone.

"It's been a while since I've been here," Cian said, his eyes scanning the estate. "It seems nicer. Like it has the touch of a woman now."

I glanced at him. There was something softer in his expression, something thoughtful.

"Perhaps Alpha Julius Knight did fall in love," he continued. "Maybe this is actually a union of love and not some political game he is playing like I initially thought."

His voice carried a weight I felt through the bond before I even fully understood it. Quiet guilt. Regret wrapped in hope for someone else's happiness.

"You wished our wedding had been bigger," I said.

He looked at me, and for a moment, the careful control he usually wore slipped. "I thought I was bigger than the program. I guess the goddess showed me after all."

A small smile tugged at his mouth, self deprecating and honest.

"I apologize," he said.

"I never imagined a grand wedding for myself," I replied. The words came easier than I expected. "And you must remember the circumstances behind our meeting."

He studied me, something unreadable passing through his eyes. Before he could respond, the sound of another car pulling up cut through the moment. I turned to see Aldric and Elara stepping out of their car. Aldric's movements were smooth and practiced, while Elara's were stiffer, more uncertain.

Aldric seemed at ease. I didn't like it. It was either that or he was damn good at hiding it.

He didn't look like he had any ulterior motives at the moment and that bothered me.

Cian straightened, preparing to suggest we head inside, when a voice boomed across the drive.

"Goodness, Alpha Cian, is that you?"

I turned. A man approached, older, with a round belly that pressed against his vest and a smile that stretched too wide. His hair was thinning, combed back carefully, and his eyes moved over Cian with something like delight.

"Alpha Mason," Cian said, his tone polite but flat.

"We really didn't think you would come," Mason said, stopping just short of us. "We discussed it extensively. But golly, you sure are full of surprises, my boy."

Then his eyes landed on me. They widened slightly, his smile growing.

"Who is this beauty?"

I opened my mouth, but he didn't wait.

"Who am I kidding?" He laughed, waving a hand like he'd answered his own question. "You must be the original bride."

My stomach tightened.

"We heard the horrid things your half sister put you through," he went on, his voice loud enough to carry. "It's so nice that he actually kicked that bitch to the curb and got married to the original as intended."

He turned back to Cian and winked. "She's pretty."

"See you inside," he added, already moving past us.

Cian stepped into his path, his posture rigid. "I think you should apologize to my wife, Alpha Mason."

Mason stopped, looked at him with something between confusion and amusement, then turned back to me.

"Oh, is she still traumatized by that moment?" He tilted his head. "Forgive my potty mouth then. I usually just say it as it is."

"Well..." Cian started, his voice tight.

"Just let him go, Cian," I said.

He turned to me, surprise flickering across his face.

I managed a curt smile and looked at Mason. "I apologize. My mate is very protective."

Mason's grin returned. "Oh, we know how Cian can be when he's in love."

What did he mean by that? Despite being bothered by that statement, I kept my face neutral.

Mason bowed slightly, then walked away, his laughter trailing behind him.

Cian watched him go, tension still coiled in his shoulders. He looked at me, his jaw set. "Why did you let him get off easy?"

"It's clear that nobody knows my face," I said. "Our pack wasn't that grand. So it is plausible. Rather than cause trouble and bring attention to me, why don't we just enjoy the day?"

"Others will know."

"Well," I said. "I'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

His eyes searched mine. "I don't mind defending you. And you shouldn't have to hear that shit."

"I know." I squeezed his hand gently. "Let's go in."

He glanced at Aldric and Elara, then back at me. His throat moved as he swallowed.

"Alright."

I put my hand in his, and we walked toward the entrance.

Inside, the estate opened into a grand hall that stole my breath. Vaulted ceilings stretched high above us, painted with scenes I didn't have time to study. Chandeliers hung at perfect intervals, crystal catching light and scattering it across the room in soft fragments. Pews lined the space, arranged in neat rows facing a raised platform draped in white and gold.

A sentinel approached, bowed, and gestured for us to follow. Cian's hand stayed firm around mine as we moved through the hall, past clusters of people already seated, their voices a low hum of conversation.

He led us to a section near the front, though not quite at it. The seats were cushioned, the wood polished until it gleamed. We were close when I felt it.

Eyes.

Not just one pair but many.

The whispers started soft, almost polite, but they grew. I caught fragments as they drifted toward me.

"Is that her?"

"Which one?"

"I thought she was supposed to be plain."

"Look at that necklace."

"Whose Luna is she? Cian's?"

My foot froze mid step. The dress suddenly felt too tight, the necklace too heavy. My hand tightened around Cian's, and I couldn't make myself move forward. The pews seemed impossibly far away, even though they were right there.

Cian stopped. He turned toward me, his brow furrowing slightly.

"Fia," he said, his voice low enough that only I could hear.

I couldn't respond. My throat felt tight, my chest too small for the air I was trying to pull in. The whispers kept coming, layering over each other until I couldn't pick out individual words anymore. Just sound. Just attention I didn't want and couldn't escape.

His hand moved to the small of my back, steady and warm.

"Look at me," he said.

I did. His eyes held mine, dark and certain.

"They're going to stare," he said. "They're going to talk. Let them."

"I don't..."

"I know." His thumb brushed against my back, a small, grounding movement. "But you're not alone. And you don't owe them anything."

I swallowed hard and nodded once.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then let's sit."

He moved first, his hand still at my back, guiding me forward. I forced my feet to follow, one step, then another. The whispers didn't stop, but they started to fade into the background as I focused on the feeling of his hand, the sound of his breathing beside me.

We reached the pew. He waited until I sat, then settled beside me, close enough that our shoulders touched. Aldric and Elara took seats behind us.

Cian leaned in slightly. "You're doing fine."

"I don't feel fine."

"You look it," he said. "That's what matters here."

I wanted to argue, but I didn't have the energy. So I sat there, hands folded in my lap, the aquamarine stones cool against my skin, and tried to remember how to breathe like a person who belonged.

No data found.

Chapter 139: What is Fate

FIA

I held Cian's hand as the ceremony began.

The grand hall quieted, conversations dropping to whispers and then to nothing at all. Everyone turned toward the back where the procession would start. I watched the doors, trying to focus on what was about to happen instead of the eyes I could still feel on me.

Music swelled from somewhere I couldn't see. Not the regular organ music like I'd heard about in most weddings, but something stringed and ancient. Not that I knew much considering I had only attended two weddings. And I ended up being the bride in the second one.

It filled the space between the vaulted ceilings and made the chandeliers seem to shimmer more brightly.

The doors opened.

A woman entered first, dressed in flowing robes the color of cream and gold. Her hair was long and looked like it was silver, though her face didn't look old. She carried herself like someone who had walked this path a thousand times before. A spiritual healer. That's what Cian had called them when he explained how these ceremonies worked.

Similar to the one who had blessed our union.

Behind her came the bridal party. Bridesmaids in coordinated gowns, groomsmen in dark suits. They processed down the aisle with measured steps, taking their places on the platform. Then came Alpha Julius Knight himself.

He was tall, broad shouldered, his presence commanding even from this distance. His suit was impeccably tailored, his expression serious but not cold. He walked alone, no one giving him away, and took his position at the front. His hands clasped in front of him, and I saw them flex once before going still.

The music shifted and this was a sign that everyone was supposed to stand.

They did and so I did I.

That was precisely when the bride appeared as well.

She was beautiful in the way that made you understand why people wrote poems about weddings. Her dress was ivory with delicate beading that caught the light with every movement. A veil covered her face, long and gossamer thin. She walked slowly, deliberately, her father at her side.

They reached the platform. Her father kissed her cheek through the veil, then placed her hand in Alpha Julius's. The gesture felt significant, final. Then he stepped back and took his seat.

The healer raised her hands, and everyone sat.

"We gather today," she began, her voice carrying easily through the hall, "to witness the joining of two souls. Not by the hand of fate, but by choice. By will. By the courage it takes to build something lasting."

I glanced at Cian. His expression was unreadable, but his thumb traced a small circle against my palm.

The healer continued, speaking about partnership and commitment, about the strength required to choose someone every day. Her words were measured, practiced, but not empty. She believed what she was saying.

Then she gestured for the couple to step forward.

"We call upon the goddess," the healer said. "We ask for her blessing on this union."

An attendant came forward carrying a length of red cloth. The healer took it, then reached for the couple's hands. She bound their wrists together, the red

fabric wrapping around and around until it was secure. Her lips moved in words too quiet to hear, some prayer or invocation I couldn't make out.

The hall went silent. Completely, utterly silent.

I felt it then. The weight of anticipation pressing down on everyone in the room. People leaned forward slightly in their seats. Some clasped their hands together. Others held their breath.

Cian shifted beside me.

"This is usually the awkward part," he murmured, his voice barely audible.

I turned to look at him.

"Most people are afraid of this," he continued. "That the goddess doesn't see both of them as a good fit."

I blinked. "What happens if she doesn't bless it?"

"A lot of marriage unions end right here," he said. "Because one party believes their soulmate is still out there. That the goddess has someone better waiting for them."

I looked around. Everyone really was watching with bated breath. Eyes fixed on the couple, bodies tense, waiting for some sign I didn't know how to recognize.

It felt strange to me. Foreign. I had been blessed with a mate bond. The goddess had chosen Milo for me, and when that fell apart, she had given me a second chance mate. She has given me Cian. I had never known what the alternative felt like. Never had to wonder if I was making the right choice or if someone better was waiting somewhere in the world.

Though, Cian has been more of an acquired taste considering how much I hated his guts originally.

The seconds stretched.

The healer's hands remained on the bound wrists, her eyes closed, her face serene.

Nothing happened.

The silence grew heavier.

Then Alpha Julius spoke.

"I don't care what the goddess believes."

The words cut through the tension like a blade. Heads turned. Whispers started and stopped just as quickly.

He looked at his bride, his expression open in a way I hadn't expected from someone with his standing and reputation.

"I know you," he said, his voice steady and sure. "If humans can make this work, I want to make it work with you."

He reached up and lifted her veil slowly, carefully, like he was unwrapping something precious. Her face was revealed. She was smiling, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"I love you," he said.

She nodded, her smile widening. "I love you too."

The healer stepped back, a small smile on her own face. The red cloth remained bound around their wrists as Alpha Julius leaned in and kissed his bride. The hall erupted in applause, the tension breaking all at once into something warmer, something celebratory.

I found it romantic. The defiance of it. The choice.

I turned to say something to Cian when I realized the seat behind us was empty.

Aldric was gone.

Fear rushed through me, cold and immediate. I shoved the bond into a bubble before Cian could feel it, before it could bleed through and make him ask questions I didn't have time to answer. My heart hammered in my chest. Where had he gone? When had he left?

I looked at Elara. She met my gaze with a bored expression, her posture relaxed, completely unconcerned. She didn't say anything. She just looked at me like I was interrupting her day.

I wanted to ask so bad. But that would alert Cian.

I turned back to Cian quickly, forcing my face into something neutral.

"I need to use the toilet real quick," I said.

He looked at me, concern flickering across his features. "Should I come with you?"

"No." I squeezed his hand once. "I'll be quick."

He hesitated, then nodded.

I stood, smoothing my dress, and made my way toward the aisle. People were still clapping, still watching the newlyweds as they prepared to process back down the aisle. I moved carefully, trying not to draw attention, trying not to rush even though everything in me wanted to run.

That's when I saw it.

A flash of pink in the back row.

My eyes found her before I could stop myself. Hazel sat there, perfectly composed in a dress that wasn't her usual style. Mostly because it has been the dress I had picked.

I had been right to go with the other gown. And as usual... Hazel could not help herself. I bet she was surprised to see me in something vastly different.

She didn't show it though. When her eyes met mine.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

Then she leaned into the shoulders of the man beside her to spite me. Our father sat there, his attention fixed entirely on the couple at the front. He smiled, clapped along with everyone else, his expression warm in a way I hadn't seen in years. He looked happy. Proud, even, to be here at this grand event.

He didn't look at me. He didn't feel me. He didn't even glance in my direction. Not even once.

But his wife sure did and the scorn she had on. She was repulsed by me.

The family looked perfect from where I stood. Small and complete. Father, mother and daughter, sitting together like they belonged nowhere else.

A sting shot through my chest. It was sharp and frankly unexpected. Because why did I care so much?

Of course he didn't miss me. Not one bit. Why would he? He had the perfect daughter who could commit no sins right there beside him.

I tore my eyes away before the tears could fall. I couldn't think about this. Not now. Not when Aldric was somewhere in this estate doing goddess knows what.

I needed to move. I needed to find him before whatever he was planning came to pass.

I turned and headed for the exit, my hands trembling as I pushed through the doors.

Chapter 140: Two steps ahead 1

FIA

I pulled out my phone the moment I cleared the doors, my fingers fumbling with the screen as I walked. The hallway stretched ahead of me, long and lined with sentinels of the Knight Estate in their formal dress uniforms. They stood at intervals, backs straight, eyes forward. Professional.

I hit Maren's contact and pressed the phone to my ear. It rang once. Twice.

A sentinel near the next doorway noticed me. He turned slightly, his expression polite but alert.

"Miss, are you lost?"

I shook my head, still waiting for Maren to pick up. "Did you see a man pass through here? Clean shaven, in his forties or fifties?"

The sentinel nodded. "Yes, miss. A gentleman went that direction." He gestured down the hall to the left.

"Thank you."

The line clicked. "Fia?" Maren's voice came through, steady but questioning. "Did something happen?"

I started walking in the direction the sentinel had pointed, my heels clicking against the polished floor. "No. Did something happen on your end?"

"No. Everything's quiet here. The witch hasn't even arrived."

"Good." I turned a corner, scanning the corridor ahead. Empty. "But I'm sure something might happen because Alpha Aldric just left the wedding procession. Something is off. So keep watch. Support Beta Ronan."

"Of course."

I ended the call and kept moving. The corridors branched in different directions, each one looking nearly identical to the last. All I saw were the high ceilings, the expensive artwork, more sentinels stationed at regular intervals. I didn't know this estate well enough to guess where someone might go if they wanted privacy. Or if they wanted to do something they shouldn't.

I turned another corner. Nothing. There was another hallway and plenty set of doors. My chest felt tight. Where the hell had he gone?

I was about to approach another sentinel when movement caught my eye through one of the tall windows. Outside. In the courtyard.

I changed direction, heading for the nearest exit. The door opened onto a stone terrace that led down to a manicured garden area. Lanterns hung from posts, casting warm light over the pathways. And there, not too far away, stood Aldric.

He had a cigarette between his fingers, the ember glowing orange as he took a drag. He looked relaxed. Casual. Like he'd just stepped out for some air during a boring party.

When he saw me, his lips curved into a smile around the cigarette.

"You look like a frightened rat," he said.

I kept my expression neutral as I walked toward him, my shoes crunching softly on the gravel path. He took another puff, letting the smoke curl upward into the air.

"Were you looking for me?" he asked.

I stopped a few feet away from him. "I didn't know you smoked."

He exhaled slowly. "So I owe you that?"

"What are you up to?"

He looked at me for a long moment, the cigarette dangling between his fingers. "Maybe I called the witch I promised Cian I would get. Turns out she's not answering." He tapped ash onto the ground. "I hope the rumors that have been going on in the warlock community about my nephew didn't dispel her from offering us her hand."

He tilted his head. "Why are you here?"

His smile widened as he spoke.

I didn't answer. I couldn't. Every response that came to mind felt like a trap.

"You don't need to answer," he continued. His tone shifted, mocking now, high pitched in a way that made my skin crawl. "I guess I know why you are here. What is he planning? What is that evil man up to? I have to stop him. I'm special. I need Cian to see that. I need to stay useful. So he doesn't get bored. There was only so much my cunt can offer."

The words hit me like ice water. Not because they were accurate, but because of how casually cruel they were. How easily he twisted everything into something ugly.

My hand moved before I could think about it. The slap connected with his cheek, the sound sharp in the quiet courtyard.

"Cian will see you for who you are regardless," I said. "All I need is time."

He dropped the cigarette and ground it under his shoe. The movement was deliberate. Slow.

"You slap like what you are," he said.

Then he smiled again, wider this time.

"I don't plan to kill my sister in law, Fia. If anything, I want Morrigan to live. And she will. So get a grip. Whatever game you think it is, it's not that."

He leaned in closer. Close enough that I could smell the tobacco on his breath.

"What I mean to say is you're no threat to me."

My jaw clenched. "You'd be surprised."

"Oh really? Is it because you added a new chess piece?"

And when he said that, his smile turned sharp. Knowing.

Then he spoke again, and his voice changed. It became mine. My exact tone, my exact inflection.

"When the Grand Luna coded, it was an intentional act. Alpha Aldric poisoned her again."

My blood went cold. The words I'd said to Beta Ronan. In private. In what I thought was a secure location.

Aldric watched my face change. Watched the realization hit me like a physical blow.

"I have eyes and ears everywhere, Omega."

My phone... I'd had my phone with me when I spoke to Ronan. Had he somehow planted something on it? Or was there someone else? Someone else who was at the training yard reporting back to him?

He reached out and grabbed my phone from my trembling hand before I could react. He glanced at the screen, then back at me.

"You're not recording," he said. "You're learning quick."

He held the phone a moment longer, his thumb moving across the screen like he was checking for something. Then he handed it back to me.

"I do like this idea of resistance that you think you have," he said. His voice was conversational now. Almost friendly. "But you stand no chance if you're not willing to go far and down, dragging yourself along in the madness."

He straightened, adjusting his cufflinks.

"From a mad man to you."

My throat felt dry. I couldn't seem to form words. I couldn't seem to do anything but stand there and take the phone he offered back to me.

"The wedding itself will be nearing its end now," he said. "The ballroom is where things get fun. Do you want to see?"

He walked past me. His shoulder brushed mine, the contact brief but deliberate. A reminder that he could get that close. That he could touch me if he wanted to.

Then he was gone, his footsteps fading as he headed back toward the estate.

I stood frozen in the courtyard. The lanterns swayed slightly in the breeze. The sounds of new celebration drifted from somewhere inside, muffled and distant. Music. Laughter. The clinking of glasses.

My hands shook. I looked down at my phone, the screen dark and innocent in my palm. How long had he been listening? What else had he heard? Every conversation I'd had with Ronan, with Maren, with anyone I'd tried to trust, replayed in my mind. Had he known everything from the start? Had this all been some elaborate game to him?

I wanted to scream. To throw the phone as far as I could and run. But I couldn't. Because if Aldric knew everything, then he was already several moves ahead. And if I showed panic now, if I broke, he would use that too. He would know I was no threat to him at all.

I forced myself to take a breath. Then another.

The wedding was ending. People would be moving to the ballroom soon for the reception. Cian would notice if I didn't come back. He would be worried.

I had to go.