

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 141: Two Steps ahead 2 -

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CIAN

The ceremony ended in applause that filled the grand hall and seemed to press against my ears. I stayed where I was, watching Julius kiss his bride, watching the relief ripple through the crowd like something heavy had finally been set down. The red cloth still bound their wrists together when they turned to face everyone, and the healer stepped back with that calm, knowing smile spiritual people always wore, like they had seen something the rest of us hadn't.

People started to stand. The quiet formality cracked almost immediately, replaced by layered conversations and laughter as the tension bled out of the room. The reception would be in the ballroom. I knew that much from the invitation. But first I needed to find Fia.

I turned toward the seats where she had been sitting.

She wasn't there.

That in itself wasn't strange, not at first. Ceremonies ran long. People stepped out. But something in my chest tightened anyway, a familiar pull of unease. I reached for the bond without thinking and hit a wall so solid it made me suck in a breath.

Not severed. Not damaged.

Shielded.

Fia was doing it deliberately, shutting me out. She only did that when she didn't want me to feel what she was feeling, when she was scared or upset or doing something she already knew I would object to. My jaw clenched before I could stop it.

Elara was beside me, smoothing down her dress as she prepared to leave, her expression carefully neutral. That was when it clicked that someone else was missing too.

"Where's Uncle Aldric?" I asked.

She glanced toward his empty seat and frowned lightly. "I'm not sure. Father stepped out for a bit."

Of course he did. Aldric disappearing and Fia shielding herself at the same time felt far too neat to be coincidence.

"I'll go find them," I said.

Elara nodded. "Okay."

I moved into the aisle, threading my way through people who were already heading for the exits. The crowd had thickened, bodies pressing close, groups stopping mid walk to chat as if the rest of us didn't exist. I had to shoulder past more than one knot of guests, irritation simmering just beneath my skin.

I was almost at the doors when someone bumped into me hard enough to knock me back a step.

"Cian!"

I looked up and found Alpha Julius grinning at me like we were old friends reunited after years apart. Before I could react, he pulled me into a hug, solid and confident, the kind you gave people you trusted. Not rivals. Not men who had opposed you at every turn once you took your father's seat.

I patted his back awkwardly, caught off guard by the familiarity.

"I didn't think you'd come," Julius said when he pulled back, his smile still wide. "Not after how rocky things have been between us."

"I was surprised by the invitation," I said, managing a polite smile.

"Well, I'm glad you did."

I couldn't tell if he meant it. Julius had always been good at this, sounding sincere while keeping his real thoughts carefully out of reach. Every word could be taken at face value or pulled apart for hidden intent. I hated that nothing was ever simple, that even moments like this felt like games played several moves ahead.

But this was the life I had stepped into. There was no pretending otherwise.

"I'm sure we have a lot to talk about," I said. "Since you invited me."

"I'm just extending a hand of friendship."

He hugged me again, shorter this time, then clapped my shoulder and moved on with an easy, satisfied air. I stood there longer than I meant to, watching him disappear into the crowd, trying to reconcile what I'd just seen with everything I knew about him. Part of me had expected something like it, though probably more hollow, more performative.

Seeing it play out so smoothly left a bad taste in my mouth.

I shook it off and headed for the doors again.

That was when I ran straight into them.

Alpha Joseph Hughes of Silvercreek stood near the entrance with his Luna, both of them relaxed, clearly enjoying the celebration. Fia's father looked genuinely pleased, his smile open and unguarded.

"Alpha Cian," he said. "It's good to see you."

"Alpha Joseph." The smile I gave him came automatically, the product of years spent navigating pack politics.

Movement behind Luna Isobel caught my attention. Hazel stepped forward, her pink dress bright even among the finery around us. She dipped into a slight bow.

"Alpha Cian."

I nodded once in acknowledgment.

"How are the early days of marriage treating you?" Joseph asked. It was harmless small talk, the kind meant to probe without appearing to.

"Great, actually."

The reaction was subtle but unmistakable. Hazel's expression flickered, Luna Isobel's too, surprise flashing across their faces before both smoothed it away. Joseph alone seemed unaffected, his smile steady, as if he truly hadn't expected anything else.

"I need to find Fia," I said. "I'll see you at the after party."

Hazel stepped forward again. "Is something wrong? I can come with you."

Luna Isobel's hand snapped out and caught her daughter's arm, pulling her back with practiced ease. She smiled at me, all polished warmth and false apology.

"I'm sorry about my daughter. She just cares so deeply about her sister."

I looked at Luna Isobel, then at Hazel. The concern on Hazel's face almost looked real. Almost.

"Yeah," I said, letting just enough edge into my voice. "I can see that."

I didn't wait for a reply.

"See you later," I said, and walked away.

I pushed through the doors and into the hallway. The crowd thinned out here, people flowing in different directions toward the ballroom. I forced my way through groups of chatting guests until I found a sentinel standing near one of the side corridors.

"Did you see a pretty petite woman come by?" I asked. "Dressed in silver and midnight blue?"

He nodded. "Yes, Alpha. She went that way." He pointed down the hallway to my right.

I started walking. My phone chimed in my pocket. I pulled it out and saw Ronan's message.

'No witch has arrived yet. Did she get cold feet?'

I stared at the words. The witch. The one Aldric had promised he could bring in to help my mother. The one who was supposed to be our last real hope.

I shoved the phone back in my pocket and started moving faster. Half running through corridors that all looked the same until I almost slammed straight into someone.

"Woah, watch it there, nephew."

It was uncle Aldric.

"Sorry," I said automatically. "I wasn't looking."

"Neither was I." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "My mind was elsewhere."

I took a deep breath, trying to center myself. "Ronan says the witch hasn't arrived yet."

Aldric sighed. The sound was heavy, disappointed. "That's why I went out. I was trying to reach her."

"And?"

"The witch heard a rumor. She believes you unnecessarily killed a witch, and from what I have gotten... it seems most magic practitioners formed a coalition of sorts. To prevent you from getting aid for your mother."

The words hit me like cold water. A coalition. Against me. Because of something I hadn't even done. Something that they'd twisted into something unforgivable.

"I'm sorry I failed you, my boy."

He reached out to hug me but I shrugged him off. I couldn't handle that right now. Couldn't handle false comfort when everything was falling apart.

"You promised me, uncle."

"I know. I know. I'm so sorry."

"Sorry doesn't fix my mother!"

My voice came out louder than I meant it to. Several heads turned in our direction. I took deeper breaths, trying to pull myself together. Trying not to break down in the middle of a hallway at someone else's wedding.

"I just want her awake," I said. Quieter this time.

"Me too."

"I made a contingency provision," Aldric continued, "but I didn't want to rely on it because I know how it could be for you."

But I didn't even want to hear it anymore.

"You should stop, uncle."

"What?"

I rubbed at my eyes. They felt hot. Wet. "I think I'll do it my way."

"Don't be brash. The magic practitioners already have the wrong kind of beef with you. To actively go against them—"

"I don't give a shit." The words came out harsh. Final. "As long as my mother wakes, I don't care what enemies I make."

"Cian."

I walked off before he could say anything else. Before I said something I couldn't take back. My mother was dying and everyone kept telling me to be careful, to be strategic, to think about the political implications. But none of that mattered if she never woke up. None of it mattered if I lost her.

I caught her scent before I saw her.

Fia.

I looked up. My eyes were misty, the hallway slightly blurred, but I could still make out her shape. That dress. The way she held herself.

She saw me. Her expression changed immediately.

"Cian, are you alright?"

I crossed the distance between us and pulled her into my arms. Held her tight against me like she was the only solid thing in a world that wouldn't stop shifting under my feet.

She didn't ask questions. She just wrapped her arms around me and held on.

Chapter 142: Two steps ahead 3

FIA

I watched Cian's face crumble before he could catch it, and something in my chest twisted hard. His eyes were glassy. Red-rimmed. The kind of look that came from holding everything in too long until your body betrayed you anyway.

"Cian, are you alright?"

He crossed the space between us in two strides and pulled me against him. His arms locked around me, tight enough that I could feel the tremor running through his shoulders. I wrapped my arms around his back and held on, not saying anything, not asking for anything. I just had to be there while he fell apart in the only way he'd allow himself to.

Over his shoulder, I caught movement. Aldric walked past us, and when our eyes met, his expression shifted. I saw something smug and cunningly knowing. It was that same sharp smile from the courtyard. He kept walking, disappearing around the corner without a word.

My blood went cold, but I kept my grip steady on Cian.

"The witch bailed on us," Cian said into my hair. His voice was rough and scraped raw.

I pulled back just enough to look at him. "Maybe try getting a witch on your own. It can't be that hard."

He had to see he didn't need to rely on Aldric. I wanted him to see the results that would come out from it if he just tried.

But Cian sighed.

"I asked my uncle for help because a lot of them seem to believe I killed Ophelia Cottonwood." He drew in another breath that sounded painful. "But they've fortified their edges. Anyone connected to me will fail."

The weight of it settled between us. Every door closing. Every ally turning away. And Aldric's voice in the courtyard echoed in my head.

I have eyes and ears everywhere, Omega.

Cian's hands moved to my shoulders, and he stepped back slightly to look at me. His jaw was tight. "Let's just enjoy today. Let's go to the ballroom, drink our fill, dance, forget our worries."

The words sounded hollow... desperate. I could feel the disappointment radiating off him in waves, mixing with something darker. Rage, maybe. Or hopelessness dressed up as the defiance he wore so well.

"Cian, you don't have to keep up appearances." I kept my voice gentle. "We can just go. We can leave."

"I'm fine."

"You're not."

His eyes locked onto mine. "I am now. You're here."

"That's not enough." I shook my head. "It's okay that you're disappointed. It is okay that you are at wits end. You don't have to bottle it or pretend to be okay."

"I swear I'm okay now." But his voice cracked on the words.

"You need an outlet."

"Yeah. Dancing."

He grabbed my hand before I could argue, his fingers threading through mine. "Let's go."

I tried to pull back, but his grip tightened. Not painfully. No, he wouldn't. But it was insistent. "Even if we pretend, we cannot run away from reality, Cian. This doesn't mean escape."

"I know and I plan to do things my way. The way I should have once those unsavoury rumors started being spread by Gabriel's machinations."

The way he said it made my stomach drop. There was something final in those words. Something that sounded like a decision already made.

"What do you mean by that?"

He sighed and started walking, tugging me along. "Don't worry about it."

"Cian—"

But he was already moving faster, half running toward the ballroom. I let him pull me because I could tell he needed me. Because stopping him now would just make everything worse. Because sometimes all you could do was stay close and hope they didn't destroy themselves in the process.

Music spilled out into the hallway before we even reached the doors. Live instruments. Something classical and bright. The kind of music meant for celebration, for joy. It felt wrong.

We stepped inside, and the space opened up around us. High ceilings. Crystal chandeliers throwing fractured light across the polished floor. People everywhere, dressed in their finest, glasses in hand, laughter echoing off the walls.

Cian waved at a bartender who was weaving through the crowd with a tray. The man came over immediately, and Cian grabbed two glasses of something amber and strong-looking. He handed one to me and downed his in three long swallows.

I held mine without drinking, while I watched him. I watched the way his throat worked. The way his eyes squeezed shut for just a second.

"Are you drinking?" he asked.

"I don't want to."

He reached over and took the glass from my hand. Before I could stop him, before I could say anything, he tilted his head back and drank that one too. Both empty glasses went back on the tray with a clink that sounded too loud.

He laughed. It came out wild and goddamn unhinged. A new song started, something faster, and he grabbed my hand again.

"Oh, let's dance."

I followed him onto the floor because refusing felt worse. Because I could see the cracks spreading through him, and maybe this was the only way he knew how to hold himself together. Maybe dancing was somehow better than breaking.

Other couples moved around us. Julius and his new bride swept past, her dress a waterfall of fabric, his hand steady at her waist. They looked happy. Content. Like people who had everything figured out.

Cian's hand found my waist, and I placed mine on his shoulder. We started moving, but his steps were too sharp. Too fast. Like he was trying to outrun something that was following him anyway.

But then the music shifted and the new number came as something slow and softer, something sweeping and melancholy, Cian's movements gentled with it. His grip on my waist relaxed. His shoulders dropped just slightly.

I moved closer, closing the space between us until I could feel his heartbeat against my chest.

"You're trying your best," I said quietly.

"My best is not enough."

"Your pack has kept power even after you took over. If you are a horrible leader, it would have fallen apart a long time ago."

He laughed, but there was no humor in it. "I come to learn every day that must be because of how strong my father was."

"That's not fair to yourself."

"Perhaps not." His voice went quieter. "But my mother never got poisoned while he was alive. Everyone that was for us was for us."

The words hit me harder than they should have. Because he was certain that he was right. Because in his eyes, everything had fallen apart the moment his father died, and Cian had been left holding pieces he didn't know how to put back together.

"I don't know how to fix this for you," I admitted.

"Well, you aren't a fixer." He pulled me a fraction closer. "You're you. And your presence and concern is more than enough. I'll be fine tomorrow. I just need time."

I could feel him starting to shield. That familiar pull at the bond, the way he tried to close himself off when he was planning something he didn't want me to know about.

"You almost shielded right then." I looked up at him. "You didn't tell me before. But I have to ask again. What do you plan to do?"

His eyes met mine, and for just a second, something mischievous flickered there. Something that looked almost like the Cian I knew before everything got so heavy.

Then his gaze shifted past me. To something over my shoulder.

Everything changed in a millisecond.

It was like watching ice form over water. Instant and complete. Cian froze mid-step, his hand going rigid at my waist. His face drained of color. His eyes went wide with shock so profound it looked physical.

I turned my head, following his stare.

I saw Blonde hair.

Long and perfectly styled, catching the light from the chandeliers. And eyes... Cornflower blue irises that are the kind of blue that looked like summer sky, clear and bright and impossible to look away from.

The woman stood near the edge of the dance floor. She was beautiful. The kind of beautiful that made everything around her seem duller by comparison. Her dress was white, simple but elegant, and she wore it like she knew exactly what she looked like.

I recognized her.

She was looking directly at Cian.

His hand fell away from my waist. He stepped back, still staring, his mouth slightly open.

I'd never seen him look at anyone like that before.

The music kept playing around us. Other couples kept dancing. But we'd stopped completely, standing frozen in the middle of the floor while everything else moved on.

"Cian?" My voice came out smaller than I meant it to.

He didn't answer. Didn't even seem to hear me. His entire world had narrowed to that woman with the blonde hair and those impossible blue eyes.

And she was smiling at him. A small, knowing smile. Like she'd been waiting for this exact moment. Like she'd known exactly what would happen when she walked into this room.

My hands felt cold. My chest felt tight. I wanted to reach for the bond, to feel what he was feeling, but I already knew. I could see it written across his face clear as daylight.

Recognition. Disbelief. Something deeper that I didn't want to name.

Someone bumped into us, muttering an apology as they danced past. Cian didn't move. Didn't blink. Just stood there staring like he'd seen a ghost.

But it was worse than that. This was something worse after all. This was his old flame.

Chapter 143: To those who knew me 1

MADELINE

I hated this.

The thought repeated itself like a mantra while I stood at the edge of the ballroom. My fingers wrapped around the stem of an empty champagne glass. The crystal felt fragile. Breakable. Like everything else in my life right now.

I hated that Cian was the last person I wanted to do this to. The absolute last person who deserved another manipulation. Another lie dressed up as something it wasn't.

But Aldric had been clear. Crystal clear in that way he had where his words felt like threats even when he was smiling.

Come late. While I play around with Cian's head.

The text sat in my phone like a ticking bomb. I'd read it fifty times since arriving at the Knight Estate. Each time it made my stomach turn over.

I'd chosen white. Something simple. A slip dress that caught the light when I moved but didn't scream for attention. Not that it mattered. I was going to be a sore sight no matter what I wore. A ghost returning to haunt someone who'd tried so hard to bury me.

I didn't know how Aldric had gotten Julius Knight to invite me to a mostly werewolf gathering. I didn't even want to know. He had his ways. His connections. His ability to twist situations until they bent exactly how he needed them to.

Another text came through while I stood there. My phone buzzed in my clutch.

Be in place at the ballroom. My job is done. Do yours.

I stared at the words until they blurred. Disgust rose in my throat like bile. This was what my life had become. Taking orders from a man who treated people like chess pieces. Who found joy in breaking things that were already cracked.

A waiter passed nearby. I flagged him down with a sharp gesture.

"Three glasses. Whatever's strongest."

He looked surprised but obliged. Set three glasses of amber liquid on his tray and handed them over one by one. I didn't bother to ask what they were. I didn't care. I just drank.

The first one burned going down. Good. The second one numbed the edges. The third one settled somewhere in my chest like a weight.

The goal tonight was simple. Painfully simple.

The witch had disappointed and backed out. Left Cian desperate and alone with his dying mother and no one to help him. So I would be the savior. I would offer my hand. Use this opening to slide back into his life like I'd never left. Like I hadn't been the one to carve the wounds in the first place.

And I would destabilize his new forming relationship with the Omega. The girl he'd bonded to. The one Aldric seemed obsessed with destroying.

Win win. That's what Aldric had said. Like this was a game with prizes instead of people bleeding out on the board.

But I knew better. I didn't like the girl. I knew Cian must have hated that girl's guts for a while. The bond was forced upon him. Unnatural. Something thrust upon him when he was vulnerable. She had entrapped him. She was not a good person. But at this point, Aldric's obsession with destroying whatever was between them seemed excessive. Cruel for cruelty's sake.

My thoughts scattered when the ballroom doors opened.

Cian walked in.

My entire body went rigid. Every muscle locked into place. I forgot how to breathe for a second. Maybe longer.

The Omega was with him. His hand wrapped around hers. They moved together like they'd done this before. Like it was natural.

I fixated on her first. Couldn't help it. I'd expected to stare at the epitome of a rebound. A *deja vu*. Some blonde girl with blue eyes who looked enough like me to be a placeholder. A cheap copy he could pretend was the original.

But this girl looked nothing like me.

Nothing.

She was petite in a way that was almost angelic. Delicate. Her face had a youthful quality that made her seem younger than she probably was. And her eyes and hair were as black as a moonless night. Dark where I was light. Small where I was tall.

My stomach knotted.

I forced myself to look at Cian then. Really look at him.

My heart went ablaze. Just caught fire in my chest like someone had struck a match against my ribs.

He looked as beautiful as ever. More beautiful... I dared say. It was like staring at a radiant sun. The kind that hurt to look at directly but you couldn't turn away. His dark hair was styled perfectly. His suit fit him like it had been made for his body specifically. And his face. Goddess, his face still did things to me that I couldn't name.

I couldn't help but smile. The expression came unbidden. Natural. Like my face remembered what to do when it saw him even if my brain knew better.

I forgot everything for a moment. Forgot why I was here. Forgot the white dress and the plan and Aldric's texts sitting in my phone like poison. I just stood there and looked at Cian and felt my chest ache with wanting something I'd thrown away.

It would have stayed that way if I hadn't seen his face more clearly.

The smile died.

Aldric had done something alright. Something terrible.

Cian didn't look like he used to. The light in his eyes was dimmer. The set of his shoulders was wrong. Tense. Like he was carrying weight that kept getting heavier and no one was helping him hold it. He looked like the life had been constantly sucked out of him. Day after day. Drop by drop.

Pity hit me hard. Sharp and unexpected. I'd had a hand in this. In breaking him down. In making him look like a shadow of who he'd been when I first fell in love with him.

But I was going to fix it. I had to believe that. Had to hope to Hekate that I could fix it. That whatever I did next would somehow make things better instead of worse.

Chapter 144: To those who knew me 2

MADELIN

They started dancing. His hand found her waist. Her hand settled on his shoulder. They moved together to music I couldn't hear over the pounding in my ears.

Jealousy took over.

It came fast and vicious. Wrapped around my throat and squeezed. I watched the way he looked at her. The way his body curved toward hers like she was gravity and he couldn't help but fall. This wasn't the look of someone forced into a bond they hated. This was something else. Something that made my chest hurt worse than the pity had.

"Look at them."

I nearly jumped. Aldric had appeared beside me like he'd materialized from thin air. I hadn't heard him approach. Hadn't sensed him at all.

"Does it not disgust you?" His voice was conversational. Pleasant. Like we were discussing the weather.

I looked at him. Really looked. Tried to find something humane in his expression. But I found nothing.

"Come to rile me up?"

"I have come to push you." He smiled. That sharp predatory smile that made him look more wolf than man. "Bury the bitch."

Then he walked away. Winked over his shoulder like this was all very amusing. Like ruining lives was his favorite hobby.

I looked back at Cian and the Omega. They were talking now. Dancing slower. Their heads bent close together. Intimate in a way that made my stomach twist.

I wondered if Cian had moved on. If I was still stuck on what once was while he'd already found something new. Something better. Something that didn't come with the weight of everything we'd destroyed together.

The thought made me want to down three more drinks. Made me want to leave. To text Aldric and tell him to find someone else for his games. But that wasn't an option. I was stuck here. Stuck with holding hands with that monster if I wanted to keep my family safe.

But then Cian's eyes found mine.

In the crowd of multitudes, he fished me out. His gaze locked onto my face like a heat seeking missile. And his body froze. Went completely still in the middle of the dance floor while everything around him kept moving.

It eased my soul. Goddess help me, it did. Seeing I still had that effect on him. That I could still make him stop breathing with just my presence.

He hasn't moved on. The realization hit me hard. We were both stuck. Both trapped in what once was. Both unable to let go even when letting go was the only thing that made sense.

My eyes wandered to the Omega. She'd noticed him staring. She had noticed me and her head turned and those dark eyes found my face. Studied me. Perhaps even tried to figure out who I was and why I'd made her mate freeze like he'd seen a ghost.

I bit back a smile and forced my expression to stay neutral, soft and mysterious.

Then I turned and headed away from the ballroom. My heels clicked against the polished floor. Steady. Measured. Not too fast. Not like I was running.

This was rehearsed. Practiced. Aldric had been specific about this part too. Leave first. Make him chase you. Make him choose to follow.

I heard footsteps behind me. Heavier and much faster.

Cian was following.

My heart hammered against my ribs. Part of me wanted to run. To disappear before he caught up. Before I had to look him in the face and pretend I was here to help when really I was here to partly hurt him all over again.

But I kept walking. Kept my pace steady. Led him away from the ballroom and the music and the Omega who was probably standing there wondering what the hell just happened.

The hallway opened up ahead of me. Quieter. More private. Fewer people.

I could feel him behind me. I could sense his presence like a physical thing pressing against my back. We never had a match of faith. But some things didn't need a bond. Some things were just written into your body until they became permanent.

I stopped and turned around slowly.

Cian stood there. Maybe ten feet away. His chest was rising and falling too fast. His hands were clenched at his sides. And his face. His face was a war between anger and relief and something that looked like pain.

"Hi," I said. My voice came out softer than I meant it to. "I did not expect to see you here."

The words felt inadequate. Stupid. What do you say to someone you destroyed? Someone you loved and left and hurt in ways that don't have names?

He didn't respond. He just stood there staring at me like he was trying to figure out if I was real. If I was really standing in front of him or if this was some cruel trick his mind was playing.

I took a step toward him. Then another. My heart pounded so hard I thought he might hear it.

"My father got your message" I continued. Kept my voice gentle. Concerned. "How are you and how is your mother?"

Cian's jaw worked. His throat moved like he was trying to swallow words that wouldn't go down.

"Madeline." My name came out rough. Raw. Like saying it hurt.

"I know." I stopped a few feet away from him. Close enough to see the gold flecks in his eyes. Close enough to smell his cologne. "I know I'm probably the last person you want to see right now."

"What are you doing here?"

"Julius invited me." Another lie. Easier this time. "I didn't know you'd be here. But when I saw you..." I let my voice trail off. Let him fill in the blanks with whatever he needed to hear.

His hands unclenched. Then clenched again. "You blocked my number."

"I had to."

"Why?"

Because Aldric told me to. Because I had to make you desperate. Because every good thing in my life has been poisoned by choices my father made years ago.

"It was complicated," I said instead.

"Complicated." He laughed. The sound was harsh. Broken. "What the fuck does that mean?"

Chapter 145: A Spectacle

FIA

I stared at Cian's face as the color drained from it completely. His expression looked like someone had punched all the air from his lungs and left him gasping.

"What is she doing here?" The words came out strangled. Rough.

I forced myself to look at the blonde woman again. Our eyes met this time. Cornflower blue locked onto mine for a heartbeat. Two heartbeats. Then she looked away and started walking, her white dress catching the light as she moved toward the hallway.

"Cian... I..." My throat felt tight.

"Fia." He turned back to me. His eyes were wide. Apologetic. Torn. "I..."

"I understand." The words came out easier than I expected. Maybe because some part of me did understand. Maybe because I could see the way his entire body was pulled toward that hallway like an invisible string was wrapped around his chest.

He swallowed hard. "No. I shouldn't."

"You should." I kept my voice steady even though my hands wanted to shake. "You clearly haven't gotten closure. Go."

His jaw worked. He looked at me like he was searching for permission he'd already been given. Like he was hoping I'd take it back.

But I didn't.

He turned and walked away. His steps were quick at first, then faster. Almost running. Chasing after the ghost that had just materialized in the middle of our dance.

I stood there on the dance floor while couples moved around me. The music kept playing. Something bright and cheerful that felt wrong against the hollow aching in my chest.

Had I made a mistake?

The thought hit me hard. I should have told him to stay. I should have asked him to choose me instead of whatever unfinished business lived in that hallway. Because the look in his eyes when he saw her. The hurt. The longing. It was still there. Raw and bleeding and so fucking obvious it made my stomach turn.

I'd been certain he moved on. The way he held me. The way he looked at me. The way he said my presence was enough.

But I was starting to think that wasn't the case at all.

The room seemed to slow around me. People spun past in their expensive clothes with their champagne glasses and their laughter. Everything felt distant. Muffled. Like I was underwater watching a party happen on the surface.

I walked slowly toward one of the far walls. Put my back against it and tried to breathe normally.

Now that I wasn't so overwhelmed by seeing Cian's ex girlfriend, my brain started putting pieces together.

Was this what Aldric had promised? Had this been his big plan for the night after all?

My hands grew cold.

His ex was a witch. And what did Cian need at this exact moment? A witch. Someone to help his mother. Someone to solve the problem that had him falling apart in my arms just an hour ago.

This wasn't coincidence. This was orchestrated.

I took a step forward, not sure where I was going. Just needing to move.

"Two lovebirds finding themselves." Aldric's voice came from beside me. Smooth. Amused. "Ain't it cute?"

I turned to face him. His expression was smug. Self satisfied in a way that made my blood boil.

"What kind of a monster are you?" The words came out sharp. "Did you orchestrate this?"

He tilted his head. "It looks more to me like the goddess is shining her great light on lost love."

"You fucker..."

"Okay. That was plain rude. But... you shouldn't be fixated on me this much."

"I wasn't the only one who saw Cian abandon you on the dance floor and run after the whirlwind romance he had." He chuckled. The sound grated against my nerves. "It has to hurt. But the think pieces that will be flying around right now will be so tea."

"What even is your end goal?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

I crossed my arms. "So Alpha Julius Knight is one of your minions."

"I wish I had that power." Aldric smiled wider. "But no. We're close though. Julius doesn't necessarily hate Cian, per se. He just saw him as a child that had too much

power way too quickly. He figured either my immediate older brother or myself were a much better choice as Alpha of Skollrend."

I looked at him. Really looked. I tried and I failed to find something remotely humane under all that calculation.

"What about her? Madeline. Is she...?"

Aldric's smile turned sharper. "You think I have the power to make a Blossom witch cower and bend to my will? That's such a high thought you have of me. I'll keep that in mind."

"So you're just playing them like fiddles then." My voice came out flat. "Is that all people are to you?"

"Want to dance?" He extended his hand. "If you say yes, I'll be more receptive to your questions. I will even be honest."

"I'm not a game or a toy."

I pushed past him. My shoulder brushed his arm as I moved. I needed to get away. I needed space. I needed something to stop the spiral happening in my head.

Despite telling Cian I didn't need alcohol, I found myself scanning the room for a waiter. One passed nearby with a tray of amber liquid. I grabbed a glass without asking what it was.

The first sip burned. Made my throat feel raw. Made my eyes water slightly.

I heard whispers. Low voices that thought they were being subtle.

"Is that her?"

I turned my head slightly. Two women stood a few feet away. Their eyes locked on me like I was something fascinating and grotesque at the same time.

"Yes. I saw Isobel with her daughter earlier, so she has to be the Omega bastard."

"You should have had your eyes on the dance floor." The other woman leaned closer. Her voice dropped but not enough. "Alpha Cian abandoned her for that witch he used to see."

"Oh, the Blossom girl? What is she even doing here?"

"Right? Someone is being messy."

Their laughter followed me as I walked away. Each step felt heavier than the last. The alcohol sat in my stomach like a fucking rock.

I wasn't watching where I was going. I was just moving. Trying to find somewhere quieter. Somewhere I could breathe without feeling everyone's eyes on me.

But I bumped into someone.

Hard.

"I'm sorry," I said automatically as I started to step around them.

The man turned. His smile died the second he saw my face.

My skin prickled. Every hair on my body stood up at once.

"Father."

The word came out before I could stop it. Automatic. Learned from years of greeting him the same way.

His eyes widened as well. "Fia?" His voice sounded strange. Shocked. "How... How.. how have you been?"

I couldn't move. I couldn't even speak. I just stood there staring at the man who'd thrown me away. The man who'd decided I wasn't worth keeping. The man whose rejection and disbelief had now shaped every single day of my life since I chose to wear Hazel's veil.

He looked older. Gray at his temples. Lines around his eyes that hadn't been there before. But his face was the same. The same sharp features. The same cold assessment in his gaze.

"I..." My voice wouldn't work properly. "I've been fine."

The lie tasted bitter. Everything about this moment tasted bitter.

"You look well." He cleared his throat. Shifted his weight. "I saw Cian earlier and it looks like things are better for you."

"Yes."

"That's good." He nodded. Like this was a normal conversation. Like we were catching up after a short separation instead of the true mess of what it has actually been. "Very good for you. It brings me peace... you know... Given what you did."

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 146: Small Rooms, No More

- Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 146: Small Rooms, No More

Chapter 146: Small Rooms, No More

FIA

"What?"

I stared at my father's face and waited for something to change. For the shock to deepen. For guilt to finally settle in once he realized how callous those words had been. It did not. Whatever was there would never be enough, and I realized that with a calm that scared me.

"What I did?" The scoff tore out of me before I could stop it, sharp and ugly and honest.

"Do not make a scene here." His voice dropped, tight and warning. "This is our first time at a gathering like this, and bringing your..."

He stopped. The word he did not say lingered anyway, heavy and obvious. I heard it as clearly as if he had shouted it.

My eyes slid past him to where Isobel and Hazel stood together across the room. Isobel looked composed, serene in that way that always meant she felt victorious. Hazel's mouth curved slightly, like she had already collected something she came for.

They started to walk towards us.

"My what?" I asked, steady even as my chest burned. "My Omega ways? Crass, low, degenerate ways?" I let each word land. I wanted him to hear them. "The ones I used to steal Hazel's man. That is still the story you are clinging to, right?"

"You could admit it," he said. His jaw tightened, the familiar line forming along his cheek. "Ask for our forgiveness. I would welcome you with open arms."

A laugh threatened to spill out of me, but it died before it could take shape. It would have sounded hysterical anyway.

"Hazel still cares for you, regardless of what you have done," he continued, as if he were offering mercy instead of rewriting the past. "She still speaks so highly of you."

"You are still deluded," I said quietly. "And blind."

His hand clenched at his side. It was a small thing, almost nothing, but I saw it. The way his fingers curled inward like he was holding something back, like anger lived there and needed permission.

"This is a big gathering, father," I said, keeping my gaze locked on his. "You might want to rein in that temper before you remind everyone what unchecked Alpha privilege looks like. You are all the same. Arrogant. Blind. But no one wants to stare too long at their own ugly reflection."

I turned away from him, already moving, surprised by how steady my legs felt. I was halfway gone when his voice reached me again.

"How could I not see the way you were?" There was bitterness in it, regret twisted the wrong way. "The love I had for your mother must have blinded me."

Something inside my chest cracked open. There was nothing gentle about the pain. It was not clean either. Heat rushed in where restraint had been.

"You cannot see people," I said, turning back to face him. "Not me. Not your perfect wife. Not Hazel." My voice rose despite myself. "How dare you talk about love? You did not love my mother. You never did. She was convenient for you. She was stable. She smoothed down every sharp edge she had just to fit into your life."

Memories surged up without asking permission. The small rooms. The careful smiles. The way we learned to disappear when needed. He didn't have to be vocal. We just knew.

"We hid," I said. "Like the open secrets you wanted us to be. We avoided events like this because you were ashamed. The worst part was all you ever had were small spaces anyway. Your events... parties... there was not nothing grabs about them. That was before Cian. Before my mate."

I looked straight at Hazel when I said it. Her expression tightened, the sweetness cracking. That small reaction felt like something earned.

"I do not need your love or your forgiveness," I told him. "I thought I did. For a long time. But I was wrong. I am not my mother. I do not want to live the way she did. I refuse to be content in a hole." My throat tightened, but I kept going. "I want to be seen. I want to be loved loudly. And I will have that."

The certainty startled me. It rose up anyway, solid and real.

"I think I already do," I added, softer now. "So keep your picture perfect family. Let me stay dead in your heart. That sounds like heaven to me at this point."

His face drained of color. His eyes went wide, unfocused. Then his knees buckled.

Isobel caught him before he hit the floor, her hands gripping his arms as she steadied him. She looked at me then, her gaze sharp and poisonous.

"How can you be so cruel?" she demanded.

"I was honest," I said, and did not look away. "His guilt is what made his knees weak, not my words. He claims he loved my mother, yet he was not there when she took her last breath. He was with you."

I turned and walked away. My heels echoed against the floor, each step lighter than the last, like I was shedding weight I had carried too long.

Fingers suddenly closed around my arm. Tight. Claiming.

"Are you lashing out because your prince charming left you halfway through the dance?" Hazel asked, her voice sugar sweet and rotten underneath. "I saw it. We all did. We just chose to be polite about it by not bringing it up because we wanted a semi cordial reunion."

I looked down at her hand gripping me, then back up at her face. She hadn't changed one bit. Calculating. Eager. Hungry for a reaction.

I slapped her hand away.

"If anyone gets to judge me, it will not be an insecure narcissist digging for drama like it owes her money," I said. My voice was cold, finished. "I know you are disappointed I did not wear pink. Try harder next time. You might actually get the fight you are begging for."

I did not wait for her answer. I walked out of the ballroom, down the hallway, my vision blurring at the edges. I kept moving until I found a bathroom, until the door shut behind me and the noise of them all finally fell away.

It felt wrong, like the room had sucked all the air out of itself and left me standing there with too much space and nowhere to put what I was feeling.

I braced my hands on the edge of the sink. The porcelain was cold beneath my palms, solid enough to remind me that I was still here, still upright. I turned the tap and let the water run until it was icy, then splashed my face. Once, then again. The cold stung, chased the heat away from my cheeks, left my eyes burning in a way that felt deserved.

I did not like the words I had used out there. They sat heavy in my chest now, sharp even in memory. True, yes. Earned, absolutely. Still ugly in the way honesty often was when it stopped asking for permission.

But what had I been meant to do. Smile and nod while lies were pressed into my skin like labels. Apologize for something I did not do just to make my father more comfortable with the story Isobel and Hazel had built for him. Bend myself smaller so he could keep believing I was the problem instead of the convenient scapegoat they needed.

No.

I would not do that. Not anymore.

I lifted my head and stared at my reflection. My makeup had somehow survived everything, lashes still dark, lips still neat, like my face had not been dragged through every version of grief and fury in the last ten minutes. My eyes told the real story. They looked worn, bruised in a way powder could not hide.

I wondered, not for the first time, why my father refused to see me. Why Hazel's voice carried more weight than mine. Why my mother's memory could be twisted into something useful, sharpened into a blade instead of treated like the fragile thing it was. The questions kept circling, biting at each other, offering no answers and no relief.

The door opened behind me.

I saw her in the mirror before I heard the lock click into place.

Hazel stood there with her back against the door, one hand still on the lock, her expression stripped of sweetness. There was no pretense left on her face now, just calculation, which was the moniker I knew her for.

"What do you want?" My voice sounded tired even to me.

She studied me instead of answering, eyes moving slowly like she was taking inventory. Measuring what was left.

"You think you've won something," she said at last, her tone almost casual. "You think because Cian chose you that everything is settled. You think you have power now, so you let your tongue run loose and do some heavy lifting with me."

I turned around fully, pressing my back to the sink. "I don't think anything is settled."

"Good." She stepped closer, heels clicking softly against the floor. "Because it isn't."

"Why are you here, Hazel?" I folded my arms, more out of instinct than defiance. "What do you actually want from me?"

Her smile curved, thin and sharp enough to cut. "An apology would be nice. I want an honest apology, on your knees, for daring to exist. But I know I won't get that. Not from you. You're too proud now."

"Proud?" The word tasted wrong in my mouth, bitter and unfair. "Is that what you call it when someone refuses to confess to crimes they didn't commit. When they finally stand up to madness and call it what it is."

"You took him from me."

For a second, I wondered what the fuck she was talking about. Then it clicked.

"Cian? He was never yours," I said, steady despite the way my chest tightened. "And he wasn't mine to take either. You've built a story in your head because reality stopped serving you. Now that he isn't the monster you wanted him to be, now that you see me surviving, even thriving, you've created this fantasy about what you think you could have had."

I met her eyes and did not look away.

"But Cian never wanted you. He never chose you. And weren't you the one who pushed him toward me in the first place. He is with me now. That truth is not mine to soften for you." My voice stayed calm, almost gentle. "You can choke on that if you want."

Hazel smiled and then went on. "I haven't finished talking yet."

Chapter 147: The contingency

CIAN

It was supposed to be over.

I had promised myself that much. I was married Fia. I had tried to move forward. I had built walls around the parts of me that still ached when I thought about what Madeline and I used to be.

Fia dominated those places now.

But seeing her standing there tore those walls down like they were made of paper.

It told me a part of me still held on to her.

My chest hurt. My hands wouldn't stop shaking. And I knew, I absolutely knew, that being here right now was going to hurt Fia. But I couldn't make myself walk away. I couldn't make myself turn around and go back to the ballroom where mate was and reassure her it was all in the gutters now.

Maybe this was about closure. Maybe it wasn't. I didn't know anymore.

"Why would you come then?" I asked. My voice came out harsher than I meant it to. "You know how rocky my relationship with that bastard is. You know he hates me. And you chose to come anyway?"

Madeline's smile was small. Sad. "My father has a relationship with him. Business ties. It would've looked strange if we ignored the invitation completely."

"Right."

"And we aren't dating anymore." She lifted her chin slightly. "I don't owe you anything, you know."

The words hit harder than they should have. "Right."

"You do know Julius only invited you for one reason, don't you?" I said.

"To mess with you?" Madeline's laugh was bitter. "I doubt I'd have that effect considering how quickly you left me in the cold."

"You wanted me to abandon my father's legacy."

"I wanted you to choose me!"

Her voice cracked on the last word. The sound echoed in the empty hallway. For a second neither of us said anything. We just stood there staring at each other while years of hurt sat between us like something that existed physically.

Her sentence made me scoff. "We were on a middle ground."

The sound she gave was sharp and dismissive. "There was no middle ground with you, Cian. What you wanted me to accept was insane."

"What I wanted?" The anger came fast. Hot. "You were the one who gave me ultimatums. You were the one who demanded I choose between you and everything my father built. Everything he died for."

"He didn't die for it. Neither did he die because of it. Life just happened. It is sad. Very sad. But you didn't have to uproot your own life to keep his legacy. A legacy that would have still stayed in your family. With your own blood."

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Nothing I said would matter. We'd had this argument a hundred times before and it always ended the same way. With both of us hurt and neither of us willing to bend.

Madeline took a deep breath. Let it out slowly. "You haven't changed."

"Neither have you."

"Not that my fears were wrong." Her eyes dropped to my ring finger. Then back up to my face. There was no ring on my finger. But I got the message. "I see the new werewolf in your arms."

My jaw clenched. "I married her to please my mother."

"Do you love her?"

The question felt like a trap. Like no matter what I said, it would be the wrong answer. I didn't want to hurt Madeline. I had done that a thousand times already and all the signs did point to the idea that all her fears had been valid. "I don't owe you an answer."

"Right." Madeline cleared her throat. Her expression shifted into something more neutral. More controlled. "I heard about your mother. The rot. That's horrible. Is she better now?"

I stared at her. Studied her face for any sign that she actually cared. That this wasn't just polite conversation meant to fill the silence.

"What do you care?"

"Cian—"

"It's not the rot." The words came out flat. Final. "It's alchemized poison."

I turned to leave. Started walking back toward the ballroom. Back toward Fia and the life I was supposed to be building. The life that didn't include Madeline and all the ways we'd broken each other.

"I know."

I stopped.

"My father got your voicemail," Madeline continued. Her voice was softer now. Gentler. "It was distressing."

I turned around slowly. "What?"

"That's partly why I came. When my father decided he wasn't going to honor Alpha Julius's invitation." She took a step toward me. Then another. "He doesn't want me to see you at all. He worries about what will happen. What state I'll be in again. But I couldn't help myself. Especially when I got Alpha Aldric's call."

My stomach dropped. "Aldric called you?"

"He was begging for my help." Madeline's eyes searched my face. "Our talk led me to believe you would be here. So I came."

The contingency. This was what my uncle had been talking about. The backup plan he'd made when the witch fell through. He'd called Madeline. He'd practically made sure she would be here.

"Why would you do me any good deed?" The question came out quieter than I meant it to.

"Because regardless of what happened to us, I still care about you, Cian." Her voice broke slightly. "I do. I don't want you to be hurt. So be sincere with me. How is your mother?"

My pride screamed at me to lie. To tell her everything was fine. To say we had it handled and we didn't need help from her or anyone else. But the words wouldn't come. Because they weren't true. Because my mother was dying and every lead had turned into a dead end and I was running out of time.

"You haven't changed one bit," I said instead.

Madeline smiled. It was sad. Small. "Have any of us?"

I swallowed hard. My throat felt tight. "It's not good."

"How not good?"

"She's dying." The words tasted like ash in my mouth. "The poison is killing her slowly. My healer and my doctor are doing their best but it is alchemy. Only magic can fix it."

"And you need a witch."

"Yes." I rubbed at my face. My eyes still felt hot. Still felt wet. "But apparently I killed one. Or that's what the rumor says. So now they've formed some kind of coalition. They won't help me. Any of them."

"You didn't kill anyone."

"I know that. You know that. But they don't care about the truth. They care about the story that Gabriel has set. And the story says I'm dangerous. That helping me means putting themselves at risk."

Madeline was quiet for a long moment. She just stood there watching me. Reading my face the way she always used to. Like she could see straight through every defense I tried to put up.

"What if I could help?" she said finally.

"No." The word came out sharper than I intended. "I can't ask that of you."

Madeline didn't flinch. She didn't smile either. She just watched me, steady and infuriatingly calm. "You didn't ask. I offered."

"That doesn't make it better."

"It does," she said softly. "Because this isn't about old obligations. Or guilt. Or trying to fix what we broke." She paused. "This is about your mother."

My jaw tightened. "You don't understand what you'd be stepping into."

"I understand alchemy," she replied. "I understand poisons that rot from the inside out and magic that's been twisted to look like nature. I grew up around it, Cian. You know that."

I dragged a hand through my hair. The corridor suddenly felt too narrow, the air too thick. Somewhere beyond the walls, music drifted from the ballroom, laughter and glasses clinking, life moving on without any regard for the fact that mine felt like it was splitting down the middle.

"And you also understand the politics," I said. "The covens won't like this. They've already decided I'm the villain in their story. If you help me, you'll be choosing a side. Implicating your father, yourself and your coven."

"I already have," she said.

Chapter 148: Skollrend all the way

CIAN

"If this is giving you hope that we'd rekindle anything," I said, "I hate to say it, but it's not happening."

Madeline's expression didn't change. "I didn't say any of that."

"You know what I mean."

"Do I?" She tilted her head slightly. "You know me, Cian. Do you think I would do anything expecting a prize or a reward? This is your mother's safety we are talking about."

I looked away. The paintings on the corridor walls blurred at the edges of my vision. "I just want to make that clear. It doesn't make sense why you would make such a move if you still didn't care about me."

"I still care about you." Her voice was quiet. Steady. "I still care about you a lot."

The words hung between us. I could feel her eyes on my face, waiting.

"What about you?" she asked. "Do you?"

My throat tightened. I forced myself to meet her gaze. "I have a mate and she is not chosen anymore."

"That's not an answer."

It wasn't. We both knew it. I could feel the truth sitting in my chest like something physical. Something I couldn't swallow down or push away no matter how hard I tried.

"I'm afraid my answer will make you change your mind," I said.

Madeline went still. "So you do love her?"

The question shouldn't have hurt. I had chosen Fia. I had married her. It might have started with a lot of hate. But things were different now. Somewhere along the way, without meaning to, without even realizing it was happening, I had started to care about her in ways that had nothing to do with mundane duty or the idea that marriage was one of my mother's wishes.

"It would seem so," I said.

Madeline was quiet for a moment. Then she laughed. It was soft. Surprised. "Well. That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Mads—"

"And I still haven't changed my mind."

She stepped closer. Her hands reached for my jacket, smoothing down the lapels where they'd gotten twisted. The gesture was familiar. Automatic. Like her body remembered doing this a thousand times before even if everything else between us had changed.

Her gaze caught on the aquamarine brooch pinned to my chest. Madeline's fingers paused there for just a second before she dropped her hands.

"Let us enjoy the party," she said. Her voice was lighter now. More controlled. "You should even introduce me to her. Then we go back to your place and make this right."

I stared at her. "You're serious."

"I am certain my people will understand when I tell them one of our own poisoned a grand Luna." She straightened my collar one last time. "And I helped prevent future strife and unnecessary bloodshed, which I'm sure you're keeping tight under lock and key."

"Nobody needs to know my mother's business." The words came out sharper than I intended. "I don't want that becoming gossip."

I turned to leave. Started walking back toward the ballroom. Back toward the music and the lights and Fia waiting for me somewhere in that crowd.

"Is it because you care for her?" Madeline's voice stopped me. "Or because you know the stain it will leave on your leadership and the strength of your pack?"

I looked back over my shoulder. "I don't think you should be therapizing me, Mads."

"It's just as depressing as it was before." Her smile was sad. Knowing. "To see that your pack will still be number one priority over everything and everyone in your life."

The accusation hit exactly where she meant it to. Because she was right. She had always been right about that. My pack came first. Skollrend came first. It was the foundation of everything I was, everything my father had built, everything I had promised to protect.

"Your new bride," Madeline continued. "If you had to choose, which would you choose? Skollrend or her?"

The question settled over me like ice water. I knew the answer. I had always known the answer. And the worst part was that Madeline knew it too. She had asked me the same thing years ago when we were still together. When she had begged me to choose her over my father's legacy. When she had given me that ultimatum that had torn us apart.

I hadn't chosen her then. I suspected that I wouldn't choose Fia now.

The realization sat heavy in my gut. Fia deserved better than that. She deserved someone who would put her first. Who would burn the world down for her if that's what it took. But I wasn't that person. I couldn't be that person. Not when Skollrend depended on me. Not when hundreds of pack members looked to me for leadership, for protection, for the kind of strength that meant putting the pack above everything else.

Even above the people I loved.

"Rumors are probably flying about us now," I said. My voice sounded tired even to my own ears. "We should get back."

Madeline smiled. It didn't reach her eyes. "I guess I have my answer. Skollrend all the way."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to tell her she was wrong. That things were different now. That I was different. But the words stuck in my throat because they would have been lies. She knew me too well for lies to work. She had always known me all too well.

"Come on," I said instead.

We walked back toward the ballroom in silence. The music grew louder with each step. Voices and laughter spilled out through the open doors. The warm glow of chandeliers cut through the dim corridor lighting.

I could see people moving inside. Dancing. Drinking. Pretending that politics and poison and broken promises didn't exist for a few hours. Julius would be somewhere in there watching me. Waiting to see if his little manipulation had worked. If bringing Madeline here would crack me open the way he wanted.

Maybe it had.

My hands were steadier now than they had been earlier. The shaking had stopped somewhere during our conversation. But my chest still felt tight. My heart still beat too fast. And I knew that the second I walked back into that ballroom and found Fia, I would have to look her in the eyes and pretend that seeing Madeline again hadn't shaken something loose inside me.

Pretend that I hadn't also just confirmed that I would still choose my pack over her if it came down to it.

Madeline paused at the entrance to the ballroom. She smoothed down her dress. Checked her reflection in one of the decorative mirrors hanging on the wall. When she looked back at me, her expression was neutral. Pleasant. The mask she wore when she had to be diplomatic.

"Ready?" she asked.

I nodded. Didn't trust my voice to come out steady.

We stepped into the ballroom together. The noise hit me first. Then the heat of too many bodies pressed into one space. The smell of expensive perfume, champagne and the faint metallic tang of silver that always seemed to cling to formal werewolf events.

I scanned the crowd for Fia.

Faces blurred together as my gaze moved from cluster to cluster. Dresses, suits, familiar pack members laughing too loudly. I caught sight of Elara near the drinks table, her back to me, deep in conversation. Aldric stood closer to the dais, looking perfectly at ease, as if nothing in the world ever touched him unless he allowed it.

But Fia was not there.

I shifted my weight and looked again. Slower this time. More carefully. I checked the edges of the room first, the places she would have gravitated toward if she felt overwhelmed. Near the tall windows. Beside the pillars. Close enough to the exits to leave if she needed air.

Nothing.

A flicker of unease slid through me. I told myself not to overreact. The ballroom was crowded. She could be behind someone taller. She could have stepped aside to speak with someone. She could be anywhere.

I took a step forward, then another, gently easing through the press of bodies. Polite nods followed me. Quiet greetings. I answered them automatically, barely hearing my own voice.

But still, I got nothing.

My chest tightened.

So I immediately reached for the bond without thinking.

Chapter 149: Girl talk

FIA

"I haven't finished talking yet."

Hazel's voice stopped me before I could push her aside and reach for the door handle. I looked up, keeping my expression neutral even though exhaustion pulled at every muscle in my body.

"Then talk," I said.

She tilted her head, studying me with that particular look she wore when she thought she held all the cards. "Men usually miss what they chased first. Did you know that?"

I waited. She would get to her point eventually. She always did.

"I came here tonight with a plan," she continued, stepping closer. Her perfume was too sweet, cloying in the small space. "To get him back. Cian." She said his name like it belonged to her, like she had some claim to it. "It shouldn't be that hard, really. He's just a man, after all."

"He's not a cheater," I said. "And he's not weak."

Her smile widened. "You would have said the same thing about Milo once upon a time." She paused, letting that sink in before adding, "But I had him."

The words landed exactly how she intended them to. Sharp and deliberate.

"There is no man you will touch that I cannot take from you."

I reached into my clutch slowly, deliberately, and pulled out my phone. My fingers moved across the screen, opening the recording app. I started it. Call it instinct. Call it survival.

"If I'm so lowly," I said, keeping my tone even, "why are you obsessed with stealing everything my Omega hands touch?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

"I'm doing no such thing." I looked at her directly. "You're doing it for me. It's why you're here, Hazel. You want to get under my skin so badly. You want a reaction. You want me to be bothered by your existence when it's increasingly clear that it's you who's bothered by mine."

Her laugh came out wrong. Too high, too sharp, spiraling at the edges.

"I'm not bothered by you," she said, and the smile dropped from her face entirely. "Why would that ever be the case?"

She moved closer, and I could see something darker settling into her features.

"What fuels me when it comes to you is hate." She said it simply, like she was telling me the weather. "Do you want to know why I hate you?"

"I couldn't care less."

I moved toward the door, but she was faster. She slid in front of it, blocking my path with her body.

"We aren't finished talking."

"You despise that no matter how small I made myself, it didn't make you any more special." The words came out steady, factual. "I was an Omega. Yet I was cherished by pack members. I was an Omega child born to an illegitimate union, yet I was blessed with a fated mate. Which is why you gravitated to Milo. Not because you liked him or his penis. But because you wanted to shatter what we had."

I gestured at her dress, the soft pink fabric that seemed chosen with surgical precision.

"You're wearing pink because you hoped I would too. So all the smear campaign you successfully ran with Milo before you helped take his life would burn bright and hit harder. You could push the narrative even further that I

was a scheming little Omega bitch who had it out for you since day one." I paused. "Did I get it right?"

"No."

The word came out flat, cold in a way I hadn't heard from her before.

"Your mother and your existence hurt my mother," Hazel said. "In a domino fashion, it trickled down and hurt me too. So I swore I wouldn't be like her. If I had been in my mother's shoes, I would have taken you and your mother out before you had the chance to even grow."

She stepped closer, and I could see the truth of it written across her face.

"This is a takedown."

The laugh burst out of me before I could stop it. It started as a chuckle and grew until I had to press my hand against my ribs, until tears stung at the corners of my eyes.

"You aren't that cool, calculated, or smart, Hazel." I wiped at my eyes, still laughing softly. "And there's no one around. So why are you still performing?"

I let the laughter fade, let the smile drop from my face.

"Your reasons are more simple-minded. I'll tell you. It is such a simple word. Such a small word." I paused. "Jealousy."

"You would know jealousy," she shot back. "I saw Alpha Cian, you know. I saw him chase after that blonde woman. And let me tell you, the things people around us started to say."

Something cold settled in my chest, but I kept my expression smooth. She would want me hot and bothered. I wouldn't let her have that.

"Do you know who she is?"

"Madeline Blossom," I said. "A witch and Cian's ex. Do you know more?"

Hazel put a hand over her mouth in mock surprise. "See? You're trying to act like it's not getting to you." She dropped her hand, eyes gleaming. "You were so proud to show him off as your possession today. But he sure showed you he's not yours."

My hands clenched at my sides. I forced them to relax.

"I will admit, I had a plan to take him back," Hazel continued. "He's a man after all. How hard could it be? Plus, I am hotter than you. Higher ranked than you. A better choice, really."

She circled me slowly, like a predator assessing prey.

"But with what I've seen today, I'll steer clear. And if you know what's best for you, you should beg him to reject you so you can come back home to us." Her voice dropped lower, almost sympathetic. "A man who isn't over his first flame? Hell on earth. I would know."

She stopped in front of me again.

"It's why I had to kill Milo even when I didn't want to. He still held something in his stupid heart for you."

The words hung in the air between us. Final. Damning.

I pulled my phone out fully, holding it up so she could see the screen. The recording timer had been running the entire time. I scrolled to the end, found the exact timestamp, and pressed play.

Her voice filled the bathroom. "It's why I had to kill Milo even when I didn't want to."

I paused it. Looked up at her face. Watched the color drain from her cheeks.

"What are you doing?" Her voice came out strangled.

"Sending it to the cloud and Father," I said calmly. "So he knows what his beloved Luna daughter did."

She lunged for the phone, but I was already moving. I twisted away, putting distance between us as I pulled up my contacts.

"Oh, the look on your face right now is gold." I couldn't help the small smile.
"Afraid?"

"He has you blocked," Hazel said quickly, desperately. "Mother and I made sure of it."

"I have a new number."

I pressed send.

The change in her was instantaneous. She screamed and came at me like something unleashed. Her hands found my shoulders, my hair, and she slammed me backward. My spine hit the edge of the sink, pain blooming sharp and bright. She shoved again and I felt the mirror crack against my back, heard the glass splinter and fall.

"You conniving evil bitch!"

She was still screaming, still pushing, and I let her. I let her rage spill over me because I needed this. I needed her to lose control completely.

Alpha Aldric's words echoed in my mind, that conversation we'd had what felt like a lifetime ago now even if it was just a few minutes ago. "But you stand no chance if you're not willing to go far and down, dragging yourself along in the madness."

I smiled up at Hazel through the pain.

"Is this what you felt when you plotted against me?"

She froze. Her hands were still gripping my arms, but she had gone completely still.

"What?"

"I knew you couldn't help yourself." I kept my voice soft, almost gentle. "Father hasn't unblocked me. And I don't have a fucking new line."

I watched understanding crash over her face like a wave.

"But you were afraid of being revealed, and common sense just went out the window."

She looked down at me, at the blood on my face, at the shattered glass around us. Her hands started to shake.

"No. You made me do this intentionally."

"How will you explain this?"

Hazel looked around wildly, panic written in every line of her body. Her eyes landed on the broken shards of mirror scattered across the floor. She grabbed one, the glass cutting into her palm as she held it up.

"You attacked me!"

She brought the shard toward her own hand, ready to cut herself, to create her own evidence.

"Trust me, no matter the story I spin. I will be believed. Your reputation is damaged."

"Is that so?" I bent down and picked up a piece of glass myself. The sharp edge bit into my fingers, but I didn't care.

"You used your Luna title to destroy me," I said quietly. "I suffered, you know. I'm still suffering even. I don't have to anymore though. I have evidence against you now and your beautiful work on my face and body."

I stood up slowly, the glass shard held loosely in my hand.

"So this is karma, big sister." I took a step toward her. "I'll use my Omega title against you now. I'll let them see what you are. And in this big space, you won't be able to hide."

I could feel it then. That pull in my chest that meant Cian was close, that he was coming. The bond thrummed with urgency.

"I'll even wager my life on it." I met Hazel's eyes. "Something I know you could never do."

I brought the shard up to my throat in one quick motion.

"I will admit, Hazel, this feels so fucking good."

"Wait—" Hazel lunged forward, her hand reaching out to stop me.

But I was already moving. The glass bit into skin and I felt the sharp sting. I felt warmth begin to bloom. Not deep. Neither fatal. Just enough.

Just enough to make sure everyone would see exactly what had happened here.

Just enough for Cian to see and rage.

Chapter 150: I might destroy you 1

CIAN

Uncle Aldric appeared at my side before I could take another step into the crowd. His expression was controlled, but I caught the edge of concern in his eyes when he looked at me.

"Goddess, you are pissed," he said quietly.

I turned to face him as he continued. "I know it is something I should have mentioned so you didn't feel cornered, but I was certain that you would decline."

He thought I was angry about Madeline. About the ambush. About Julius bringing my ex to this party like some kind of twisted gift.

"I'm not mad about Madeline."

Aldric's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"You knew my weakness," I continued. "And you knew how to bypass it to help my mother. If anything, I'm grateful."

"Then why the long face?"

"I can't find Fia."

The words had barely left my mouth when the bond slammed back into me with the force of a physical blow. It clawed its way from wherever Fia was, raking across my insides, desperate, urgent and wrong. Goosebumps erupted across my skin. My chest seized. Every instinct I had screamed that something was terribly, horribly wrong.

"Fia is in trouble."

I was already moving. My feet carried me through the crowd without thought, without care for who I shoved past or what conversations I interrupted. The bond pulled me forward like a rope tied around my ribs. Tight. Insistent. Painful in its intensity.

I heard Aldric following behind me, but I didn't slow down. I couldn't slow down. The ballroom blurred. The corridor outside came into focus. Then I was running.

The bond led me down a side hallway. Past decorative tables I barely registered. Past paintings I didn't see. My heart hammered against my ribs so hard I thought they might crack.

The female bathroom.

I reached the door, grabbed the handle and pulled.

It didn't budge.

Was it fucking locked?

Horror flooded through me, cold and nauseating. Something loud came from inside. It sounded like something heavy hitting tile or porcelain. A sound that made my blood run ice cold.

I didn't think. I threw my full weight against the door.

One.

Two.

The wood cracked. The lock gave way with a shriek of metal, and the door exploded inward.

The scene that greeted me stopped my heart.

Fia was on the ground. Blood streaked down her throat, bright, red and way too much. Her eyes were wide but unfocused. She was pale. Too pale.

Hazel stood above her. A shard of glass in her hand. Red at the tip.

The world went silent. My vision narrowed until all I could see was that glass. That blood. Fia's blood.

Hazel's head snapped toward me. Her mouth moved. "I swear this isn't what it looks like."

Something inside me snapped.

I crossed the space between us in two strides. I did not think about it. I did not plan it. My hand was already at her throat before she could even draw a breath, fingers closing hard, finding skin and bone and pulse. I lifted her off the ground and drove her back into the tiled wall with everything I had left in me.

The impact shot up my arms. Tiles cracked beneath her back. Some of them shattered outright, sharp fragments skittering across the floor. Fractures spread out from the point of impact, spiderwebbing through the wall. The sound was loud and brittle and wrong.

Hazel gagged. Her hands flew up, clawing at my fingers. She scratched, nails scraping skin, drawing thin lines of pain that barely registered. Her legs kicked uselessly in the air. Her face flushed red, then darker, veins standing out as her eyes widened.

"The bitch framed me," she choked out. The words tore free between gasps. "She—"

"You fucking monster."

The voice that came out of me did not feel like mine. It felt dragged up from somewhere deep and dark, somewhere that had been waiting.

"Was it not enough that you tried to turn everyone against her," I said, tightening my grip. I could feel her pulse hammering against my palm, frantic and fast. "That you even used me to do it. Now you want to kill her?"

Her struggles turned wild. Desperate. Her nails dug into the back of my hand, sharp enough to draw blood. I barely felt it. All I could see was her face changing color, the way her mouth worked uselessly as air refused to come.

"You're killing me, Alpha Cian," she gasped. "Let me explain—"

"Good," I said, and the word came out steady, clear and terrifying. "Die."

I meant it. Every word. I wanted to watch it happen. I wanted to feel the moment she stopped fighting, stopped breathing, stopped existing. I wanted the world to go quiet again.

Something slammed into my side. Hard. The impact knocked me off balance, but I did not let go. Uncle Aldric's hands closed around my arm, trying to pull me back.

"Calm yourself!"

I could not. Not with blood on the floor behind me. Not with Fia bleeding. Not with this thing still alive in my grip.

Hazel twisted when my attention shifted. Slippery, desperate. She started to slip free.

No.

I swung at Aldric without thinking, aiming to hurt him, to make him let go. Then I lunged after her. My hand caught in her hair and I yanked her back. She screamed, the sound ripping through the room. I grabbed the hand that had held the glass and twisted.

The resistance gave way with a sickening snap that I felt all the way up my arm.

Her scream went high and sharp, inhuman. She collapsed to the floor, cradling her broken hand, sobbing as her body curled inward.

Aldric tackled me properly this time. His weight drove me backward and knocked the air from my lungs. He shoved himself between us, hands braced against my chest.

"A crowd will be here in a matter of seconds," he said, voice urgent but controlled. "What matters right now is Fia."

Fia.

Her name cut through the rage like a blade. Everything inside me faltered. The fury loosened its grip all at once, leaving my hands shaking and my chest tight. I looked past Aldric, past Hazel rocking on the floor, and saw her.

She was so still.

Something inside me dropped out entirely. I let go. Of Hazel. Of Aldric. Of the need to destroy. I dropped to my knees beside Fia, my hands trembling as I reached for her.

The cut at her throat was still bleeding. It was a good thing that it was not spraying, or pulsing. The bad news was the bleeding was steady. Too steady. Blood pooled beneath her and soaked into the tile.

I looked around wildly. My vision tunneled until I spotted a towel hanging near the sink. I grabbed it and pressed it against her throat, hands slick almost immediately as the white fabric turned red.

"Fia," I said, and my voice cracked apart. "Stay with me."

Her eyes found mine. Focused slowly, like she was pulling herself back from somewhere far away. She was conscious. She was breathing.

Footsteps thundered in the hallway. Voices rose. Gasps. Whispers. Aldric had been right. The crowd was coming.

"What happened?"

"Is that blood?"

"Oh my goddess—"

"Is that Luna Hazel?"

I did not care. Let them see. Let them whisper. Let them know.

"Somebody get a fucking healer in here!"

The words tore out of me like a roar. People scattered. Someone ran. I stayed where I was, pressing harder, willing the bleeding to slow.

Fia's hand lifted. Weak. Shaking. Her fingers wrapped around my wrist, grounding me.

"I'm okay," she whispered.

"You're bleeding," I said. I needed her to understand that this was real. That she could not leave.

"I know." A faint smile touched her lips. "It's not that bad."

Glass glittered around us. Hazel sobbed a few feet away. Blood soaked my hands. Not that bad.

"What happened," I asked, keeping pressure on the wound. "Tell me what happened."

"Later," she said. Her eyes were clearer now. "The recording—"

She did not get to finish. A healer pushed through the crowd, an older woman I recognized as one of Alpha Julius's elders. She dropped to her knees beside us.

"Let me see."

I did not want to move. Every instinct screamed to keep holding her. But I forced myself to lean back as the healer carefully peeled the towel away and examined the cut.

"Superficial," she said after a moment. "Painful and bloody, but nothing vital was hit."

Relief crashed through me so hard my vision blurred. I had to brace my hand against the floor to keep from collapsing.

"I need to clean and close it," she continued. "The scarring should be minimal if we act quickly."

I nodded, unable to speak.

Aldric appeared at my shoulder again. "Cian."

I looked up at him. His expression was grim.

"We need to secure the scene," he said quietly. "And we need to deal with her."

He nodded toward Hazel.

Hazel had managed to push herself into a sitting position. Her broken hand hung at an unnatural angle. Tears streaked through her mascara. She looked at me with something that might have been fear or calculation.

"She attacked me," Hazel said. Her voice was steadier now. Practiced. "She's been trying to destroy me since she arrived. Everyone knows it. Tonight she came at me with the glass."

"Shut up."

I stood slowly. The healer was still working on Fia behind me. I could hear her breathing. That was all that mattered.

I walked toward Hazel. She flinched back, pressing herself against the wall like she could disappear into it.

"You tried to kill my mate," I said quietly.

"No," she said quickly. "She attacked me. I was defending myself—"

"My mate is bleeding," I said. "You were holding the weapon. And you expect anyone here to believe she attacked you?"

Her mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

The crowd parted as Julius pushed his way through, other alphas and pack members behind him. His gaze swept over the shattered tiles, the blood, Hazel's broken hand.

"Alpha Cian," he said carefully. "What is the meaning of this?"

I did not look away from Hazel. "This Luna just tried to murder my wife."

The reaction was immediate. Gasps. Shocked murmurs. Julius went very still.

"That is a serious accusation. Is that not her sister?"

"It's the truth," Fia said.

Her voice was weak but clear. The healer helped her sit up. She lifted her phone. The screen was cracked, but it was still on.

"And I have proof."