

To ruin an Omega

#Chapter 156: Resist - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 156: Resist

Chapter 156: Resist

MADELINE

I walked straight out of the ballroom and into a corner of the corridor because I was bothered. Deeply, uncomfortably bothered, the kind that sits under your skin and refuses to be ignored. It was about the Omega. About Fia.

I had told myself I was above it. That I would not be the villain in anyone's story, least of all hers. You could not fight what the heart wanted, that was always the excuse, the clean and reasonable one. If Cian still chosen me, then so be it. Fate, instinct, all of those things people liked to blame when choices became inconvenient.

But tonight was doing a very good job of proving just how wrong Aldric's careful assumptions had been.

I had seen it. The moment Cian realized she was gone. The way he had charged out of the ballroom, barely contained, his control slipping in that unmistakable way that meant his wolf was right there, clawing at the surface. That was not concern out of obligation. That was not duty to a bond he tolerated.

He loved her.

The realization landed hard and stayed there.

It bothered me more than I wanted to admit.

Because even though there was still something in his eyes when he looked at me, something familiar and unresolved that he could deny all he wanted, it did not change the truth. Whatever had once been mine now belonged, at least in part, to that Omega. Maybe more than part. Maybe most of it.

I did not understand how that was even possible.

I pulled out my powder mirror and stared at my reflection longer than necessary. My ears were red, flushed in a way no amount of makeup could hide. That was how unsettled I was. I adjusted my earring just to give my hands something to do, even though it was already sitting perfectly.

My phone buzzed against the side of my clutch.

I did not need to look to know who it was, but I did anyway. Aldric's name glowed on the screen, neat and unyielding. The message was short, as his instructions always were when he expected obedience rather than discussion.

Find Cian. Use this opportunity as an aperitif to get even closer to Cian before Morrigan. Help the Omega if you must.

I stared at the words. Once. Then again. By the third time, my mouth had gone dry.

Help the Omega if I must.

What did that even mean in Aldric's world?

I slid the phone back into my clutch and smoothed my hands down the front of my dress. The silk was cool, grounding, a small mercy against the heat crawling up my neck. I took a steadying breath, then another, trying to shake the feeling that I was being nudged into something I did not fully understand yet.

Aldric's message lingered anyway, needling at the back of my mind.

I snapped the powder mirror shut and turned back toward the ballroom.

Something had changed while I was gone. The air felt different, thicker somehow. People were gathered in tight little knots, their voices low but animated, the kind of hushed excitement that only ever came from witnessing drama you were not directly involved in. Eyes flicked toward doorways. Heads leaned together. Information was already spreading.

I searched the room for Cian again, hoping foolishly that he had returned. He had been there earlier, standing near Alpha Joseph Hughes with that carefully neutral expression he wore when he was holding himself together by sheer will. Now there was no sign of him.

Fia was gone too.

The space she should have occupied felt conspicuously empty, like a missing note in a song that refused to resolve.

I moved through the crowd slowly. Deliberately. My heels clicked against the marble floor but the sound was swallowed by the whispers around me.

"Did you see what happened?"

"I heard it was quite the scene."

"Coming to this party was really a smart choice."

I paused near a group of women. They were huddled together, their faces animated with gossip. One of them was practically vibrating with the need to share what she knew.

"All the tea that came out today alone," she said. Her voice carried despite her attempt to whisper. "Turns out the Omega isn't a bitch after all. She's been surrounded by a snake for a sister all along."

Another woman nodded eagerly. "I just came back from the bathroom by the hallway and let me tell you, Hazel Hughes is such a snake. The things she said, the recording Fia played. It was insane."

Hughes.

The name caught my attention. I turned toward them and took a few steps closer. They noticed me immediately. Their conversation faltered.

"Hughes," I said. Kept my voice light. Curious. "Isn't that Silvercreek?"

The first woman blinked. Then nodded. "Yes. Alpha Joseph Hughes's daughters."

"You said something about her sister." I tilted my head slightly. "That's Cian's mate, right?"

"Yes." The woman leaned in like she was sharing a secret even though half the party probably knew by now. "Hazel tried to kill her own sister. Can you believe it? There was a recording. Proof of everything. She framed Fia into a marriage with Alpha Cian with help from the poor girl's ex and then murdered him when his guilt came to roost. It's insane."

The pieces clicked into place.

Aldric's message. Find Cian. Help the Omega if you must.

He was positioning me once more.

"Where did this happen?" I asked.

"The bathroom near the west wing." The woman gestured vaguely. "But I think people are dispersing now. The show's over."

I didn't wait to hear more. I turned and walked toward the west wing. My pace was measured. Controlled. I couldn't run. Couldn't draw attention. But inside my chest my heart was beating faster.

The hallway opened up ahead of me. People were streaming out of an area near the bathrooms. They talked in low voices. Some looked shocked. Others looked thrilled by what they'd witnessed.

I caught sight of Alpha Joseph Hughes. He was walking toward a woman who must have been his wife. His face was red. Mottled with anger or shame. Maybe both. His daughter, the one who wasn't Fia, was on her knees absolutely looking like she had lost it.

But Cian wasn't there.

Neither was Fia.

I stopped one of the passing guests. A young man who looked like he'd had too much champagne.

"Excuse me," I said. Kept my voice pleasant. "Do you know where Alpha Cian went?"

He blinked at me. Processed the question slowly. "Oh. Yeah. He carried his mate out. They went to one of the guest rooms I think. The healer followed them."

"Which direction?"

He pointed down the hall. "That way. Not too far from here."

I thanked him and moved in the direction he'd indicated. The guest rooms weren't far. There were several doors along this corridor. I checked each one quickly. Listened at the door for voices.

The third door was different. I could hear movement inside. The soft murmur of voices.

I knocked once. Then pushed the door open.

The scene inside made me pause.

Fia lay on the bed. Her body was too still. Too pale. A healer stood beside her, gathering supplies from a medical bag. And Cian sat in a chair pulled close to the bed. His hand wrapped around Fia's. His shoulders were tense. His jaw was tight.

He looked up when I entered.

"Seems like I'm late to the ruckus." I let a soft smile touch my lips. Tried to convey sympathy. Concern. "I heard what happened. Is she okay?"

"Yes." His voice was rough. Strained. He cleared his throat. "Yes. She is."

But he didn't look convinced. He looked like he was barely holding himself together.

I moved closer. Took in Fia's appearance more carefully. Her throat was bandaged but blood had soaked through the white cotton. It looked dark. Wet. Fresh.

The healer glanced at me but didn't speak. She was focused on her work.

I looked at Fia's face. She was unconscious. Her features were slack. Peaceful in a way that felt wrong given the blood and the bandages and the obvious trauma she'd just experienced.

"I can help," I said.

Cian looked up. "What?"

I took another step toward the bed. "Her injuries. They won't heal well on their own. She's not a Sentinel. Not a Delta. Not a Luna by birth." I gestured toward her throat. "There will be plenty of events in her future. High society functions. Gatherings where appearances matter whether we like it or not. Scarring tells a story. People will ask questions. They'll stare. What she survived... it's brave. But if we can avoid a scar, we should."

The healer had paused in her work. She was looking at me now. Assessing.

"You're good with healing magics?" she asked.

I nodded. "It's rare and hard but yes. I'm good at performing healing magic. Not many can do it properly. But it would be a significant advantage for Luna Fia. For her comfort and confidence."

The healer turned to Cian. "Alpha Cian, the witch is not wrong."

Cian didn't respond immediately. He looked at Fia. Really looked at her. His thumb brushed across her knuckles in a gesture so tender it made something twist in my chest.

Then he nodded. Looked at me. "Do it."

I smiled, small and practiced, the kind that came automatically after years of being useful. Then I moved to the other side of the bed and reached for the bandage at Fia's throat.

It was damp when my fingers touched it. Sticky. Warm. I peeled it back slowly, careful not to tug too hard, though the fabric still pulled away with a wet sound that turned my stomach despite myself. Blood had soaked through completely, the white long gone, and beneath it the wound gaped ugly and raw.

The cut was deep. Not clean. The edges were torn, as if whoever had done this had wanted it to hurt. Fresh blood welled up almost immediately and slipped down the side of her neck in a thin line.

I placed my hands on either side of the wound and let my fingers hover just above her skin. Close enough to feel her warmth, close enough to feel the tremor of her pulse. I took a breath and began to whisper the incantation.

The words were old. Older than most of what I used day to day. They came from somewhere buried deep, a place I did not like to visit too often. They sat heavy on my tongue, dense with intention, with weight. This was not decorative magic. This was work.

I felt the spell stir inside me, familiar and not at the same time. Power rose slowly, then all at once, flooding my chest and moving down my arms until it pooled in my hands. I guided it forward, into her flesh, into the torn places that needed mending.

That was when something pushed back.

At first it was subtle, just a faint resistance brushing against my magic, like running into a current you had not expected. I frowned but kept going, tightening my focus, assuming it would give way.

It did not.

The resistance grew sharper, more defined. It felt intentional, not like damaged tissue or lingering poison, but like something aware of me. A presence that noticed what I was doing and objected to it.

Pain flared behind my eyes, sudden and sharp, making my vision blur for a second. This was not physical resistance. It felt mental, invasive in a way that set my teeth on edge. Not violent, not chaotic, just there. Watching me. Measuring me.

I pushed harder.

I fed more magic into the spell, ignoring the throb in my head, refusing to let go now that I had started. The wound responded, slowly at first, then with that familiar sensation of flesh reaching for itself. Torn edges drew together. Skin knitted closed, smooth and seamless, like water filling a crack in stone.

The resistance never left. It stayed with me the entire time, coiled at the back of my mind, present and patient, as if it were waiting to see how far I would go.

Then it was over.

In less than a minute the wound was gone, the skin at her throat perfect and unmarked, as if nothing had ever touched her. I pulled my hands away and the pressure vanished instantly, the ache behind my eyes releasing so fast it left me lightheaded.

I stared down at Fia's throat.

What was that?

I had healed hundreds of wounds in my life. On Cian. On pack members. On strangers. I had never felt anything like that, never encountered resistance that felt so deliberate, so specifically aimed at me.

Was it her?

Did Fia have some kind of innate protection, some instinctive defense against magic?

That made no sense. She was an Omega. They were not built that way.

Unless...

No. I shoved the thought aside before it could take root. This was not the moment. I needed to stay present, to stay useful, to play the role I had been given.

I looked up at Cian and let my smile return. "There," I said lightly. "Much better, don't you think?"

The way he looked at me made the smile falter.

He was staring, his blue eyes locked on me with an intensity that felt wrong, that raised the fine hairs along my arms. He did not look angry. He did not look relieved.

He looked afraid.

The realization hit me hard enough to tighten my chest. Afraid of me. I did not understand it. I had helped him. I had healed his mate. This was supposed to earn trust, gratitude, something even more solid between us.

Instead, he looked like he was deciding whether to run.

"Cian?" I kept my voice soft, gentle, careful. "Are you alright? You look pale."

He blinked and the expression disappeared so quickly I almost convinced myself it had never been there.

"I'm fine," he said. His voice was flat, stripped of warmth. "Thank you. For helping her."

"Of course." I let my smile brighten again, tried to wrap reassurance around it like silk. "I'm happy to help anytime. You know that."

I did not know if he believed me.

And I did not know why he had looked at me like that.

Like I was dangerous.

Like I was something to fear.

Chapter 157: You're on your own Kid

CIAN

I sat there with the weight of it pressing down on my chest until it felt physical, like something heavy had been laid across my ribs and left there on purpose.

Madeline. The magic users. The way they had all turned on me.

The pieces had been there for a while now, scattered across days of unease and half formed suspicion, but they had refused to settle into anything coherent until this moment. I had been accused of killing Ophelia Cottonwood, a witch with enough power and experience to put up a real fight if I had even tried. It had never made sense. Not the accusation, not the certainty with which they had delivered it, especially when the evidence had pointed so clearly to one of their own.

None of that had mattered.

The magical community had closed ranks overnight. Doors shut. Voices went quiet. Allies vanished. I had gone from being tolerated to being a pariah, cut off from the very people who could have balanced the threats pressing in on my pack.

And then Madeline had appeared.

Offering help. Offering loyalty. Offering magic.

At the time it had felt like a miracle, like some small mercy in the middle of a slow collapse. One practitioner willing to stand beside me when every other witch had turned their back. Someone I knew. Someone I trusted. Someone with history, with shared memories, with roots tangled deep in my pack's past.

What if that had been the point?

What if isolating me had been the goal from the beginning, stripping away every other option until there was only one voice left to listen to. Make me dependent. Make me grateful. Make me blind.

It would work better if it came from someone familiar. Someone I already trusted before the ground started giving way beneath my feet.

My jaw tightened until my teeth ached.

And underneath it all was Gabriel. There was no avoiding that truth. Everything rotten that had crept into my life since I took my father's throne traced back to him somehow. The attacks. The instability. The constant pressure testing the limits of my authority. If Gabriel was involved in this, and I knew in my gut that he was, then that meant the rot ran deeper than I wanted to admit.

The door opened.

I looked up as Alpha Julius stepped inside. His hair was dyed black, streaked lightly with gray that he never bothered to hide, and his posture was as rigid and commanding as it had ever been. He took in the room in a single sweep of his eyes, Fia on the bed, me seated beside her, Madeline standing near the wall.

"Is she alright?" he asked.

"She is now," I said, and was vaguely surprised at how steady my voice sounded.

The healer gathered her things with efficient movements, packing her supplies without ceremony. When she finished, she turned toward Julius and me and bowed low, respectful and precise. "I'll be on my way now."

We both nodded. She left without another word, the door closing softly behind her.

Madeline's gaze moved between the two of us, her expression knowing in a way that made my skin prickle. "I can tell a conversation needs to happen," she said lightly. Her smile was pleasant, professional. "So I'll take my leave as well."

She crossed the room with easy, graceful steps and paused beside me. Her hand settled briefly on my shoulder, meant to comfort, meant to reassure. I had to fight the instinct to pull away.

Then she was gone.

Silence stretched out in her wake. Julius remained at the foot of the bed, his hands clasped behind his back, studying me the way he always had. It was the same look that used to make me feel like a boy caught in a lie.

"Why exactly did you invite me?" I asked. I did not soften it.

His eyebrow lifted slightly. "You think I had a nefarious reason?"

"You invited Madeline."

"Did she not help today?" He gestured toward Fia, toward her throat where a vicious wound had been only minutes ago and now there was nothing at all.

"It feels convenient."

Julius sighed, long and heavy, the sound of an elder indulging a disappointment. "This is why I was against you taking your father's throne," he said, shaking his head. "You are not very bright."

Heat flared in my chest, sharp and immediate. "And provoking a dull man with a lot of power does not strike me as smart either."

"I can back most of the shit I say with power as well," he replied calmly. "You are not the only apex predator in this room."

We held each other's gaze, neither of us blinking.

"I actually wanted to see you and the girl you bound yourself to out of pride struggle with something simple," he continued, and there was something almost amused in his voice now. "But I am pleasantly surprised. You work well with her."

His eyes drifted to Fia. She lay still, her breathing slow and even, her face peaceful despite everything that had happened tonight.

"Do you love her?"

The question hit harder than I expected, landing somewhere deep and unguarded. Too sudden. Too personal.

I did what I always did when cornered.

"You seem to cherish this new mate of yours," I said instead of answering. "I could ask you the same."

Julius smiled then, small and genuine in a way that caught me off guard. "I surprise myself," he said. "It seems I am a lover at heart after all."

The admission lingered between us, exposed in a way I had never heard from him before, not from a man like Julius. It felt fragile, like something that could shatter if either of us moved too quickly.

"Since you deflected my question, I'll assume you do care about her," he said at last, folding his arms across his chest. "Which I suppose also means bringing Madeline here wasn't as entertaining as I initially hoped."

Now. Ask now.

"About Madeline," I said, keeping my voice level even as my pulse picked up. "That was entirely your idea? No pressure from anyone else."

His eyes sharpened instantly. "Are you fishing for something?"

"You pushed for Gabriel," I replied, the words coming faster, heavier. "You backed him without hesitation during the contest for Skollrend. Am I really grasping at nothing here?"

Julius was quiet for a long moment. The amusement drained from his face, replaced by something more thoughtful, more guarded. He uncrossed his arms slowly.

"I haven't been in contact with Gabriel for a long time," he said. "The only person I could say was involved at all was Aldric."

My heart slammed hard against my ribs.

"He wouldn't explain himself," Julius went on. "But he was desperate. And with the way he's been scouring for witches these past few days, I'd wager it's something you both need badly."

I didn't respond. I wasn't about to tell him about my mother or why I'd needed magic at all costs. Whatever he saw on my face, he chose not to press.

"Well," I said eventually, breaking the silence, "I suppose that's the end of our conversation."

"Not quite."

I looked up at him and waited.

"I hated the hell out of you, boy."

"I am not a boy," I shot back, the protest automatic, edged with old defensiveness.

Julius chuckled, warm and unexpectedly gentle. "Old habits."

He stepped closer, stopping beside the chair where I sat. His presence felt solid, grounding in a way I hadn't realized I needed.

"The truth is," he said more quietly, "I see now that I was too hard on you. I told myself I was testing you, that I needed proof you were worth the throne before offering any apology. But I don't need that anymore."

I didn't know what to say. The words lodged somewhere behind my ribs and refused to come out.

"So consider this my pathetic apology for making your life harder than it needed to be," he continued, his gaze steady. "Skollrend still stands. You have your flaws, but your father's pack hasn't fallen apart under you. That earns my respect."

He paused, letting it sink in.

"Your father would be proud of you, Cian Donlon."

Everything inside me went still. My breath caught, sharp and sudden, and my heart slowed as if those words had reached in and stilled it by force. I couldn't speak. My throat closed around everything I might have said.

Julius patted my shoulder briefly, almost paternal. "Your mate's family is trouble, though. Keep an eye on that. I'd hate to take back my praise."

Then he turned and left. The door closed behind him with a soft, final sound.

I stayed where I was, staring at Fia as she slept, her face peaceful and untouched now. My mind churned, replaying everything that had been said, everything I'd learned, everything that still didn't sit right.

Raised voices drifted through the door, muffled but unmistakably angry.

I knew them immediately. Alpha Joseph. Luna Isobel.

I stood, legs stiff, and crossed the room in a few long strides before pulling the door open.

They were in the hallway, Joseph's face flushed, jaw clenched hard enough to ache just looking at it. Isobel stood in front of him, her stance defensive, eyes flashing with something sharp and volatile that could have been fear or fury or both.

They both turned when the door opened and froze when they saw me.

Whatever argument had been burning between them died instantly. The silence that followed was thick and uncomfortable, pressing in from all sides.

I looked from one to the other and waited. Waited for an explanation. For an excuse. For anything that justified them fighting outside the room where Fia was recovering from what Hazel and Isobel had done to her.

Neither of them spoke.

The tension stretched on, brittle and ready to break.

So I broke the silence.

Chapter 158: A good name

CIAN

I stepped through the doorway and pulled it shut behind me with more force than necessary. The sound echoed down the hallway, sharp enough to make them both flinch.

"You can carry this dysfunctional family nonsense away from here," I said. My voice came out flat, controlled. "My mate is trying to rest."

Joseph's jaw worked. His face was still flushed, anger simmering just beneath the surface. "About that. I need to see my daughter."

"I'm sure you heard me say she is trying to rest."

"So she will neglect her father now?"

The word hung in the air between us. Neglect. As if Fia owed him something after what had happened. As if he had any right to demand her attention while she lay unconscious, healing from wounds his other daughter had inflicted.

I felt something cold settle in my chest.

"Neglect?" I repeated. The word tasted bitter. "Do you even know what that is?"

Joseph swallowed. His throat bobbed visibly. "She is my daughter. You cannot keep me from her."

"She is unconscious. She cannot see you. And yes, I can."

"She needs to stop with the dramatics." His tone shifted, dismissive now. "I know she is not unconscious."

White hot rage flooded through me so fast it stole my breath. My fingers clenched at my sides, nails biting into my palms hard enough to draw blood. Everything in me wanted to

move, to close the distance between us and make him understand exactly how dangerous those words were.

"Are you implying I am lying?"

Joseph held my gaze, stubborn. "I am implying that you are inclined to protect your mate. But what could I even do to her? She is yours and under your protection now."

"Your presence." I bit the words out. "Your very presence would destabilize her. I cannot imagine the horror she must have endured being in your household."

I turned to face Isobel. She stood there with her spine straight, her expression carefully neutral. Too neutral. Like she was bracing for impact.

"Do you even know what your wife did?"

Joseph laughed. The sound was harsh and theatrical, bouncing off the walls. "No. But I'm sure there is a recording since someone now has a tendency to record every conversation instead of talking it out."

My hands were shaking. I forced them still.

"And you would listen to her?" The question came out quiet, dangerous. "When the mess that was our marriage happened? You didn't stand by her side. Not once."

"I might have been trying to avoid a war." His voice rose defensively. "Given it was a pack as vast and powerful as Skollrend that was offended."

I moved closer. He didn't back down, but something flickered in his eyes. Good. He should be afraid.

"What changed now?" I asked. "You suddenly grown wings?"

"My daughter fucked the standing of our pack today." The words came out bitter, resentful. "Made a fool out of me. We will not hear the end of this for years."

"You should be grateful a name is all you lose."

I took another step. We were close enough now that I could see the vein pulsing in his temple, could smell the anger and fear mixing on his skin.

"Because do not forget. Your daughter Hazel laid a hand on my woman. She tried to kill her." My voice dropped lower. "With a wave of my hand, I can start a war and no one will lift a finger to defend you. I will burn you and your insignificant territory to the ground."

Joseph's face paled.

"So whatever spirits you have taken that makes you think you can wag your tongue here, know that being my father in law will not save you. Not anymore." I let each word land with weight. "I suggest you cool the fuck down and do everything in your power to get spared."

"Alpha Cian, I apologize on behalf of my husband."

Isobel's voice cut through the tension. I turned to look at her, and the disgust must have shown on my face because she took a small step back.

"Shut the fuck up." The words came out cold. "You snake."

"Alpha Cian, you are going too far." Joseph's voice held a warning note, like he still thought he had any authority here.

"Not far enough." I looked at Isobel again. "That murderer does not deserve to speak to me."

"Murderer?" Joseph's confusion sounded genuine.

"Oh, you don't know." I smiled, but there was no humor in it. "Well, let me tell you what your wife had the confidence to say in the full belief that nothing would be done to her. She killed Fia's mother."

"No." The word came out fast, automatic. "Fia's mother died because she contacted the rot."

The conviction in his voice stopped me cold. He believed it. Completely, utterly believed what he was saying. There was no hesitation, no doubt. Just absolute certainty in something that was a lie.

It made me reflect. This was how I sounded. This was how I sounded with Aldric. While Fia was certain something was off with him.

Was this what refusing to see what was right in front of me because acknowledging it would mean accepting that someone I trusted could betray me looked like?

Was this how I had sounded?

Huh.

"It is that confidence that you have in her that could make her confess with the goal of hurting Fia, because she knows nothing would be done to her."

"Alpha Cian, these are cruel accusations." Isobel's voice trembled slightly. "I raised Fia. I cohabited her mother Muna as well. If I had cruel intentions, I would have done it a long time ago."

She took a breath, steadying herself.

"I understand tensions are high for Fia with what my daughter did. But trying to assassinate my character as well is just cruel. I was a mother to her. For a very long time. Why would I do this thing she says I did?"

"It takes everything in me not to break your neck right now." My hands were shaking again. "But I'll go through the right routes."

I turned back to Joseph.

"I want your daughter tried for deception, for murder and for attempted murder."

"Alpha Cian, Alpha Julius forgave Hazel and trying her is our pack business." Isobel's voice had gone sharp, defensive.

"Two of those concern me." I kept my eyes on Joseph. "She deceived me and she attempted to murder my mate. If Silvercreek will not carry it up, Skollrend will and we are not very forgiving, I promise you that. So burying this, it is out of the question."

"Alpha Cian, I understand that emotions are high. But this is too much."

"Too much?" I laughed, and the sound was ugly. "No. You haven't seen much yet."

Silence fell. Joseph and Isobel looked at each other. Something passed between them, some wordless communication that I couldn't read. Then Joseph moved.

His knees hit the floor hard enough that I heard the impact. He bowed his head.

"I am begging you to forgive my daughter."

The sight of an alpha like him on his knees should have satisfied something in me. Should have felt like victory. Instead it just felt hollow.

"And what is so special about getting on your knees?"

Isobel dropped down beside him. Her face was composed but her hands trembled where they rested on her thighs.

"Nothing." Her voice was quiet. "But this is all we can do."

I looked down at them. An Alpha and his Luna on their knees in front of me, begging for mercy they certainly knew they did not deserve. Begging for their daughter who had tried to kill mine.

Fia's face flashed through my mind. The wound on her throat. The blood. The way she had looked at me with trust even as she struggled to breathe.

My jaw clenched so hard it ached.

But there were other considerations. Practical ones. Starting a war with Silvercreek would be satisfying in the moment and devastating in the long run. Gabriel was still out there. The threats against my pack hadn't lessened. I needed to be strategic.

I needed leverage. And only the simplest thing came to mind.

"I will let go of the deception charge." The words came slowly. "But I want something in return."

Joseph's head snapped up. Hope flickered across his face, desperate and pathetic.

"What could that be?"

I looked between them, these two people who had raised Fia and failed her so completely. Who had let one daughter torture another under their own roof. Who had the audacity to come here and demand to see her like they had any right.

"I'll tell you what I want," I said.

Chapter 159: Blood to Blood

ALDRIC

The bathroom door on the second floor clicked shut behind me. I stood there for a moment, letting the silence settle over my shoulders like a familiar coat. The chaos was contained now. Cian had his bleeding omega. Her sister, Hazel had her broken hands, her shattered pride and a new ally in me.

And I had what I came for.

I reached into my chest pocket. My fingers found the handkerchief first. The outer one was white. Pristine. I pulled it out slowly, feeling the weight of what was wrapped inside. The second handkerchief was crimson. Not by design. By opportunity.

I unwrapped it carefully. The fabric was still damp. Still fresh. Blood had a particular smell when it was this new. Metallic. Sharp. Almost sweet if you knew what to look for.

Fia's blood.

I hummed under my breath. A tune I couldn't name but had been stuck in my head since yesterday. My fingers traced the edge of the stained fabric. It was more than I'd hoped for. Much more. I'd expected to have to manufacture an opportunity. Create some elaborate scenario where I could get close enough to take what I needed.

But the universe had delivered it right into my lap.

Well. Technically onto the bathroom floor where I'd knelt beside her while everyone else was distracted. A quick press of the handkerchief against the pooling blood while I pretended to check her pulse. Nobody had noticed. Nobody ever noticed the helpful uncle doing his due diligence.

I pulled the small bottle of sanitizer on the sink. Clear liquid sloshed inside as I unscrewed the cap. The sharp scent of alcohol filled my nostrils. I poured all of it into the sinkhole and watched it slowly drain down the pipes.

Then I washed the bottle clean with water and dapped a generous amount of the water over the bloodied handkerchief, watching as the water mixed with the blood. Red swirled into clear. The liquid dripped down in thin streams.

I held the container beneath it. A makeshift vial I'd made specifically for this purpose. The blood and water mixture collected at the bottom. Diluted. But viable. More than viable.

When the last drop fell I screwed the cap back on the vial. Held it up to the light. The contents caught the fluorescent glow from above. Rudy red. Almost innocent looking.

I allowed myself a small smile.

Then I tossed both handkerchiefs into the waste bin. The white one landed on top. Covering the evidence.

The vial went into my inner pocket. Right next to my heart. I could feel its weight there. Insignificant in terms of mass. Significant in every other way that mattered.

I moved to the sink and turned on the tap again. Water rushed out. Cold first, then gradually warming as I held my hands beneath the stream. I pumped soap from the dispenser. Lathered. Scrubbed between each finger. Under my nails. The water ran clear almost immediately but I kept washing. Thirty seconds. Forty. Until my hands were raw and pink.

I dried them on a paper towel. Tossed it in the bin with the handkerchiefs.

Then I looked up at the mirror.

The bruise was already forming on the left side of my neck. Purple spreading beneath the skin like spilled ink. I touched it gently. Pressed. The pain was immediate and sharp. Cian's elbow had caught me there when I'd tackled him away from Hazel. Not intentionally. Or maybe it was. Hard to say in that moment when my nephew had been fully committed to murder.

That bothered me.

Not the bruise. I'd had worse. Would have worse again. The physical pain was irrelevant. Temporary.

What bothered me was the look in Cian's eyes. The complete and total absence of anything resembling control. There were always limits with Cian. Lines he wouldn't cross no matter how angry he got. Boundaries built from years of careful cultivation. I'd helped shape those boundaries myself. Reinforced them. Made sure they held.

But in that bathroom he'd forgotten they existed.

He'd forgotten I existed.

All that rage. All that violence. All that desperate, clawing need. It had been directed at one thing and one thing only. Protecting her. Saving her. Destroying anything that threatened her.

I'd never seen him like that before. Not even with his mother. Not even when his father had died. There had always been a part of Cian that remained mine. Tethered to me. Listening to me.

But today he'd tried to kill Hazel with me standing right there. Had thrown me off like I was nothing more than an obstacle. Had broken that girl's hand with a viciousness that made even me pause.

And all of it for the omega.

I looked at my reflection. Studied the bruise. Traced the edge of it with my fingertips.

I was losing my hold on Cian. The realization sat heavy in my chest. Uncomfortable. Unacceptable. He was supposed to be mine. My nephew. My protégé. My carefully constructed masterpiece of manipulation and control.

But that girl was unraveling everything.

Thread by thread. Moment by moment. She was pulling him away from me and toward something I couldn't predict. Couldn't control. That made her dangerous in ways Madeline could never be.

Madeline was obvious. Clumsy. A blunt instrument that thought itself a scalpel. But Fia?

Fia was something else entirely.

I pulled the vial back out of my pocket. Held it between thumb and forefinger. The contents shifted. Settled. I'd thought it would take months of plotting to get this. To get what I needed for the tests. For the confirmation.

But she'd handed it to me tonight. Not intentionally of course. But handed it to me all the same.

That bathroom scene. The recording she'd mentioned. The way she'd positioned herself as the victim while Hazel had played perfectly into the villain role. It had been almost too neat. Too convenient.

She'd planned it. I was certain of that now. The shattered glass. The cut throat. Just deep enough to bleed impressively but not deep enough to actually endanger herself. She'd known exactly where to place the shard. Exactly how much pressure to apply.

She'd set a trap and Hazel had walked right into it.

More than that. She'd set a trap knowing I would be there. Knowing Cian would lose control. Knowing the bond would lead him straight to her at exactly the right moment for maximum impact.

It was a message. Crimson clear as the blood I now held in my hand. She was telling me she understood the game we were playing. That she was willing to match me move for move. That she'd drag herself through hell if it meant dragging me down with her.

Poetic. Really.

If she wasn't such a massive thorn in my side I might have appreciated the artistry of it.

But appreciation didn't change the reality. She was becoming a problem. A variable I hadn't fully accounted for. I'd underestimated her. That much was obvious now. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

I tucked the vial back into my pocket and pulled out my phone. The screen lit up. I scrolled through my contacts until I found the name I needed.

Madeline.

My thumb hovered over her name. Madeline was supposed to be a slow burn. A gradual reintroduction into Cian's life. A familiar face. A comfortable presence. Someone who could remind him of who he was before the omega. Before the bond. Before everything got so complicated.

But slow wasn't going to work anymore. Not with Cian spiraling this fast. Not with Fia gaining ground.

I needed to accelerate the timeline. Push Madeline forward even harder. Use tonight's chaos as the opening I needed.

I typed quickly. My thumbs moved across the screen with practiced efficiency.

Find Cian. Use this opportunity to get closer to him. Be there for him. Help the omega if you must. Build trust. I need you in position before Morrigan.

I read it over once. Twice. Then hit send.

The message delivered immediately. Read receipt showed up seconds later. Madeline was alert and ready which was good.

I slipped the phone back into my pocket and let my hand rest there. Feeling the shape of the vial through the fabric. Such a small thing. Such enormous implications.

The tests would tell me what I needed to know. Confirm what I suspected. And once I had that confirmation I could move forward with the next phase. The necessary phase.

But that was later. First I needed to deal with the Cian situation. Needed to pull him back from the edge before he fell completely into whatever this thing with Fia was becoming. There were other options. Bloodier options. Permanent solutions to temporary problems.

But those were last resorts. I preferred cleaner methods. Surgical strikes rather than butchery. Madeline would work. She had to work. Because if she didn't...

Well. I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.

I looked at myself in the mirror one more time. The bruise stared back at me. A reminder. A warning. Cian had hurt me tonight. Not badly. Not seriously. But he'd done it without hesitation. Without thought.

That couldn't happen again.

I smoothed down my jacket and adjusted my collar to hide most of the bruising. Ran a hand through my hair. Composed myself back into the concerned uncle. The helpful family member. The man everyone trusted.

The mask settled into place like it always did.

I smiled at my reflection.

Fia thought she was clever. Thought she'd won some sort of victory tonight by surviving. By getting her evidence. By turning everyone against Hazel.

But she'd also given me exactly what I needed. Her blood. Her old enemies. Her confidence that she could play this game and win.

She was about to learn something important. Something fundamental about the difference between us.

I'd been playing games like this since before she was born. Had perfected the art of manipulation while she was still learning to walk. Had buried bodies she didn't even know existed.

She wanted to match my madness? Fine. I'd show her exactly how deep it ran. How far I was willing to go. How little I cared about collateral damage.

Starting with that vial in my pocket.

Chapter 160: Curiosity and the cat

MADELINE

I walked back toward the ballroom slowly. My heels clicked against the marble but the sound felt distant, like it belonged to someone else. The conversation with Cian replayed in my head. The way he had looked at me. That flash of fear in his eyes when I finished healing Fia.

It bothered me more than I wanted to admit.

But I couldn't tell why that look had been on his face. I had done nothing to warrant it.

He was just probably bothered.... Bothered about what has happened to Fia.

My phone rang. I pulled it from my clutch and looked at the screen. Aldric's name glowed there, predictable and unwelcome. I sighed and answered.

Because if I didn't, it was just going to be a problem later.

"I'm behind you." He said when I put the phone to my ear.

I stopped walking and proceeded to turn. And there he was, standing in the corridor with that smile. The one that made me want to wipe it off his face. I frowned at him.

He ended the call and walked toward me. When he was close enough, he said, "Keep walking and please smile. At least pretend you don't despise me at least."

I obeyed and immediately started walking again. Just like he asked, I let my expression soften into something more neutral. He fell into step beside me.

"So how was it?" he asked.

"How was what?"

"You helped heal Fia. How grateful was my nephew?"

I stopped walking again and turned to face him fully. "That is what you are curious about?"

"Of course." He tilted his head slightly. "I did promise to help reignite your love story. Remember?"

The words hit wrong. Too casual. Too confident. Like he actually believed he had any control over what happened between Cian and me.

"Oh please, you want to be Alpha of Skollrend," I said, keeping my voice low. "But you don't have the balls to come out as public enemy number one. Which I will never get. Because your brother had no problem showing his teeth. Why won't you show what beast you are?"

Aldric's smile didn't falter. "There was so much about everything you don't know about. Even my good nephew is seeing everything through rose colored glasses."

I waited and let him continue.

"But while you can distrust me all you want," he said, "know this. I want you by his side."

"Because I am easy to control."

"Exactly." His smile widened. There was no shame in it. No pretense.

It was the one thing I was grateful for about the man. Once he didn't have to hide his colors with you, he could be honest. Mostly at least.

I looked at him for a long moment. "An Omega cannot be that hard to contain? Is she really that free of a bird? I would hate that she has so much power even against you. Given I am a great witch and I am still at your mercy."

Something shifted in his expression. Not quite concern but something close to it. "Well... I know nothing about her. Her origins for example. She is very suspicious of me and I want to keep this as mostly bloodless as I can."

He paused. Looked at me more carefully.

"And there is something off about her."

My attention sharpened. I stared at him. "What is off about her?"

His eyes gleamed. "I see the light in your eyes. What did you notice?"

"Show me your hands and I will show you mine."

Aldric laughed softly. "She performed the miracle you were supposed to perform."

I blinked. "What does that mean?"

His smile returned. "It might sound crazy. But she alongside the healers at Skollrend managed to break the spell of an alchemized poison."

The words landed hard. I felt my breath catch. "That isn't possible."

But even as I said it, my mind went back. To the healing spell. To that resistance I had felt when I tried to close Fia's wound. It hadn't been random. Hadn't been accidental. It had felt intentional. Like something inside her had noticed what I was doing and pushed back.

Aldric snapped his fingers in front of my face. The sound pulled me out of my thoughts. I looked at him.

"What are your cards?" he asked. "You look like you have discovered something."

I hesitated. Weighed my options. Then decided honesty was worth more than secrecy right now. "If what you are saying is correct, then it wasn't entirely in my head."

"Go on."

"When I performed the healing spell on the Omega," I said slowly, "it felt like she was fighting back against my magic."

Aldric's expression sharpened. Interest flickered across his face, bright and hungry. "Interesting."

He reached into his pocket and pulled something out. A vial. Small. Glass. Filled with dark red liquid that caught the light.

Blood.

"Your father is still good with blood spells, is he not?" he asked.

I stared at the vial. "Whose blood is that?"

"The lovely Omega." He held it out toward me. "I want to know every secret her blood hides. Secrets she might not even know herself. So send this to your father."

I didn't move at first. I just looked at the vial. At the blood inside it. Fia's blood.

This was crossing a line. I knew that. Blood magic was invasive in ways most people didn't understand. It revealed things that were meant to stay hidden. Private things. Personal things. Using someone's blood without their knowledge or consent was a violation that went beyond simple betrayal.

But I thought about the resistance I had felt. About the way Cian had looked at me with fear in his eyes. About the fact that Fia had somehow helped break an alchemized poison, something that should have been impossible for an ordinary Omega.

What was she?

Aldric was still holding the vial out. Waiting. Patient in that infuriating way of his.

I reached out and took it. The glass was cool against my palm. The blood inside moved slightly, thick and dark.

"What exactly do you want to know?" I asked.

"Everything." His smile returned. "Her lineage. Her talents. Whatever makes her different from other Omegas. Whatever makes her dangerous."

Dangerous. The word sat heavy between us.

I closed my fingers around the vial. Felt the weight of it. The responsibility. The wrongness of what I was agreeing to do.

"My father will have questions," I said.

"Tell him whatever you need to. Just get me my answers."

I nodded slowly and slipped the vial into my clutch. It settled next to my phone, hidden but present. A secret I was now carrying.

Aldric's hand came up and patted my shoulder. The gesture felt almost friendly. Almost warm. But there was nothing warm about him. Nothing genuine.

"You're doing the right thing," he said.

I didn't believe him. But I didn't argue either.

"Is there anything else?" I asked.

"Not for now." He stepped back and put some distance between us. "Go back to the ballroom. Be seen. Have fun. Be sociable. Take it all in before you stitch up Morrigan and become indispensable once more."

"And you?"

"I have other business to attend to." He turned to leave. Then paused. Looked back at me. "Madeline. Whatever you discover about her, tell me first."

It wasn't a request.

"Understood," I said.

He left. Walked down the corridor and disappeared around the corner. I stood there alone, my clutch heavier than it had been a few minutes ago. The vial of blood pressed against my phone. A reminder. A burden.

I thought about Fia. About the way she had looked lying on that bed. Pale. Vulnerable. Unconscious.

Guilt tried to surface. I pushed it down. Buried it beneath practicality. Beneath survival. Beneath the need to understand what I was dealing with.

If Fia was dangerous, I needed to know also. If she had abilities that could threaten me or my plans or my future with Cian, I needed to know.

This was necessary.

I repeated that to myself as I started walking again. Headed back toward the ballroom. Toward the music and the lights and the people who had no idea what had just happened in these quiet corridors.

My hand tightened around my clutch. The vial inside pressed against my palm through the fabric.

Necessary.

I would send it to my father first thing in the morning. He would perform the blood spells. He would uncover whatever secrets Fia's blood held. And then I and Aldric would know exactly what I was dealing with.

The ballroom doors appeared ahead. I smoothed my dress. Checked my expression. Made sure nothing showed on my face that shouldn't be there.

Then I stepped inside. Back into the party. Back into the performance.

But I couldn't stop thinking about the resistance I had felt. About the way Fia's body had pushed back against my magic. About what it meant.

What are you, I thought. What are you really?