

# To ruin an Omega

## #Chapter 161: Mr Do Better - Read To ruin an Omega

### Chapter 161: Mr Do Better

#### Chapter 161: Mr Do Better

##### CIAN

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 paused. Let the silence stretch. "Fia told me what her favorite food is. Something her mother used to make for her with her own recipe. She says no one could ever get it right." I kept my eyes on Isobel. "But yours was manageable."

I pulled out my phone, opened the notes app. The screen glowed between us.

"I want the recipe. The exact way you prepare it. Written here."

The confusion that crossed their faces was almost comical. Joseph's brow furrowed. Isobel's mouth opened slightly, then closed again. They looked at each other, then back at me. Like they were trying to find the trick, the hidden blade in my words.

I held the phone out. Waited.

"Too lax?" I asked.

"No." Joseph's response came fast. "I apologize."

He reached for the phone. His hands were steadier than I expected as he took it from me. I watched his thumbs move across the screen, typing slowly but deliberately. The silence was thick. Isobel shifted beside him but said nothing. I could hear Joseph's breathing, could see the slight tremor in his fingers that he was trying to hide.

The seconds dragged. I kept my expression neutral, my posture relaxed. Inside, something twisted. This recipe wouldn't fix anything. Wouldn't heal the wounds or undo the years of neglect. But it was something Fia wanted. Something that connected her to a mother she'd lost. And if I could give her that, then I would take it from these people who had taken so much from her already.

"I'm done."

Joseph held the phone out. I took it back and looked at the screen.

Palm oiled beans. The ingredients were listed carefully. Measurements in cups and tablespoons. Instructions that went step by step through the preparation. Soak the beans overnight. Rinse three times. The specific type of palm oil to use. The way to season it, when to add each ingredient. It was detailed. Thorough.

"I see."

I locked the phone and slipped it back into my pocket. Joseph was still on his knees, looking up at me with that desperate hope in his eyes. Pathetic.

"Does that mean you will forget the deception charge?"

"Yes."

The relief that flooded his face made my stomach turn.

"But your daughter still has to pay for her other crimes."

"I want that too." Joseph's voice came quickly. "I promise Hazel will not get off this easy."

"Good." I crossed my arms. "As long as she faces the elder court."

Isobel's voice cut in, sharp with panic. "If she faces them..." She looked at her husband. "She would be in trouble. It would be bad for our pack."

I looked at her. Really looked at her. This woman who had raised Fia after killing her mother. Who had the gall to play victim here.

"Hate us all you want," Isobel continued. Her voice had gone softer, pleading. "But we are still your in-laws."

The word felt wrong coming from her mouth. In-laws. Like there was some bond there, some obligation I owed them. Like they hadn't forfeited any claim to connection the moment they let one daughter nearly kill the other.

"Then your daughter better have a good defense."

I turned to leave. My hand was on the door handle when Joseph's voice stopped me.

"If you knew Fia, you would know she wouldn't want this for her sister."

I paused. I didn't bother to turn around.

"She is only angry right now," Joseph went on. "She was angry that I did not believe her. Which is why she took such a drastic choice." He was talking faster now, words tumbling out. "Now... now that the truth is out... She will want to drop this."

My jaw tightened. I looked back at him over my shoulder.

"She won't."

Joseph opened his mouth. I cut him off.

"But let us say she does." I turned fully to face them again. "I don't want to."

Joseph's face fell.

"Deception aside. Attempted murder is attempted murder." I let each word land clearly. "And she has done it before. With that Sentinel. I think his name was Milo."

The color drained from Joseph's face.

"His family would want justice too. Don't you think?"

The silence that followed was absolute. I could see Joseph processing it, see the moment he realized the depth of what Hazel had done. What he had failed to see. Isobel had gone very still beside him.

I smiled. There was no warmth in it.

"Rest, in-laws. You will need it."

I didn't wait for a response. I pushed the door open and stepped back into the room, pulling it shut firmly behind me. The silence inside was a relief after the tension in the hallway. Peaceful. Safe.

Fia lay exactly where I'd left her. Her face was pale against the pillow, but her breathing was even. Strong.

I moved to the bedside. Looked down at her. Even unconscious, she was beautiful. My chest ached with it.

I reached out and ran my fingers through her hair. The strands were soft, sliding through my fingers like silk. I'd almost lost this. Almost lost her because for the moment, I'd been too blind to see what was right in front of me. Because I'd let the past hold on to me again.

Never again.

"It's time to go home now."

I said it quietly, even though I knew she couldn't hear me. Maybe I was saying it for myself. Maybe I just needed to say the words out loud, to make them real.

I slipped one arm under her knees and the other behind her shoulders. She was lighter than she should be. Had she been eating enough? Another thing I'd failed to notice. Another way I'd let her down.

I lifted her carefully, cradling her against my chest. Her head lolled slightly before settling against my shoulder. The weight of her felt right. Felt like something I should have been protecting all along.

Right now, all that mattered was getting her somewhere safe. Somewhere that was ours.

Home. Where I could watch over her properly. Where I could make sure that when she woke up, she would see that things were different now. That I was different. That I would believe her, protect her, stand by her the way I should have from the beginning.

The recipe in my phone felt like a small thing. Inadequate, really, in the face of everything else. But it was a start. A tangible piece of her mother's memory that I could give back to her. Something that said I heard what you wanted. I paid attention. You matter.

I carried her toward the door. My arms were steady. My grip was sure. Whatever came next, whatever battles we'd face with her family or with Gabriel or with any other threat that emerged, we'd face it together.

This time, I'd do better.

I had to.

## **Chapter 162: The garden**

### **FIA**

The darkness gave way to gold.

It was warm and it felt soft. Afternoon sunlight filtered through leaves above me. I blinked and the world came into focus. A garden stretched out before me. Rows of herbs and flowers I half recognized. The scent hit me next. The earth... green things and something else. Something that made my chest ache.

I knew this place.

"Fia, come here."

My head turned toward the voice. My body moved before my mind caught up. Small steps. Child steps. I looked down and saw my hands. Tiny. Unmarked by scars or years.

Mother knelt between two raised beds. Her hair fell loose down her back. No pins. No careful arrangement. Just her. The sun caught in the strands and turned them copper.

She smiled when she saw me. That smile I'd almost forgotten. The one that reached her eyes and crinkled the corners.

"Look at this." She gestured to a plant with silver-green leaves. "Do you remember what this is?"

I shook my head. The motion felt strange. Like moving through water.

"Lavender." She plucked a sprig and held it out to me. "Here."

I took it. The leaves felt soft. Fuzzy almost.

"Smell it," she said.

I brought it to my nose and inhaled. The scent filled my lungs. Sweet but sharp. Floral but not overwhelming. Something that made my shoulders drop and my breathing slow.

"What do you smell?" Mother's voice stayed gentle. Patient.

"Flowers," I said. My voice came out higher. Younger. "But not like the roses in the main garden. This is different."

"Good." She nodded. "What else?"

I breathed in again. Deeper this time. "Something clean. Like soap but not soap."

"Anything else?"

I closed my eyes. Focused. "Something bitter underneath. Just a little."

When I opened my eyes, Mother was watching me. Her expression had changed. Pride shone there. Clear and unmistakable.

"You have a gift." She reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "You should always trust your sense of smell. Ours is unique."

The words settled into me. Warm and certain.

"Is it something specific to our side of the family?" The question tumbled out before I could stop it. "Like how Hazel heals much faster than me?"

Mother's hand stilled. Her smile didn't fade but something shifted in her eyes.

She looked at me for a long moment. Then she nodded. "Of course."

I scuffed my foot against the dirt. "That isn't as cool though."

"But it is." Mother leaned forward. Her hands moved to another plant. This one had broader leaves. Darker green. "With different herbs, you can achieve several results. Healing. Soothing. Protection. Some can even harm if used wrong."

The words stirred something in me. Unease crept up my spine.

"We only know this because Omegas have weaker genes right?" I kept my eyes on the plant. "Ours is even worse than most."

"Who told you that?"

The sharpness in her voice made me look up. Mother's expression had hardened. Not angry. This was something else. Something protective and fierce.

"I heard the servants," I said. My voice came out small.

Mother set down the plant she'd been holding. She shifted closer and took both my hands in hers. Her palms were warm. Calloused from the garden work.

"Trust me." She spoke slowly. Deliberately. Each word its own sentence. "There is nothing defective about you. Or me."

I nodded. The tightness in my chest loosened just a fraction.

"Hazel will go visit grandpa and grandma soon." I changed the subject. Turned it toward safer ground. "Since they don't want us there. Can we go to yours?"

Mother's smile died.

The change happened so fast I almost missed it. One moment she looked open and warm. The next her face went blank. Carefully blank.

"Come here, Fia."

She pulled me closer. Her fingers moved to my hair. She gently touched it. Smoothing. Arranging. The motions felt automatic. Like she needed to keep her hands busy.

"I don't have a family outside of here." Her voice stayed level but something underneath it cracked. "You and this pack and your father are my family."

"Why?" I tilted my head back to look at her. "Did they die?"

Mother's hands paused. Just for a heartbeat. Then continued their gentle movements.

"It was a horrid thing that happened." She stared at something beyond me. Beyond the garden. "But it was a long time ago."

The weight in her words pressed down on both of us. Heavy and suffocating.

"But you need to know that there is nothing wrong with you, Fia." She focused on me again. Really looked at me. "You are magic."

I wrinkled my nose. "Everybody's parents says that. Even stepmother I am sure."

"No." Mother shook her head. A small smile tugged at her lips. Real this time. "I mean it, Fia. You are going to be a miracle. You never fall sick like me. You have Alpha blood in you."

"Stepmother says I got most of everything from you." The words came out matter of fact. Clinical. "I'm still an Omega."

Mother leaned in close. So close I could see the flecks of gold in her eyes. I could also smell the lavender on her fingers.

"I'll tell you a secret."

Her lips moved. Formed words. But no sound came out. The garden blurred at the edges. Colors bled together. The warmth of the sun faded.

"Mother?" I reached for her. "What secret?"

But she was already dissolving. Breaking apart like mist. The garden went with her. The plants and the soil and the golden light. Everything pulled away like someone yanked a tablecloth from underneath a full table setting.

Darkness rushed back in.

Then nothing.

Then something.

A rumble beneath me. Steady and rhythmic. The hum of an engine. I felt movement. The gentle sway of a vehicle in motion.

My eyes opened slowly. The world came back in pieces.

Dim interior.

The smell of leather.

The press of a shoulder against my temple.

I lifted my head. Pain throbbed at my throat. But when I reached for it, there was nothing there.

I turned and looked up.

Cian stared down at me. His expression shifted from distant to focused the moment our eyes met.

"Hey," he said.

Something wet tracked down my cheek. Then another. I realized then that I was crying. Not sobbing. Just silent tears that slipped free without permission.

"What is wrong?" Cian's voice carried a note of concern I rarely heard from him.

I lifted a hand to my face. Wiped at the tears. They kept coming anyway.

"I had a dream." The words scraped out of my throat. Raw and painful.

Cian didn't respond right away. He just watched me. Waited for me to continue or fall back to sleep. I couldn't tell which he expected.

But I couldn't sleep. Not now. Not with the memory of Mother's face so fresh. Not with her voice still echoing in my ears. Not with the secret she almost told me hanging there. Unfinished. Unknown.

It was a memory. A memory I didn't quite remember because it was so long ago.

I pressed my hand to my head. The motion did nothing to stop the ache building behind my eyes.

Finally, he spoke. "What did you dream about?"

"I'm not sure." I confessed.

### **Chapter 163: A Family of Beasts**

**HAZEL**

My phone vibrated against my thigh. Once. Twice. Three times in quick succession. The screen lit up through the thin fabric of my dress, casting a pale glow that made my stomach clench.

Father.

I didn't need to look to know. The buzzing continued, relentless and angry, each ring a demand I couldn't bring myself to answer. Not here. Not with all these eyes on me.

The stares had started the moment I'd left that bathroom. Whispers followed me through the hallways like smoke, clinging to my skin, suffocating. I kept my head down, my broken hands tucked against my sides where the blood had finally stopped dripping but the pain still screamed with every heartbeat even if it was starting to heal now.

"Evil bitch."

The words drifted from somewhere behind me. It was a woman's voice, sharp with disgust.

"So cruel."

Another voice joined in. Male this time. Deep and condemning.

"Goddess, she reeks of wickedness."

My jaw clenched so hard I thought my teeth might crack. How dare they. How fucking dare they judge me when half of them probably had secrets just as dark. Darker, even. They just hadn't had theirs ripped open and displayed for everyone to see. They hadn't been exposed the way I had.

The phone buzzed again. And again. The vibrations felt like accusations.

I pressed my ruined hands tighter against my dress and kept walking. Each step was deliberate. Measured. I wouldn't run. Wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing me scatter like a frightened animal.

But inside, everything was collapsing.

This wasn't how tonight was supposed to go. I was supposed to walk into this gathering and steal the attention of every unmated Alpha in the room. I was supposed to remind Fia of her place at the bottom where she belonged. Instead, the table had turned and I was the one being ground into the dirt.

The phone went silent for exactly three seconds before my mother's text came through. I felt the buzz pattern, different from a call. Shorter. More final.

I pulled the phone out with trembling fingers. The screen was smeared with dried blood, but I could still read the message clearly enough.

'Come to the parking lot or your father leaves you.'

My breath caught. Left me. Here. Like I was nothing more than trash to be discarded.

I stared at the words until they blurred. Until I had to blink to clear my vision. This couldn't be real. This couldn't be what my life had become.

But it was.

I turned toward the exit. My legs felt disconnected from my body, moving on autopilot while my mind screamed protests that went nowhere. The hallway stretched endlessly ahead, and behind me the whispers grew louder, bolder now that I was leaving.

Good riddance. I hoped they choked on their self-righteousness.

The cool night air hit my face when I pushed through the doors. It should have been refreshing after the stifling atmosphere inside, but instead it just made me feel more exposed. More vulnerable. I scanned the parking lot, looking for Father's car among the rows of expensive vehicles that gleamed under the security lights.

There. I found him.

Near the back, away from the main entrance. Of course he'd park somewhere discrete. Somewhere he wouldn't be seen associating with his disgrace of a daughter.

I walked toward it. Each step sent jolts of pain through my hands, but I barely felt it anymore. The physical pain had become background noise to the louder agony eating through my chest.

The car's headlights flashed once. Twice. A signal. Or a warning.

I got closer. Father stood beside the driver's side door, his silhouette rigid with fury even from a distance. Mother was near the passenger side, her posture tense. Waiting.

"Where were you?"

Father's voice cut across the parking lot before I was even within normal speaking distance. His tone was cold and demanding.

I didn't answer. Couldn't. What was I supposed to say? That I'd been processing the complete destruction of my life? That I'd been trying not to fall apart in front of everyone who wanted to see me broken?

I reached them and stopped a few feet away. Father took a step toward me, closing the distance. His face was flushed, his jaw tight.

"I asked a question."

His hand came up. Fast. Instinctive. I'd seen that motion a thousand times before but it had never been directed at me. Not like this. Not with this much rage behind it.

I didn't flinch. I didn't move. I just watched his palm rise and prepared for the impact.

"That is enough."

Mother's voice was sharp as she moved between us. Her hand caught Father's wrist, stopping him mid-swing. She looked at him with an expression I couldn't read in the dim light.

"We should just go."

Father stared at her for a long moment. Then at me. Something ugly twisted across his face before he turned away, swearing under his breath. He yanked open the car door and dropped into the driver's seat with enough force to rock the vehicle.

The engine roared to life. The headlights blazed bright, washing everything in harsh white light that made my eyes water. Or maybe that was something else entirely.

Mother grabbed my arm. Her fingers dug into my skin through the thin fabric of my dress.

"Just get in." Her voice was low. Urgent. "Do not piss your father off."

I let her pull me toward the car. Let her guide me into the back seat like I was a child who couldn't manage on my own. Maybe I couldn't. Maybe I'd lost the right to make my own decisions the moment everything had fallen apart.

The door slammed shut behind me. Mother climbed into the passenger seat. The Sentinel who'd been waiting in the driver's seat beside Father started the car moving before I'd even fastened my seatbelt.

We pulled out of the parking lot in silence. Father's hands gripped the steering wheel so tight his knuckles had gone white. His breathing was harsh, audible even over the hum of the engine.

"Fuck him."

The words burst out of Father suddenly. Violently. Like they'd been building pressure and finally exploded.

I stared at the back of his head. Why was he so bothered? I was the one who'd been humiliated. I was the one whose reputation had been shredded in front of everyone. The story would spread to our pack before we even got home. The elders would demand answers. Justice. A retrial.

Hopefully Father would show his power for once and refuse that mess. Surely he had enough authority to push back.

"We need to talk about strategies."

Mother's voice broke through my thoughts. She'd turned in her seat to look at me, her expression composed in a way that felt forced. Manufactured.

"There will be questions when we get to the pack. Demands for fairness about what happened to the Sentinel Milo."

The name hit me like cold water.

"What?"

The word came out sharper than I intended. Louder. Both my parents turned to look at me. Father's eyes found mine in the rearview mirror, dark and warning.

"Please shut up right now." Mother's voice had gone hard. "We are trying to save you."

"Why would I face a trial for Milo?" My voice pitched higher despite my efforts to control it. "He was killed by the judgment of the elder court. For rape. That still stands."

Father laughed. The sound was bitter and humorless, bouncing around the car's interior like broken glass.

"But that is not what you said in the tape."

"I said I was trying to get on Fia's skin!" The words exploded out of me. "I was trying to hurt her. That's what I said."

"Who will believe that?" Father's voice dripped with scorn. He caught my eyes again in the mirror. "Even if that was the case, Skollrend wants you to face the elders for attempted murder. Do you know what the punishment for that is? Demotion."

Demotion. The word should have terrified me. Should have been the worst possible outcome. But my mind had snagged on something else entirely.

The murder charge. The accusation that I'd framed Milo. That I'd lied about the rape. That I'd gotten an innocent man killed.

The punishment for murder wasn't demotion.

It was death.

My hands started shaking. The pain from my broken fingers flared hot and sharp, but it was nothing compared to the ice spreading through my chest.

I couldn't die. I couldn't. Not like this. Not for something that should have stayed buried.

Mother reached back and grabbed my hand. I gasped at the contact, at the way it sent agony shooting up my arm. She didn't let go.

"Do not worry." Her voice had softened, become almost soothing. "We will find a way around this. Milo's case can be put aside and killed before it gains any traction. We just have to make sure he doesn't have any family that still holds resentment for what happened to him."

"You think we have money to just give around?" Father's voice rose again. "It would make us look fucking guilty. Susceptible to blackmail."

"Get with the times, Joseph." Mother's tone turned sharp. Impatient. "You cannot be that naive. We have to kill them. Anyone with a trace of his blood needs to die."

The words hung in the air. Casual. Matter of fact. Like she was discussing what to have for dinner instead of planning multiple murders.

My parents kept talking. Planning. Arguing about logistics and timing and who would be easiest to eliminate first. It was clear they didn't even know anything about the sentinel and honestly, neither did I. Their voices blurred together into white noise that I couldn't process.

My clutch sat in my lap. The small black bag felt heavier than it should. I opened it with trembling fingers, careful not to jostle my broken hand too much.

The business card was still there. Pristine white against the dark lining. I pulled it out, angling it to catch the light from passing streetlamps.

The text was simple. A phone number. Nothing else.

Save as Gabriel, Aldric had said.

I didn't know who Gabriel was. Didn't know what Aldric's endgame was or why he'd been so interested in Fia's mother. But right now, staring at this card while my parents planned to murder innocent people to cover up my crimes, I knew one thing with absolute certainty.

I needed salvation.

More than ever. More than anything.

There was no way my story was ending here. No way I was going down for this. Not when I'd come so close to having everything I wanted. Not when Fia was supposed to be the one suffering, not me.

I closed my fingers around the card. The edges bit into my palm, sharp and real and solid.

Never.

My story wasn't ending here.

It couldn't.

### **Chapter 164: Closer to peace**

#### **FIA**

I blinked against the dim interior of the car. My fingers found my throat again, searching for phantom pain that wasn't there. The tears kept sliding down my cheeks in steady tracks. I couldn't seem to stop them.

"What is wrong?" Cian asked.

I dragged my hand across my face. The wetness smeared but more tears replaced them immediately. My chest felt tight. Compressed.

"I had a dream." My voice came out rougher than I expected. Like I'd been screaming.

Cian stayed quiet. He just looked at me with that focused intensity he sometimes got. The kind that made me feel like I was the only thing in the world worth paying attention to. I didn't know if he wanted me to keep talking or if he thought I might fall back asleep. Either way, he waited.

But sleep felt impossible now. Mother's face hung in my mind too clearly. Too vividly. Her smile. Her voice. That secret she'd almost told me before everything dissolved into nothing. The memory had been real. Something from when I was small. Something I'd buried or forgotten. Something that hurt to remember.

My head throbbed. I pressed my palm against my temple but the ache only deepened.

"What did you dream about?" Cian finally asked.

"I'm not sure." The confession slipped out easily. Too easily.

I looked around the car properly for the first time since waking. The seats. The windows showing darkness outside. The quiet hum of the engine beneath us.

"Are we leaving the party?"

"It's late already." Cian shifted slightly. His shoulder moved against mine.

"Did I cause you trouble?" The question felt necessary. Important somehow.

"No." He said it simply. Without hesitation.

I waited for more. He usually gave more.

"A lot happened." He continued after a moment. "Rather than giving the gossip brigade something new to work with, I figured we should go home. I also didn't want your parents cornering you and pressuring you into accepting their ass apology."

The corner of my mouth lifted despite everything. Despite the tears that still hadn't stopped. Despite the weight in my chest.

"I wouldn't." I meant it too.

"I know."

"Seeing my father still defend and protect Hazel when he never did that for me." I paused. Swallowed around the lump in my throat. "It sort of opened my eyes completely. He never loved me or Mother. He just wanted a mate of fate and he hated the complexities that came with it."

Cian's jaw tightened. I saw the muscle jump there.

"What about Madeline?" The question came out before I could stop it.

Cian swallowed. The motion was visible. Deliberate.

"She's in the car with Aldric and Elara."

I nodded. Tried to keep my expression neutral. Tried not to let how much that bothered me show too obviously.

"Did you—" I started, then stopped.

Anything I said would reveal too much. Would show exactly how jealous I'd been. How hard I'd tried to not let Madeline's presence affect me. How badly I'd failed at that particular task.

"Madeline wants to help my mother with her magic." Cian said it plainly. Matter of fact.

I turned to look at him properly. "Huh?"

"I think you should know that." He met my gaze without flinching. "Considering you're shielding again."

Heat crept up my neck. I'd thought I was being subtle about it. Apparently not subtle enough.

"Nothing is going to happen between me and Madeline." He spoke slowly. Carefully. "I promise you that."

My cheeks burned. I could feel the flush spreading across my face. I managed to keep my voice level though. Mostly level.

"I wasn't thinking that."

"You're a horrible liar." The hint of amusement in his tone made my embarrassment worse.

I opened my mouth to protest but he continued.

"I want to promise you though." His voice dropped lower. Serious again. "Whatever hell you went through with your father at Silvercrest, you will never have to face it at Skollrend."

The words hit me harder than they should have. Settled into my chest and wrapped around my ribs. I reached for his hand without thinking. Found it warm and solid. Real. I rested my head back against his shoulder. The position felt natural now. Easy.

"You promise?"

He nodded. I felt the movement more than saw it.

My mind drifted back to the party. To Isobel's confession. To the revelation that had shattered something inside me. She'd killed Mother. Suffocated her. Which meant the cure I had been working on for the rot had somehow worked. At least enough to cure the disease first.

Alchemized poison. The rot. Was it something I could actually do? Something I'd inherited?

"I want to get justice for my mother." The words came out quiet. More to myself than to Cian.

"That might be hard." Cian's response was immediate but not dismissive.

I lifted my head from his shoulder. Turned to face him again.

"She killed my mother."

"I believe you." He said it without hesitation. Without doubt. "But she was diseased with the rot and on the last days of her life. When she died, no foul play was detected. This would be hard to pin on her."

Frustration bubbled up in my throat. Hot and bitter.

"So you're telling me to just let it go?"

"I didn't say that." Cian's expression stayed calm. Measured. "She cares a lot for her daughter. I saw it. And I made sure to force the hands of your parents to make sure that Hazel faces the charges of murder for the dead sentinel and attempted murder for what she did to you."

I stared at him and tried to process what he was saying.

"She'll be tried by the elders." He continued. "If she wants a charge to be dropped for the sake of her beloved daughter, she can consider catching one for her. She can confess."

The logic made sense. Brutal sense. The kind that would force Isobel to choose between her freedom and Hazel's life.

"You're not wrong." I admitted slowly. "But Isobel is not that much of a mother."

Would she really sacrifice herself for Hazel?

This was the same woman who had spent years shielding her daughter at every turn. The same woman who had killed, not out of desperation, but to settle an age old score against me and my mother. She had just confessed to murder, not with remorse, but to provoke me, to turn it into some twisted contest between us. And the worst part was that I felt a strange calm at the idea of Hazel finally being forced to face the consequences of her actions.

But confessing to the elders was different. That meant punishment. Real punishment. Not just words spoken in the heat of the moment.

"We'll just have to wait and see then." Cian said.

I turned his words over in my mind. Examined them from different angles. The plan had teeth. It could work. If Isobel loved Hazel as much as she claimed. If she was willing to pay the price for all the things she'd done.

The car rolled through the darkness. Steady and smooth. Taking us away from Alpha Julius' estate. Away from my father and Isobel and Hazel. Away from all the ghosts that now lived in that place.

My tears had finally stopped. The tracks on my cheeks dried sticky and uncomfortable. I wiped at them again with the back of my hand.

"Thank you." The words felt inadequate but necessary.

Cian glanced at me. His expression softened just slightly. Just enough.

"You don't need to thank me."

"I do though." I insisted. "You didn't have to do any of this. You didn't have to push my parents. Didn't have to make sure Hazel faces justice. You could have just let it all go."

"No." He shook his head. "I couldn't."

The certainty in his voice did something strange to my chest. Made it feel tight and loose all at once.

I settled back against his shoulder. Let the steady rhythm of the car lull me into something close to peace. Not quite peace. But closer than I'd been in a long time.

Mother's face drifted through my thoughts again. Younger. Happier. The way she'd looked in the garden with sunlight in her hair and dirt under her fingernails. The way she'd smiled at me like I was something precious. Something worth protecting.

You are magic, she'd said.

Now those words were starting to carry a different kind of weight.

## **Chapter 165: A game of mask**

### **MADELINE**

The Sentinel that would be driving us opened the car door for me. I slid into the backseat next to Elara, who was already settled in and adjusting her dress. Through the windshield, I could see Cian lifting Fia into his arms. She looked small against him. Fragile in a way that made my stomach twist.

He carried her to the other car. The one in front of ours. His movements were careful. Protective. Like she might shatter if he held her wrong.

I looked away. Hating how jealous and competitive it made me.

Aldric appeared at the driver's side window. He tapped on it twice. The sentinel rolled it down.

"I'll drive," Aldric said.

The sentinel's brow furrowed. "Sir, that's not necessary. I can—"

"I need to." Aldric's tone left no room for argument. "It helps me think. Clear my head after these events."

The sentinel hesitated. His jaw worked like he was chewing on words he couldn't quite swallow. Finally, he nodded and stepped out. Aldric took his place behind the wheel. The sentinel moved to the passenger seat instead, settling in with visible reluctance.

The engine started. Smooth and quiet. Aldric pulled out after Cian's car, following at a respectful distance. The estate lights faded behind us as we merged onto the main road.

Elara turned to me, her eyes bright with excitement. "Can we talk about how stunning everything was tonight? The floral arrangements alone must have cost a fortune."

I smiled. "The centerpieces were impressive. Those roses couldn't have been local."

"Definitely imported." Elara leaned in conspiratorially. "And did you see the ice sculpture? I heard they had to bring in a specialist from the capital."

"The attention to detail was remarkable." I kept my voice light. Easy. "Even the napkin rings matched the theme perfectly."

"Right? And the champagne fountain." Elara sighed dramatically. "I've been to plenty of Alpha gatherings but Alpha Julius really outdid himself this time. I hope this wedding lasts."

My phone chimed in my clutch. A soft vibration against the fabric. I pulled it out and glanced at the screen.

The message was from Aldric. Simple. Direct.

*'Take out the sentinel and my daughter with a spell.'*

My fingers tightened around the phone. I read it twice to make sure I understood correctly. Then I locked the screen and slipped it back into my clutch.

Elara was still talking. Something about the dessert selection and how the chocolate soufflé had been perfection itself. I turned to face her fully, letting my expression show interest even as my mind shifted gears.

"That sounds wonderful," I said.

Then I raised my hand slightly. The motion was subtle. Barely noticeable. The spell left my fingers in a whisper of power that only I could feel. It hit Elara mid-sentence.

Her eyes went glassy. Her body slumped sideways, head lolling against the seat with a soft thud that was louder than I'd intended.

The sentinel turned around immediately. "What—"

The second spell caught him before he could finish. His eyes rolled back and his body went slack, shoulders hitting the passenger window with a dull thump.

Silence filled the car except for the hum of tires on asphalt.

"What now?" I asked.

Aldric's eyes stayed fixed on the road ahead. "Something is wrong."

"What is?"

"When Cian called us out to leave." He paused. His hands tightened on the steering wheel. "There was a way he looked at you."

The words landed strange. Heavy in a way I didn't expect.

"Yeah." I kept my voice steady. "He's clearly uncomfortable with my presence."

"That is not it." Aldric's tone sharpened. "It is like he is wary of you. Afraid of you."

My chest tightened. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"I know you are not blind, Mads."

The nickname he used grated. Only Cian could call me that. But I bit back the irritation and forced myself to think. To remember. Cian's face when he'd looked at me in that room. The way his expression had shifted after I'd finished healing Fia. That flash of something in his eyes that I'd been trying to decode ever since.

"I don't really know what happened," I admitted finally.

Aldric said nothing. He just waited.

"It was when I healed Fia." The words came slower now. More careful. "The look he gave me then felt off. But I couldn't put my finger on why."

The car ahead of us made a turn. Aldric followed smoothly, keeping the same measured distance.

"Be on your toes," he said. "Whatever conversation you have with him now, see it as swords meant to cut. He might be on to you."

"I haven't done anything to warrant it."

The protest sounded weak even to my own ears. Because it wasn't entirely true, was it? I'd taken Fia's blood. I'd agreed to have my father perform invasive magic on it. I'd been working with Aldric to manipulate events from the shadows.

But Cian didn't know any of that. Did he?

"I don't care whether you believe you warrant this suspicion." Aldric's voice cut through my thoughts. "I will try to pry something from him to help you. If not, I'll find other ways to get information."

I looked at his profile in the dim light from the dashboard. His jaw was set. Determined. He meant what he said.

"Once Morrigan wakes up," he continued, "she will not want you there. I hope you have figured out a way to make yourself stay at Skollrend."

"I have."

The lie came easily. Too easily. But I needed him to believe I had control over this situation. That I was still useful. Still worth keeping around.

"Good." He nodded once. "You can wake them up now."

I reached forward and touched the sentinel's shoulder first. The counterspell was simple. A reversal of what I'd done moments ago. His eyes fluttered open, confusion washing over his features as he tried to orient himself.

Then I turned to Elara and did the same. She jerked awake with a small gasp, her hand flying to her chest.

"Woah, I must have dozed off," she murmured. "How embarrassing."

"It's late," I said smoothly. "We're all tired."

The sentinel rubbed his face but said nothing. Probably trying to piece together what had happened. Probably failing spectacularly at it.

We drove in silence after that. Elara didn't try to restart the conversation about the party. The sentinel kept his eyes forward. Aldric's focus never wavered from the road and from following Cian's car.

But my mind raced.

Cian suspected something. That much was clear now. The question was what. And how much.

Had I been too obvious in a way during the healing? Had I let something slip in my expression or my movements? Maybe he'd sensed the resistance I'd felt when Fia's body had pushed back against my spell.

Or maybe it was something else entirely. Something I hadn't even considered yet.

If Cian was wary of me now, what would he do once he had real proof? Once he knew I'd been working with Aldric? Once he discovered I'd taken Fia's blood without permission?

No. I couldn't dwell on that. It wasn't like I was actually working for Aldric. I was trapped in this and I was playing a game of my own.

Once I could cut this fucking cancer that was Cian's uncle, I would. Cian was what mattered here. Only Cian mattered here.

## **Chapter 166: A little Faith**

### **CIAN**

I stepped out of the car first. The cool night air hit my face and I breathed it in deep, trying to clear my head. Behind me, Fia stirred. I turned back and reached for her, helping her out of the vehicle. Her hand felt small in mine. Steady though. She was steady.

The gravel crunched under our feet. Skollrend's main estate loomed ahead, windows glowing warm against the darkness. Home. It should have felt like coming home. Instead, my chest was tight with the weight of everything I was carrying. Everything I suspected. Everything I couldn't prove yet.

The second car pulled up behind ours. Headlights swept across the drive before cutting out. I watched Aldric emerge from the driver's seat. Then Elara. Then Madeline.

Madeline.

My jaw clenched before I could stop it. I forced myself to relax. To breathe. To remember that I needed her right now. Whatever she had done, whatever part she might have played in Ophelia's death, I had to push it down. Lock it away. My mother was dying. Madeline could save her. That was what mattered. That had to be what mattered.

"You are disturbed." Fia's voice pulled me back. She was looking at me with those eyes that saw too much. "Is something wrong?"

I managed a smile. It felt stiff on my face but I held it there. "Don't worry about it."

She didn't look convinced but she didn't push. I was grateful for that.

Aldric, Elara, and Madeline crossed the drive toward us. Madeline's expression was calm. Professional. Like she was here on official witch business and nothing more. Maybe she was. Maybe I was seeing ghosts where there weren't any.

But my instincts had kept me alive this long. Even if I had my moments of weakness. It had kept Skollrend strong. I wasn't about to ignore them now.

I turned my attention fully to Madeline. "We should go in. Help my mother."

She nodded once. "Of course."

The front doors burst open before we could take another step. Ronan came rushing down the stairs, his face tight with worry that melted into relief the second he saw me.

"You are back." His eyes found mine first. Then they slid past me and landed right on Madeline.

Everything in his expression changed. His shoulders went rigid. His jaw locked. The relief vanished, replaced by something harder. Colder.

"You."

The single word carried the weight of a thousand accusations.

I stepped slightly to the side, putting myself between them. "Madeline is here to help my mother."

Ronan's gaze snapped back to me. Surprise flickered there. He blinked. Processed. Then his features smoothed out into something more neutral. More controlled.

"Of course," he said. His voice was careful now. Measured.

We started toward the entrance. Fia stumbled on the first step. Just a small thing. A catch in her stride. But I was there instantly, my hand on her elbow, steadyng her. She glanced up at me and I saw the exhaustion in her face. The toll tonight had taken.

"I'm fine," she murmured.

"I know. Let me just help."

We moved inside together. The familiar halls of Skollrend wrapped around us. Stone and wood and the scent of home. But there was no comfort in it tonight. We moved through the corridors with purpose. Ronan led the way. Elara stayed close to Madeline. Aldric brought up the rear, silent as always.

The infirmary doors came into view. My stomach twisted. I had been avoiding this place as much as I could. Avoiding the sight of my mother hooked up to machines. Tubes and monitors and the constant beep that measured out her remaining time in mechanical increments.

But I couldn't avoid it as much I wished. Plus, tonight was supposed to be the end of her suffering. I had to have a little faith.

Ronan pushed the doors open. The smell hit me first. Antiseptic and bleach.

My mother lay in the center bed. Machines surrounded her like metal sentinels. Dr. Maren stood beside her, checking readings. Elder Thorne was near the window, his weathered face drawn with worry.

They both straightened when they saw me. Their eyes went wide when they registered Madeline behind me.

I understood their reaction. After everything that had happened between me and Madeline, after the way things had ended, bringing her here was a statement. A risk. But it was a risk I had to take.

I stepped aside and gave Madeline a clear path to my mother's bed. "Do what you can."

Madeline looked at me. Her eyes searched my face for something. Then her gaze slid to Fia, still tucked against my side where I was holding her upright. Something passed through Madeline's expression. Too quick for me to name.

She looked back at me. "I promise to fix this."

The words should have been reassuring. They weren't. Because of that nagging fear at the back of mind. What if this was a mistake? What if my hunch was right and she was now Gabriel's pawn and spy? I sounded mad. I knew that. Because she has healed Fia without anything negative happening. So I just nodded anyway.

Madeline moved to my mother's bedside. Her movements were swift. Efficient. She examined the lesions on my mother's neck and face. The bark-like texture that had been spreading. Killing her slowly from the inside out.

"I need wolfsbane," Madeline said. Her voice was all business now. "Moonbriar. Hollowberry roots. The red variant."

Dr. Maren moved immediately to a cabinet and started pulling out jars and vials.

"Two parts wolfsbane," Madeline continued. "One part moonbriar. Half a part of the hollowberry. Grind them fine. Mix them in a ceramic bowl."

Dr. Maren worked quickly. Her hands were steady despite the tension in her shoulders. Elder Thorne moved closer, watching everything with sharp eyes.

Madeline took some of the ingredients herself. Her fingers moved with practiced precision. Measuring. Mixing. The components came together in the bowl. The mixture started as a dull brown. Then it shifted. Amber. Like honey catching light.

The color brightened. Deepened. Became something luminous.

Madeline held the bowl in both hands. Her lips moved. She said words I couldn't quite hear. Neither could I understand. The language was old. Ancient. The kind of magic that predated our packs. That reached back to when witches ruled the forests and wolves were still learning to walk on their two legs.

The liquid in the bowl glowed. Just for a second. A flash of golden light that made my eyes water. Then it faded and went still.

Madeline carried it to my mother's feeding tube. Her movements were careful. Deliberate. She poured the mixture in. We all watched it disappear down the tube. Into my mother's body.

I moved closer without thinking. My eyes fixed on the lesions. The rough, diseased poison patches that had been consuming her. They looked worse up close. More invasive. Like something alien had taken root under her skin and was slowly transforming her into something else.

"Did it work?" The question came out rougher than I intended.

Madeline turned to face me. "Give it a minute."

The words hung between us. The machines kept beeping. Kept measuring. Kept marking time.

Then I saw it.

The lesions. They were moving. Shifting. The bark-like texture started to smooth at the edges. Just slightly at first. So subtle I almost thought I was imagining it.

But no. It was real.

The rough patches began to fade. Receding like shadows under sunlight. The skin underneath was pale. Too pale. But whole. Unmarked.

"Goddess," I whispered. "It's lifting."

The transformation spread. Across my mother's neck. Up toward her jaw. The diseased tissue melted away like it had never been there at all. Like it had been nothing but a bad dream.

Fia's hand found mine and she squeezed tight. I squeezed back, not taking my eyes off my mother.

The lesions on her face began to fade too. Slower than the ones on her neck but steady. Inexorable. The poison was losing its hold. Releasing its grip on her.

Dr. Maren leaned in and checked the monitors. Her eyes widened. "Her vitals are stabilizing. Heart rate is improving. Oxygen levels are climbing."

Elder Thorne moved closer too. His weathered hands reached out like he wanted to touch her but didn't quite dare. "The corruption seems to be leaving her."

Madeline stayed where she was. Watching. Waiting. Her expression was neutral but I could see the tension in her shoulders. The way she held herself too still.

The last of the lesions disappeared and my mother's skin was now clear. Unmarked except for the natural lines of age and the pallor of someone who had been ill for too long.

"Is she cured?" Ronan asked from behind me. His voice was thick.

"The alchemized poison is gone," Madeline said. "The immediate danger has passed. But she will need time to recover. Her body has been through trauma. She needs rest. Proper nutrition. Care."

I couldn't look away from my mother's face. She looked peaceful now. Like she was just sleeping. Like she might wake up any moment and ask what all the fuss was about.

"When will she wake up?" The question came from me but I barely recognized my own voice.

"Today... Tomorrow... Days, maybe," Madeline said. "What is clear is that her body needs to heal. To rebuild what the poison destroyed. But she will wake up, Cian. I promise you that."

The promise settled into my chest. Heavy and real. My mother was going to live. The poison hadn't won. Madeline had saved her.

But even as relief flooded through me, even as the weight I'd been carrying started to lift, I couldn't shake the other feeling. The suspicion that coiled tight in my gut. The questions that wouldn't go away no matter how much I wanted them to.

Madeline had saved my mother. But had she also been the one who killed Ophelia?

I forced the thought down. Buried it deep. Now wasn't the time. My mother was alive. That was what mattered. The rest could wait.

Fia swayed slightly against me. I tightened my hold on her. "You need rest."

"I'm fine."

"You're exhausted." I looked down at her. "Let me take you upstairs."

She opened her mouth like she wanted to argue. Then she just nodded. Small. Tired.

I turned to Madeline. "Thank you."

The words felt inadequate. Insufficient for what she had just done. But they were all I had.

Madeline met my eyes. Something flickered there. Something I couldn't name. "You're welcome."

The machines around my mother kept their steady rhythm. Dr. Maren was already adjusting medications. Elder Thorne stood watch like he planned to stay there all night.

I guided Fia toward the door. Ronan fell into step beside us. Madeline, Aldric and Elara chose to stay behind.

## **Chapter 167: Holding back**

### **CIAN**

I took Fia upstairs myself.

The halls were quieter up here. The kind of quiet that pressed in on your ears and made every thought louder. Fia leaned more of her weight into me the farther we went. She

tried to hide it. She always did. But I felt the way her steps lagged, the way her breathing changed.

"You don't have to carry me," she murmured.

"I know," I said. "I still will."

Her room was exactly how she'd left it. The curtains were half drawn. Moonlight spilled across the rug in a pale stripe. I guided her to the bed and helped her sit, then eased her back until her head hit the pillows.

She sighed. The sound came out of her like relief she'd been holding all night.

I pulled the covers up over her. Tucked them in around her shoulders the way I'd seen healers do when they wanted a patient to stay put. She watched me with heavy eyes, lashes low, mouth soft with exhaustion.

"I'll have an Omega come sit with you," I said. "Just in case you need anything."

She nodded. No argument this time. Her eyes were already drifting shut.

"Cian," she said quietly, catching my wrist before I could step away.

I leaned closer. "Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." I managed to say.

I squeezed her hand in a gentle manner and then I let go.

"Rest," I said. "I'll be right outside."

She was asleep before I reached the door.

I left Fia's room and pulled the door closed behind me with a soft click. The hallway stretched out in both directions, lit by the warm glow of wall sconces. Ronan was already there, leaning against the opposite wall with his arms crossed. He straightened when he saw me.

"We need to talk," I said.

"Yeah." His expression was serious. "That's why I'm here. You looked out of it."

I glanced down the corridor. It was empty for now, but voices drifted up from somewhere below. The estate was settling in for the night but people were still moving around. Word of my mother's miraculous healing has probably already spread.

"When did you even meet Madeline?" Ronan asked. His voice was low but there was an edge to it. Curiosity mixed with something harder. He wanted to tease me.

"I don't want to talk about that."

His eyebrows went up. "Cian—"

"Something's up." The words came out clipped. Sharper than I intended.

Ronan studied my face for a long moment. Then his expression shifted. The curiosity bled away and left something more concerned behind. "You're scaring me."

I reached out and gripped his shoulder, pushing him gently but firmly away from Fia's door. He went without resistance, his eyes never leaving my face. We moved down the hall until we were a good distance away. I checked over my shoulder. Checked both directions. No one.

I turned back to Ronan and dropped my voice to barely above a whisper. "I think Madeline is compromised."

He blinked. "What?"

"When Ophelia died." I had to force the words out. They felt wrong on my tongue. Crazy. But I couldn't keep them inside anymore. "I smelled something. Magic. It is something that just flies past most people. But magic usually has a smell, you know? This one was familiar. I knew it from somewhere but I couldn't place my finger on it then."

Ronan's face was blank. Processing.

"Until I met Madeline again," I continued. "She used her magic at Alpha Julius' estate. The smell..." I paused. Swallowed. "It was the same smell. The exact same smell I caught at Ophelia's death scene."

The silence that followed felt heavy. Oppressive. Ronan just stared at me.

"I think she was the one who killed Ophelia," I said. Each word felt like pulling teeth. "And I think she might be working for my uncle Gabriel."

Ronan gave me a long look. His eyes searched my face like he was looking for something. Some sign that I was joking or delirious or having some kind of breakdown.

Then he laughed.

It wasn't a big laugh. Just a short burst of disbelief. But it cut through me anyway.

"You cannot be serious."

"Ronan, I'm not joking here." My hands curled into fists at my sides. "I'm deadly serious."

The laugh died. His expression sobered but there was still skepticism written all over his features. "It's Madeline. She... loves you to death. She would never—"

"I'm having a hard time with it too." The admission came out rough. Raw. "But is it not possible? All the magic practitioners icing me out. Madeline being at the party. It feels like I was being puppeted. Like someone was pulling strings and I was just dancing along."

Ronan shook his head slowly. "This feels like you're going through cognitive dissonance of some sort."

I felt my jaw clench. "You aren't hearing me."

"I am." He held up his hands. "I swear I am. But Madeline is part of your past. She was something that you haven't moved on from for a long time. Until recently. Until Fia. I think your mind hates that she's back now and the trouble that it means. So your body is trying to hate her and be wary and suspicious of her before her presence here opens closed things."

The words hit harder than I expected. I felt them land in my chest and spread out like cold water. Was that what this was? Was I just looking for reasons to push her away because having her here was too complicated? Too painful?

"I'm not in love with Madeline," I said. The words came out firm. Certain. "Not anymore."

Ronan nodded. "I believe you."

He reached out and tapped his chest. Right over his heart. "You know what? Nothing... No idea or suspicion is dumb. What happened to the witch Ophelia was calculated. Planned. Maybe you're right. Maybe there's something there that we're all missing."

I felt some of the tension in my shoulders ease. Not all of it. But enough.

"I'll keep an eye out," Ronan continued. "See if I can fizzle anything suspicious out of Madeline. I don't think there's anything to find. But I will look. I'll watch her. I'll be careful."

"Thank you."

The gratitude felt inadequate but it was all I had. Ronan had always been there. Always had my back even when I was making questionable decisions or chasing ghosts that might not exist. He didn't dismiss me. Didn't tell me I was crazy even though I probably sounded like it.

He just nodded. "But hold back, okay? Don't go confronting her or doing anything rash. If she is compromised, if she is working with Gabriel somehow, we need to be smart about this. We need proof."

"I know."

"Do you?" His eyes were serious again. "Because I know you, Cian. When you get an idea in your head, you charge at it like a bull. But this isn't something you can just attack head-on. If you're wrong, you'll destroy whatever trust she has left in you. And if you're right..." He trailed off. Shook his head. "If you're right, then we're dealing with something bigger than we thought."

I thought about that. About what it would mean if Madeline really was working with Gabriel. If she had killed Ophelia. If she was here in my home, in my mother's room, with access to everything and everyone I cared about.

The thought made my skin crawl.

But Ronan was right. I couldn't just accuse her. Couldn't confront her without proof. Because if I was wrong, if this was just my mind playing tricks on me because I was scared of what her presence meant, then I would be throwing away the one person who had just saved my mother's life because of our stupid rocky past.

"I'll hold back," I said finally. "But I need you to watch her. Really watch her. If she does anything suspicious, anything at all—"

"I'll tell you immediately." Ronan's voice was steady. Reassuring. "I promise."

The voices from below were getting louder. Footsteps on the stairs. Someone was coming up. We both tensed and then forced ourselves to relax. To look casual. Like we were just having a normal conversation about nothing important.

An Omega appeared at the top of the stairs. She looked between us and dipped her head in a quick bow. "Alpha. Beta."

Ronan and I gave her a curt smile.

She bowed again and disappeared back down the stairs.

I turned back to Ronan. "We keep this between us for now. No one else can know what I suspect. Not until we have something concrete."

"Agreed." He paused. "What about Fia?"

I thought about that. About whether I should tell her what I was thinking. She had been through so much already. Had her own trauma to deal with. Did I really want to add my paranoid suspicions on top of everything else?

"Not yet," I decided. "Let her rest. Let her recover. If we find something a bit concrete, then I'll tell her. But right now she needs peace."

Ronan nodded. He understood. He always understood.

### **Chapter 168: Credit given**

#### **CIAN**

I was about to say something else when footsteps pounded up the stairs. Fast. Urgent. An Omega came rushing toward us, her face flushed and her eyes wide with something that looked like excitement.

"The Grand Luna is awake!" She was practically shouting. "The Grand Luna is awake!"

The words hit me like a physical blow. My chest tightened. Relief flooded through me so fast it made me dizzy. I grabbed Ronan without thinking and pulled him into a rough hug. He hugged me back just as hard, his hand thumping against my shoulder blade.

"She's awake," I said into his shoulder. The words came out shaky. "Goddess, she's actually awake."

Behind us, Fia's door opened. I pulled back from Ronan and turned to see her standing in the doorway. She looked exhausted still, her hair mussed from the pillow, but her eyes were alert and focused.

"I heard," she said quietly.

I crossed to her in three strides. "You should stay here. Rest. You just fell asleep."

She shook her head and pushed past me into the hallway. "I want to see her."

"Fia."

"I'm going." She looked up at me with those determined eyes that told me arguing would be pointless. "You can either come with me or I'll go alone."

I felt my jaw work. I wanted to push back. To insist she needed sleep more than she needed to see my mother right now. But I knew that look. I knew that tone. She wasn't going to budge.

"Fine," I said. "But if you start feeling weak, you tell me immediately."

She nodded and fell into step beside me. Ronan came up on my other side and the three of us moved through the halls together. The Omega who had brought the news hurried ahead of us, practically bouncing with excitement.

My heart was hammering in my chest. My mother was awake. After days of watching her waste away, of seeing her trapped in that bed with machines breathing for her and tubes feeding her, she was finally conscious. Finally back.

We reached the infirmary and the Omega pushed the doors open. I stepped through first and the scene hit me all at once.

My mother was sitting up. Or trying to. Dr. Maren was supporting her shoulders while Elder Thorne hovered nearby looking concerned and relieved at the same time. Madeline stood off to the side with Elara. Both of them stood a bit far back but were watching my mother with careful eyes.

But it was my mother who held all my attention.

She had her hand raised up high. Her fingers were spread wide like she was reaching for something only she could see. Her eyes were unfocused. Distant. Like she was looking at something far beyond the walls of this room.

"The colors," she was saying. Her voice was thin. Raspy from disuse. "Do you see them? They're everywhere. Dancing. Spinning."

Dr. Maren's voice was gentle. "Luna Morrigan, you need to rest. Lie back down."

"But the colors..." My mother's hand waved through the air. "They're so beautiful. I've never seen anything like them."

I moved without thinking. My feet carried me across the room to her bedside. I reached out and took her raised hand in both of mine. Her skin felt cold. Too cold. But her grip was there. Weak but present.

"Mother," I said. My voice cracked on the word.

She turned her head toward me. Her eyes were still glassy. Still unfocused. But something in them shifted when she looked at me. Some recognition that cut through whatever delirium was holding her.

I couldn't help myself. I leaned in and wrapped my arms around her, careful not to jostle the tubes and wires still attached to her. She felt so small in my arms. So fragile. Like she might break if I held her too tight.

The tears came before I could stop them. They burned hot tracks down my face and I didn't care who saw. I buried my face against her shoulder and felt my whole body shake with the force of everything I'd been holding in for a long while now.

"I missed you," I said. The words came out choked. Broken. "I missed you so much."

Her hand came up. Slow and trembling. She touched the back of my head and her fingers tangled in my hair the way they used to when I was a child and needed comfort.

"My boy," she whispered. Her voice was rough but steady. Real. "How have you been?"

I pulled back enough to look at her face. The delirious quality had faded from her eyes. She was looking at me now. Really looking at me. Seeing me.

"I've been well," I managed. My throat was tight. My chest ached. "It's good to have you back."

She smiled. It was a small thing. Tired. But genuine. Her eyes held mine for a long moment and I saw all the love and worry and relief reflected there that I was feeling in my own chest.

Then her gaze shifted. Moved past me to where Fia stood near the foot of the bed. My mother's smile widened and something warm entered her expression.

"Hey," she said softly. "Come here."

Fia hesitated. Just for a second. Then she moved forward slowly until she was close enough to the bed. My mother reached out with the hand that wasn't holding mine and Fia took it carefully.

My mother pulled her closer and wrapped her arms around Fia in a gentle hug. Fia went stiff for just a moment before she relaxed and returned the embrace.

"It brings me peace," my mother said into Fia's hair, "to see you two. You seem closer."

Fia didn't say anything but I saw the way her shoulders relaxed. The way she leaned into my mother's hold just slightly.

My mother pulled back but kept hold of Fia's hand. She looked down at their joined hands and then back up to Fia's face. Her eyes were soft. Grateful.

"This must be you," she said quietly. "Thank you for saving my life."

Fia's eyes went wide. Confusion flashed across her face. She opened her mouth like she was going to say something but no words came out.

Before either of us could respond, Uncle Aldric stepped forward from where he'd been standing near the wall. His movements were deliberate. Purposeful. He came to stand at the foot of the bed and his eyes met my mother's.

"Luna Fia was indeed indispensable to saving you from the poisoning getting worse," he said. His voice was measured. Careful. "But it was actually Madeline Blossom that lifted the spell of the alchemized poison."

The words landed in the room like stones dropping into still water. Ripples spread outward. I felt them hit me in the chest.

My jaw clenched before I could stop it. I turned my head to look at Aldric and found him looking back at me with an expression that was completely neutral. Like he had just stated a simple fact and nothing more.

But it wasn't nothing.

This felt like it was a deliberate correction. A pointed statement. He had waited until this exact moment to clarify who had actually saved my mother's life. Right when my mother was thanking Fia. Right when she was showing gratitude and affection.

It was a low blow. Calculated and precise. The kind of move that looked innocent on the surface but cut deep underneath.

I felt anger spark in my chest. Hot and immediate. But I pushed it down. Buried it. This wasn't the time or place for confrontation. My mother had just woken up. She was still weak. Still recovering. I wasn't going to start a fight in her sick room.

But I would remember this. It seemed so odd. Out of character for uncle Aldric.

My mother's gaze shifted from Fia to me. Her expression changed. Became thoughtful. Maybe a little confused. Like she was trying to piece together information that didn't quite fit together in her mind.

"Madeline Blossom?" she repeated. Her voice was still rough but there was curiosity in it now. "She's here?"

"Yes," Aldric said. "She arrived tonight and performed the ritual to remove the poison from your system. You owe your life to her skill and her willingness to help."

I watched Madeline's face as Aldric spoke. She looked uncomfortable. Her shoulders were tense and her hands were clasped in front of her like she didn't know what to do

with them. She didn't meet my mother's eyes. Didn't look at me either. Just stared at some point on the floor between us all.

My mother turned her attention fully to Madeline now. "Oh... Madeline... it is nice to see you again."

Madeline took a deep breath and said; "You too, Luna Morrigan."

"Thank you," Mother said simply. "I'm in your debt."

Madeline finally looked up. Her eyes found my mother's and she shook her head twice. "No, Luna Morrigan. I'm glad I could help."

## **Chapter 169: Your Patterns**

### **CIAN**

My mother's gaze then back to Aldric. Her eyes held recognition and something else. Something that looked like surprise mixed with relief.

"When did you even arrive?" she asked.

Aldric's expression softened. Just slightly. The hard edges around his mouth eased and his eyes warmed in a way I hadn't seen in years.

"The moment I heard it wasn't the rot you were afflicted with, I had to come," he said. "How couldn't I?"

My mother's smile grew. It transformed her face. Made her look less like the fragile woman in the hospital bed and more like the strong Luna I remembered well.

"Do not run away this time," she said. Her voice was quiet but firm. "Please stay for a while."

Aldric nodded once. Slowly. His jaw worked like he was trying to keep emotion from showing on his face. "Trust me, I'm not leaving anytime soon, Morrigan."

Something passed between them. Some unspoken understanding that I wasn't privy to. Whatever history existed between my mother and my uncle ran deeper than I'd realized.

My mother's attention moved to Fia. Her expression changed again. Became softer. More concerned.

"Dear, you look tired," she said.

Fia straightened her shoulders. "I'm good."

"No." My mother shook her head gently. "I can tell you need rest." She glanced around the room at all of us. "It's late even. Everybody needs rest. I'm awake and I am more than great. Tomorrow isn't running away. Y'all can go sleep."

"No." Fia's voice came out stronger than I expected. "I want to stay."

I turned to her. Saw the stubborn set of her jaw. The determination in her eyes. But I also saw the exhaustion pulling at her features. The way she was swaying slightly on her feet. The paleness of her skin.

"No," I said firmly. "She's right. You do need to rest."

Fia opened her mouth. I could see the argument forming on her lips.

"I'm collecting no buts," I said before she could speak. I kept my voice gentle but left no room for negotiation. "I can tell you're a bit worried for my mother."

I paused. Let the words settle between us. Because it was true. I could see it in every line of Fia's body. The way she kept glancing at my mother. The tension in her shoulders. The concern in her eyes.

"I find that endearing," I said quietly. "But I'll stay with her."

Something in Fia's expression shifted. The fight went out of her shoulders. She looked at me for a long moment and then nodded once.

I turned to Ronan. "Help her to her room."

Ronan moved forward immediately. He came to stand beside Fia and offered his arm. She took it after a moment's hesitation. Her fingers curled around his forearm and she leaned into him just slightly.

Aldric stepped forward. "Goodnight, Luna Morrigan," he said. His voice had returned to its usual measured tone. "Rest well."

"Goodnight," my mother said.

Elara came forward next. She dipped her head in respect. "Sleep well, aunty."

Madeline was the last to approach. She still looked uncomfortable. Her hands twisted together in front of her and she wouldn't quite meet my mother's eyes.

"Goodnight," she said softly.

"Goodnight, dear," my mother replied. "And thank you again."

Madeline nodded quickly and then turned away. The three of them moved toward the door. Ronan guided Fia after them. She glanced back at me once before disappearing through the doorway. Then they were gone and the room felt suddenly much emptier.

Dr. Maren and Elder Thorne had retreated to the far corner of the room. They were speaking in low voices. Giving us space but staying close enough to intervene if anything happened.

I moved closer to the bed. Pulled the chair that was already there even nearer and sat down heavily. My legs felt weak now that the adrenaline was fading. Now that the reality of the situation was settling in.

My mother was awake. She was talking. She was here.

I reached out and took her hand in both of mine. Her skin still felt too cold but her grip was stronger now than it had been when I first touched her.

"I'm glad to have you back," I said. The words felt inadequate. Too small for what I was feeling. But they were all I had.

She squeezed my hand. "I'm glad to be back."

I looked up at her face. Really looked at her. And that's when I saw it. The way her eyes had changed. The way her mouth had tightened just slightly at the corners. The way she was looking at me like she wanted to say something but was holding back.

"What is it?" I asked.

She didn't answer right away. Her gaze dropped to our joined hands. Her thumb moved across my knuckles in a slow rhythm. Back and forth. Back and forth.

"Cian?"

"Yes?"

She took a slow breath. I felt it through her hand before I saw it in her chest. Careful. Like she was choosing every word.

"I was scared when I went unconscious," she said quietly. "Not of dying. Not really. I have made my peace with that more times than you know."

My throat tightened but I said nothing.

"It was the one thing on my mind," she continued. "Worry for you."

I frowned. "For me?"

"Yes." Her eyes lifted back to my face. Clear. Too clear. "You and Fia did not seem as close then as you do now. I saw the distance. I felt it even from a bed like this. And I was afraid you would do what you do best."

A short breath left me. Almost a laugh but there was no humor in it. "What do I do best?"

She did not hesitate. "You hold it in. You turn it inward. You hate yourself for feeling anything at all. And when it gets too heavy, you lash out."

The words landed clean. No accusation. Just truth.

I looked away. Fixed my eyes on the wall for a moment. "That is not fair."

She squeezed my hand again. Firmer this time. "It is accurate."

I swallowed.

"You had me when your father passed," she said. Her voice softened at his name. "You were young. Angry. Lost. But you had me. I was there to stand beside you even when you pushed me away."

Her thumb kept moving over my knuckles. Slow. Steady.

"If I had passed from the poison," she went on, "I did not know who you would have had by your side."

My jaw tightened. "You are here now."

"Let me finish," she said gently.

I nodded.

"I thought of Ronan," she admitted. "And I know you care for him. I know he would have tried. But I feared he would not be enough. Not for the parts of you that turn sharp when you are hurt."

That stung more than I expected.

"You can be callous when you are in pain," she said. "Not because you are cruel. But because you believe it is safer to be cold than to break."

I exhaled slowly through my nose.

"And the one I feared for the most," she added, her gaze steady on mine, "was Fia."

My head snapped back to her. "Fia?"

"Yes," she said. "Because you tolerated her before. I didn't think this... you and her... I didn't think it would happen anytime soon."

"That is not what happened," I said quickly. Too quickly. "None of that happened. You are here. Fia is here. Everything is fine."

The words sounded hollow even to me.

My mother watched me for a long moment. Really watched me. The way she used to when I was a boy and thought I was hiding things well.

"Is it?" she asked softly.

Something cold slid into my chest.

"What does that even mean?" I said. My voice came out sharper than I intended. "You are alive. The poison is gone. The danger passed. What more do you want me to say?"

Her eyes did not leave mine.

"Madeline," she said.

The name sat between us like a blade laid carefully on the table.

I stared at her. "Madeline?"

"Yes."

## **Chapter 170: Good Different**

### **CIAN**

I stared at my mother. My mind went blank for a second before the implication of that single name hit me square in the chest.

"Mother," I said slowly. "Get your mind out of the gutter."

She raised one eyebrow. The gesture was so familiar it almost made me laugh. Almost.

"Madeline was here for one reason and one reason alone," I continued. "To help you. That's it."

My mother's lips pressed together. Not quite a smile. Not quite disapproval either. Something in between that I couldn't read.

"I was just surprised to see her back," she said. Her voice was light but there was weight underneath it. "Considering the mess that happened between you two."

I let go of her hand and leaned back. The wood creaked under me. "It was just a stupid breakup. Nothing more. You used to like Madeline well enough."

"Yes," my mother said. She didn't hesitate. "Yes, I did."

I waited. There was more coming. I could feel it in the pause she left hanging between us.

"But that was before she told you to choose between her and this pack."

The words landed quiet. Matter of fact. Like she was commenting on the weather.

I closed my eyes for a moment. Remembered that conversation. The ultimatum. The way Madeline's voice had cracked when she said she couldn't keep doing this. Couldn't keep being second to everything else in my life. The pack. The responsibilities.

"That was a long time ago," I said.

"Not that long," my mother replied.

I opened my eyes and looked at her. "What exactly are you worried about? That, I'll do something stupid?"

She shifted slightly in the bed. Winced just a little. I moved forward instinctively but she waved me off.

"That's not even the issue," she said.

"Then what is?"

"She's an old flame, Cian."

I blinked. "So?"

My mother sighed. It was the kind of sigh she used to give me when I was being deliberately obtuse. When I knew exactly what she meant but was choosing to ignore it.

"You need to remember that you're married now," she said. Her gaze was steady on mine. "To Fia."

Heat rushed up my neck. Anger or embarrassment or some combination of both. I stood up from the chair too fast. It scraped against the floor with a harsh sound that made Maren and Thorne look over from their corner.

"Goddess," I said. My voice came out too loud. I forced it lower. "I'm not a mindless whore who fucks anything in skirts."

My mother didn't flinch. She didn't even look away. She just watched me with those too knowing eyes.

"That's not what I'm saying," she said calmly.

"Then what are you saying?"

"The problem is that you have history with her that wasn't entirely closed," she said. "Something could happen. And it's best to send her on her way as soon as possible."

I ran a hand through my hair. Gripped the back of my neck and squeezed. The pressure helped. A little.

"Nothing will happen," I said.

"Cian."

"Nothing," I repeated. Firmer this time. "I promise you. Nothing will happen."

I sat back down. The anger was draining out of me already. Leaving just exhaustion in its place.

"But that's after I thank her properly," I added. "In front of the pack. For what she did. For bringing you back from the brink of death."

My mother was quiet for a moment. Her fingers plucked at the blanket covering her legs. Small movements. Thoughtful.

"I have no problem with that," she said finally. "My mind is settled now."

I nodded. Let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

She shifted again in the bed. This time she managed to sit up a little straighter. Her hand reached out and patted mine where it rested on the armrest of the chair.

"Now," she said. Her tone changed. Became lighter. Almost playful. "On to other news."

Something in my gut twisted. I knew that tone. Had heard it before when she was about to say something that would make me want to leave the room.

"Have you and Fia fulfilled your marital duties to one another now that you don't hate each other?"

The words hung in the air. Crystal clear. Impossible to misunderstand.

I stared at her. My mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

"Mother," I said. My voice came out strangled. "You have to stop."

"What?" She looked genuinely confused. Like she'd just asked me about the weather or what I'd had for breakfast. "I ain't getting younger."

"That's not the point."

"And I just survived a damn poisoning," she continued. Like I hadn't spoken at all. "Give me grandkids."

My face was burning. I could feel it. The heat spreading from my neck up to my ears. I looked away. Looked at the wall. At the door. Anywhere but at her.

"This is not a conversation we're having right now," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because you just woke up from being poisoned," I said. I forced myself to look back at her. "Because you nearly died. Because we just spent the last however many hours terrified that you wouldn't wake up at all. Because there are about a hundred more important things to discuss right now."

She waved her hand dismissively. "All of that is exactly why we should be having this conversation."

"How does that logic work?"

"Because life is short," she said simply. "And I want to see my grandchildren before I'm too old to enjoy them."

"You're not old."

"I'm not young either," she countered. "And you're not getting any younger yourself. Neither is Fia. So tell me. Have you consummated the marriage or not?"

I stood up again. This time I walked away from the bed. Moved toward the window. Looked out at the darkness beyond. The moon was still visible through the clouds. Nearly full. Bright enough to cast shadows.

"This is insane," I muttered.

"It's a simple question, Cian."

"It's invasive."

"I'm your mother," she said. Like that explained everything. Maybe it did. "I have a right to ask."

I turned back to face her. Crossed my arms over my chest. "No. You don't."

She smiled. Actually smiled. Like this was amusing to her.

"So that's a no then," she said.

I didn't answer.

"Or is it a yes and you're just too embarrassed to admit it?"

"I'm not doing this," I said.

"Doing what?" Her smile widened. "Having a conversation with your mother about your marriage?"

"Having a conversation about my sex life with anyone," I shot back. "Let alone my mother. Who just woke up from being unconscious for days."

She laughed. It was quiet. A little weak. But it was real. The sound of it made something in my chest loosen. Just slightly.

"You always were easy to fluster," she said.

"I'm not flustered."

"You're bright red."

I uncrossed my arms. Shoved my hands in my pockets instead. "Can we please talk about literally anything else?"

"Fine," she said. But her eyes were still dancing with amusement. "But you should know that I'm not going to drop this forever. You're married. Fia is lovely. And I want grandbabies to spoil before I'm too decrepit to chase them around."

"You're not going to be decrepit."

"Not if you give me something to live for," she said. Her voice went softer. More serious. "Children are a blessing, Cian. They give you purpose. They give you hope. Don't wait too long."

I looked at her. Really looked at her. Saw the sincerity in her expression. The genuine hope. And underneath that, the fear. The fear that maybe she wouldn't still have as much time as she thought. That maybe the poison had reminded her just how fragile everything was.

"I hear you," I said quietly.

"But?"

"But that's between me and Fia," I said. "And right now we're focused on other things. Like making sure the pack is safe. Like finding out that bastard who orchestrated your poisoning in the first place. Like dealing with everything else that's happening. Gabriel has to pay."

My mother nodded slowly. "I understand that. I do. But don't let those things consume you so much that you forget to live. To build something good with your mate."

"I won't," I said.

"Promise me."

I walked back to the chair. Sat down again. Took her hand in mine.

"I promise," I said.

She squeezed my fingers. "Good. That's all I needed to hear."

We sat in silence for a moment. The kind of comfortable quiet that only comes from knowing someone your whole life. From not needing to fill every second with words.

"She seems different," my mother said eventually. "Fia. From when I first met her."

I thought about that.

"She is different," I said.

"Good different?"

"Yes," I said. And I meant it. "Very good different."