

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 21: Small Spaces - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 21: Small Spaces

Chapter 21: Small Spaces

FIA

The sentinels' hands dug into my arms hard enough to leave marks. I could tell by the way they gripped me, like they wanted to hurt me but were holding back just enough to follow some order they didn't like. One of them had his fingers pressed into the soft part of my bicep, right where it would bruise darkest.

"Move," he growled.

I moved. There wasn't much point in resisting. They dragged me through hallways I didn't recognize, and I let my feet shuffle along the stone floor because it was easier than trying to fight them. The silver cuffs around my wrists burned. They weren't just cold—they actively hurt, like they were pulling something out of me. My wolf skin crawled under them.

"Stupid omega," one of them muttered. "Nearly kills the Alpha and still gets to breathe."

"Should throw her in with the rogues," the other one said. "Let them have her for a while."

I didn't look at either of them. I just kept my eyes forward and tried not to think about what was waiting for me at the end of these hallways.

Then Garret appeared.

He stepped out from a side corridor, and the sentinels holding me actually tensed. There was something in the way he moved that made them nervous. His jaw was tight as he looked at me, then at the hands on my arms.

"You better be careful with the Luna of Skollrend," he said.

His voice was quiet, but both sentinels let go of me like I'd turned hot.

"If she was a Luna of this pack, she wouldn't be dragged to a cell," one of them shot back, but his voice had lost its edge. "Alpha Cian despises her. Why should we not?"

Garret stepped closer. "I will take it from here."

"We have orders," the second one started.

"And my station is higher than both of yours." Garret's tone didn't change, but something in his face went cold. "Would you refuse me?"

They didn't answer. They just apologized, stiff and awkward, and despite clearly not wanting to, they bowed. Their shoulders were tight with resentment as they turned and walked away, muttering to each other in voices they thought were quiet enough I wouldn't hear. I heard them anyway.

Garret looked at the silver cuffs. I saw his jaw clench when he noticed the burn marks on my wrists. He pulled on a leather glove from his pocket—where he'd been keeping it, I had no idea—and reached for the cuffs.

The metal came away from my skin with a rush of relief that made me gasp. The burning stopped. My wolf settled, just slightly, now that the silver wasn't touching me anymore.

"Why are you helping me?" I asked.

"I am not." He pocketed the cuffs and started walking. "The order was to put you in a cell. Not to treat you like shit while doing it."

I followed him because I didn't have much choice. We moved through more hallways, deeper into the stone. The air got colder the further we went. Damper.

"Why then do you not want to treat me like shit?" I asked.

"Because you helped Alpha Cian."

"I had to." The words came out before I could stop them. "I would be facing a much worse fate than this if something had actually happened to him. So it was not noble. I was trying to save my own flesh."

He glanced back at me as we walked. "That is not what it looked like."

"What does it matter what it looked like?" My voice came out sharper than I meant it to. "I am down here anyway."

"I am a sentinel," Garret said. His tone was matter of fact, like he was just stating something obvious. "I am good at sensing intention. And you genuinely wanted to save him."

I laughed, but it came out bitter. "Well, see what that got me."

"You are in this predicament because you blow hot constantly," he said. We'd reached a set of iron stairs that spiraled down. He started descending them, and I followed. "Alpha Cian was going to step in. You know that. He would have."

I did know that. I'd felt it through the bond. I'd felt him gathering himself to take control of the situation, to shut Ronan down. And that had filled me with a rage so hot I couldn't breathe. So I'd spoken up. I'd made sure Cian knew I didn't want his help. That I didn't need it. That I could handle this myself.

I bit my lower lip because Garret was right. He was absolutely right.

"When it mattered, he did not hear me out," I said quietly. "Or step in. I do not need him."

"We should head to the cell," Garret replied, like I hadn't spoken. "It is not right to linger."

We walked in silence for a while. The stone got rougher as we went deeper. Less finished. The air smelled like damp and old things. Like things that were locked away and left to be forgotten.

"I am only a sentinel," Garret said eventually, his voice careful. "But I do believe you will have to take his hand. A lot of wolves here despise you for what they think you did."

"I did not do it," I said. "I was deceived."

"It does not matter." He said it without judgment, just like a fact. "They have what they believe, and they will stand by it. It is their first impression of you. It is probably the first lasting impression that Alpha Cian has of you as well."

The words stung because they were true.

"But that is where you have it easy," Garret continued. "You are Luna of Skollrend at the end of the day. You are his chosen mate. A chosen mate with a bond that was blessed by the goddess. He cannot hate you, no matter how hard he tries."

I stopped walking. "Are you suggesting I use the bond to save myself?"

"It is not going to get better," he said instead of answering. We'd reached the prison section now. The cells were carved right out of the stone, dark and narrow. "Not unless you do something."

We stopped in front of one, and Garret's eyes opened it with some kind of magic. The door clicked open, and I stepped inside. The stone was cold under my feet. There was a thin cot in the corner and nothing else.

"He could reject me," I said, looking back at Garret.

"He might have if the goddess had not blessed the bond during the union while you took your sister's place," he said quietly. "But rejecting a bond blessed by the goddess

minutes after the ceremony would be asking for divine wrath. No Alpha is foolish enough to do that."

I scoffed. "What would Alpha Cian care about divine wrath? Even I have heard stories. He does not seem like a man of faith."

Garret chuckled as he locked the gate behind me. The sound echoed through the cell. "He is not. But even he has moments of weakness. For our Alpha, it is his mother. It is why he chose to get married in the first place. It is why he will not let you go or reject you. There is a small chance the goddess might bite him back for the mockery, and he will not risk that. Not for the woman he loves most in the world."

I sat down on the cot. It was harder than stone. "I did not see her at the wedding. Or even a father."

"She could not come," Garret said, and there was something sad in his voice. "She is afflicted. With the rot."

He didn't explain what that meant, and I didn't ask. But I knew. My mother had been afflicted as well. I just sat there in the dark and listened to his footsteps fade as he walked back up the stairs, leaving me alone in the stone.

Chapter 22: To Give Her Peace

CIAN

I got out of bed at exactly six in the evening. The healer had said I could move around, that staying still would only make the poison linger in my muscles longer. I didn't argue. Lying there thinking about Fia in the dungeons wasn't going to help anyone.

The shower was hot enough to sting. I stood under the spray and watched the herb-scented water run pink before it cleared. My bandages had come off that afternoon, and the Mourning Moon's burn marks underneath were already fading. Maren had said I healed fast.

I dried off and dressed carefully. My hands weren't quite steady yet, but I was Alpha. I couldn't look weak. I combed my hair, checked myself in the mirror, and told the weak thing inside me to shut up and get back in its cage.

I headed for Mother's wing at six forty-five.

The hallway was empty. Too empty. The omega who usually kept watch should have been there, should have seen me coming. My jaw clenched as I stood outside the door. I tapped my foot against the marble. The sound echoed down the stone corridor in sharp, regular beats. Six forty-eight. Six forty-nine.

The omega appeared at six fifty-three, her whole body shaking as she wheeled the dinner tray. She'd been running. Her hair was coming out of its tie, and there was a thin shine of sweat on her forehead. The moment she saw me, she actually flinched. Like my presence was something painful.

She dropped to her knees before the tray could even stop moving. Her body folded nearly in half, her forehead almost touching the ground.

"I apologize," she whispered. "I apologize, I apologize."

"I told you to always be here before me." The words came out flat. Cold. The way I'd learned to speak to people who failed. "Six fifty-five. Every single time. You've had a week to learn this."

"I know, I know, I'm sorry, Alpha." She was crying now, the tears tracking down her face. Her whole frame shook with it. "It won't happen again."

"First strike," I said. "There will be no second strike. You should know what happened to the former one."

I didn't wait for her to answer. I took the handle of the tray and wheeled it toward the door myself. I knocked. A soft sound, careful. Respectful.

"Mother, it's me."

I opened the door and stepped inside.

Her room was exactly how she preferred it. Everything was old. The walls had been made to look weathered and ancient. The furniture was heavy dark wood, the kind that had probably been carved before the pack even had a name. The curtains were drawn against the evening light. There were no electric bulbs up here. Just candlelight, which Mother said didn't hurt her eyes the way the harsh lights did.

The chamber was in the corner, waiting.

The smell hit me first. Herbs. Always herbs. Mint and something sharper that I could never quite name. Thorne brought them in batches and Mother said they helped with the pain. I wasn't sure I believed her, but I'd stopped arguing about it years ago.

She was smiling even before I turned around.

Mother was in the cryo chamber, suspended in the green mist that kept the rot from spreading. The frost clung to the glass in delicate patterns. Inside, she was curled in a way that must have been uncomfortable, but she'd learned to sleep that way. Had learned to do a lot of things. A lot of impossible things.

I smiled back at her, even though my chest was trying to split open.

The rot was worse than last week.

The blackness had spread up the side of her neck. Her skin in those places looked like charred wood, all dark and cracked. Red infection bloomed underneath like flowers I didn't want to see. Her left arm was wrapped, and I could see the seep of something that wasn't right oozing through the bandages. The fungus inside her was eating her from the inside out. Doctor Maren called it the rot. The healers called it a curse. Mother just called it a phase of her life.

I put on the glove and the mask. I'd gotten good at this. Fast and efficient even. I opened the chamber and felt the cold air rush out at me. Mother had gone still, the way she always did when I opened it. Waiting for me to touch her.

"Are you hungry, Mother?"

"I have told you several times we should do as Doctor Maren suggested." Her voice was thin but steady. She always kept that steadiness for me. "Just give me a feeder. No one should get infected. Cian, we both know the risks."

"I'm not letting you forego the only contact with kin you have left." I meant it in a way that made my throat tight. "I need this. And you need this."

I opened the tray and sorted through the dishes. The omega had prepared soft foods, things that didn't require much chewing. Broth and vegetables that had been cooked until they were almost liquid. Bread soaked in milk. All of it was warm. I'd timed the walk perfectly.

I helped Mother out of the chamber, my gloved hands careful against her shoulders. She was so light now. Like she might blow away if I wasn't holding her down. I settled her on the bed and propped her up with pillows so she was sitting upright.

"What about your bride?" she asked. Her eyes were still sharp even when the rest of her was failing.

"The wedding took a toll on her," I lied smoothly. "She'll see you tomorrow. She needed to rest."

Mother smiled. I saw the effort it cost her, the way the movement made her wince. But she smiled anyway.

"You look tired too," she said. She reached her hand toward my face, and then stopped. Let it fall back to her lap. "I shouldn't touch you without the glove."

I took her hand anyway. Her skin was cool but not the terrible cold of the chamber. It was just cool the way a mother's hand could be.

"I'll disinfect anyway," I said.

She held my hand. Her grip was weak, but it was there. I could feel her trying to squeeze harder, could feel her restraint. The way she had to hold back every instinct to pull me close.

I picked up the spoon and started to feed her. The broth was still warm. She swallowed slowly, carefully. She'd gotten better at this too. Learning how her body changed. Learning what it could and couldn't do anymore.

"I can't wait to see her," Mother said between spoonfuls. "Your bride. What is she like?"

"She's strong," I said, and meant it. Fia had fought me with everything she had. Had nearly died rather than let me have the satisfaction of killing her. Had saved my life when she could have let me burn. "You'll love her."

"I don't have to," Mother said, and there was something in her voice that made me look at her. "As long as you love her."

I felt the spoon almost slip in my hand. I recovered, brought it back up to her mouth, and smiled. I made it look easy.

"I do," I said. "Why else would I have gotten married?"

Mother laughed. It was a soft sound, barely more than a breath, but it was real. "That is true. I did all I could, but you never heard me."

She was quiet for a moment, swallowing another spoonful. Then she looked at me and said something I hadn't expected.

"When you told me you found a woman you loved, I was certain you were only giving in because you were convinced I would die soon."

My grip on the spoon almost faltered. The metal nearly slipped right out of my hand and into the broth. I made myself laugh. Forced it out like it was the most crazy thing I'd ever heard.

"That's absurd," I said.

But it wasn't.

Maren and Thorne had given me the report in private. One year. Maybe a little longer if the herbs worked better than they expected. But one year was what I'd been working

with when I made this choice. When I decided that Mother needed to see me settled. Needed to believe that I had found someone. That I wouldn't be alone after she was gone.

I'd thought a bride would comfort her. Give her something to hold onto in her final months. Someone to believe in, even if it was a lie I was constructing just for her benefit.

I fed her another spoonful. She closed her eyes while she swallowed, like she was trying to savor it. Like the soft broth was something precious.

"You know me too well," I said quietly.

"I'm your mother," she replied. "It's my job to know you too well."

I kept feeding her. The spoon moved up and down in a rhythm I'd learned. She ate slowly, deliberately, taking her time with each bite. I didn't rush her. I never rushed her.

When the bowl was half empty, she waved her hand. Said she was full. I set the bowl aside and just sat with her, my gloved hand still holding hers. The candlelight flickered across her face, and I tried not to look at the dark patches of the rot spreading under her skin. Tried not to count how much worse it looked than last week.

"Tell me about her," Mother said. "Your bride. What does she look like? What kind of person do you think she is?"

I told her stories. Small things. Nothing true, mostly. But things I wanted to be true. I invented kindness and grace. I invented a woman who looked at me the way I imagined someone should look at a person they were going to spend their life with.

Mother listened with her eyes closed, smiling that small, satisfied smile. And I sat there in the candlelight of that old room, holding her cool hand in my gloved one, lying like my life depended on it.

Because it did. Her life did. And I would lie to the goddess herself if it meant giving her peace.

Chapter 23: No One But Me 1

FIA

I had been in this cell for more than twenty-three hours. I knew because I'd been counting. Counting the seconds. Counting the minutes. Counting every breath that made my ribs ache against the cold stone wall I was leaning against.

The mate bond was a constant throb in my chest. Like a bruise that wouldn't heal. I'd been trying to shield it. Trying to keep my emotions locked down tight so he wouldn't feel them through the connection. So he wouldn't know I was breaking.

But I was tired. So tired. And the shield was slipping.

I could feel him on the other side of it. His contempt. His anger. It bled through the bond in waves that made me want to curl up on the thin cot and never move again. But I wouldn't. I refused to give him that satisfaction.

The worst part wasn't even him. It was the pack. I could feel their hostility like needles under my skin. Every time one of them walked past the dungeon entrance, their hatred would spike through like it was alive and hit me square in the chest. They despised me. All of them.

Footsteps echoed down the stone stairs. Multiple sets. I heard them before I saw them. Three omegas appeared at my cell door carrying a tray. The food smelled good. Warm bread and some kind of stew. My stomach clenched with hunger.

The first omega smiled at me. It wasn't a kind smile.

She tilted the tray. The food splashed onto the floor in front of my cell. The bowl clattered and rolled. Stew seeped between the cracks in the stone.

"Oops," she said.

The second one laughed. "That's the only way an omega like you deserves to eat. Off the ground. Like the animal you are."

I stared at the spilled food. At the bread soaking in the stew. At the way they were all watching me. Waiting for me to break down. Waiting for me to cry or beg or show them I was weak.

I laughed instead.

It came out sharp and a little unhinged. I saw all three of them flinch.

"We're all omegas here, aren't we?" I said. My voice echoed off the stone walls. "Does treating me worse make you feel better about your own lives?"

The first omega's face twisted. "You little shit."

She reached through the bars. Her hand was going for my hair. For my face. I don't know what she planned to do, but I didn't give her the chance.

I grabbed her wrist and twisted. Hard. Against the bars.

She screamed. The sound was high and piercing and satisfying in a way that probably said terrible things about me. I held her there for another second. Let her feel it. Then I let go.

She stumbled back, cradling her wrist. The other two were staring at me like I'd grown fangs.

"We should get Timothy," one of them hissed. "Get him to open the cage. Then we can teach her a real lesson."

"Really?"

The voice came from behind them. Deep and cold and unmistakable.

The mate bond thrummed. He'd been hiding it. Keeping his presence muted so I wouldn't feel him approach. But now I could feel everything. His rage was a living thing. Hot and violent and sharp.

I wondered if that rage was for me. Or for them.

The three omegas spun around. Their faces went pale. They dropped into bows so fast I heard one of their knees crack against the stone.

"Alpha Cian," the first one stammered. "We apologize. She was just making our job very hard and we—"

"Silence."

They shut up immediately.

Cian stepped into view. I could see him properly now. He looked intimidating. Dangerous. The way he had at the wedding and shortly after he found out that I was not Hazel. All that sharp edge and barely contained fury. I found I liked it better when he was poisoned. When he'd looked vulnerable and mortal and not like something that could tear me apart without breaking a sweat.

His eyes swept over them. Over the spilled food on the floor. Over me now pressed against the back wall of my cell.

"I understand you think you're doing this on my behalf," he said. His voice was quiet. That made it worse somehow. "But the next time any of you do this again, there will be blood. Lots of it."

"We're sorry, Alpha," they whispered in unison.

"Scram."

They ran. I heard their footsteps echoing back up the stairs. Fast and frantic and scared.

Then it was just him and me. And the bond between us that I couldn't escape no matter how hard I tried.

He turned to look at me. Really look at me. His gaze moved over my face. My dirty clothes. The bruises on my wrists where the silver cuffs had been.

"How has prison life been going?" he asked.

I blinked. "Did I just watch you do a good deed on my behalf?"

"Well." He shifted his weight. "If you give lower life forms the gift of trampling on what should belong to you, it won't be long until that disrespect finds you."

"You call your servants lower life forms?"

"Are they not?" He tilted his head. "But I actually mean omegas. If they don't know their place, it can be quite catastrophic. You would know what I mean given how high you flew to the sun. Given the audacity you had to trap in this union."

The words stung. I turned my face away from him.

"I don't want to talk to you anymore," I said. "Leave."

He cleared his throat then. "But you did save my life. And I for one know how to be grateful. So... thank you."

My heart fluttered. I hated that it did. Hated that those simple words could affect me when I knew they meant nothing. When I knew he'd keep me back in this cell the second I pissed him off again.

I forced myself to look at him. To meet his eyes.

"If you want to be grateful," I said carefully, "there are two things you can do. Release me and reject me."

He chuckled. The sound was low and dark and sent shivers down my spine.

Then he moved. His hand went to the cell door. I heard the lock click. Heard the iron swing open.

I moved back. My shoulders hit the wall. There was nowhere else to go.

He kept coming. One step. Then another. Until he was right in front of me. Until I could feel the heat coming off his body. Until I had to crane my neck to keep looking at his face.

"I'm not paying a debt," he said softly. "I'm simply being kind. So I will do none of that. And we both know, no matter how much you want to pretend that is the case, you do not want me to reject you."

His hand came up. I thought he was going to touch my face. Instead, he braced it against the wall next to my head. Caging me in.

He leaned down. His lips brushed my ear.

"But I will do you one better. How about... No one will torment you but me, omega."

His voice was sultry. Dark. It slid over my skin like silk and made wetness pool between my thighs. I wanted to shove him away. Wanted to scream at him. Wanted to do anything except stand there feeling my body betray me.

I shook my head. Forced myself to meet his eyes again.

"And what exactly do you want," I said, "since you're here? We both know you didn't suddenly grow a heart."

He studied me. His gaze moved over my face like he was trying to read something written there. Then he reached behind his back and pulled out papers. Printed pages that had been folded.

He placed them on the floor. Right in front of my feet.

I looked down. Saw the words printed across the top. Contract. Agreement. Terms and conditions.

"This is the contract?" I asked.

"Yeah." He straightened up. Put some distance between us. "You came back to me after all."

"I was poisoned and dragged here."

"Yeah. Saved by me, my people and my drugs. You owe me your life."

His voice changed. Went cold. Ice cold. The kind of cold that made frost patterns on glass.

"And if you want any semblance of freedom here, sign it. Refuse, and you'll remain locked in this room until you break." He paused. Let the words sink in. "And trust me, I will make you break."

I stared at him. At the papers on the floor. At the choice he was giving me that wasn't really a choice at all.

My hands were shaking. I curled them into fists to hide it.

"Can I read it first?" I asked.

"Of course." He smiled. It didn't reach his eyes. "Take all the time you need, omega. I'm not going anywhere."

Chapter 24: No One But Me 2

FIA

I read the contract slowly. Every word felt like a punch to the gut.

The first clause said I had to conceive within six months. That I would be provided with his seed in sterile containers. That I was expected to inseminate myself according to a schedule his physicians would provide. Clinical. Cold. Like I was livestock being bred.

The second clause outlined my duties. I would wear the clothes Cian had intended for Hazel. I would attend pack functions on his arm. I would smile and nod and never speak unless spoken to. I would play the part of the Luna without actually having any of the power.

The third clause was about obedience. I would not question his authority. I would not challenge his decisions. I would defer to him in all things. The word "submit" appeared seven times in that section alone.

I kept reading. My hands weren't shaking anymore. They'd gone numb.

There were clauses about my movements. Where I could and couldn't go. Who I could and couldn't speak to. What parts of the compound were off limits. I would essentially be a prisoner with better accommodations than this cell.

The final clause said that any breach of the contract would result in immediate punishment at his discretion. No appeals. No second chances.

I looked up at him. He was leaning against the wall near the door. Watching me with that cold expression he wore so well.

"Would my sister have become a traditional wife if she had actually married you in my place?" I asked. My voice came out steadier than I expected. "She was always outspoken. Independent. She would have hated this."

He tilted his head. Something flickered across his face. Annoyance maybe.

"No," he said. "Because she was someone I actually wanted to get married to."

The words landed exactly how he meant them to. Sharp and precise and designed to hurt.

I smiled. I made sure it reached my eyes.

"If you want to show gratitude," I said carefully, "I will sign this. I will become practically your slave. But one term here has to be changed."

He straightened up. I saw his eyebrows lift. Like he couldn't believe I had the audacity to negotiate.

"What?" His tone was amused. Like I was a child asking for something ridiculous.

I looked down at the contract. Found the clause about conception. Read it again to make sure I had the wording right.

"I do not want you to hand me your seed routinely," I said. I looked up. Met his eyes and held them. "I want you to do it yourself."

The silence that followed was thick enough to choke on.

Then he laughed. Short and sharp and disbelieving.

"What?"

"You heard me."

He pushed off the wall. Took two steps toward me. His face had gone from amused to something darker.

"Now you are showing your true colors," he said.

"Am I?" I kept my voice level. Kept my gaze locked on his. "I am just changing one term. I will accept the rest."

"I will never have sex with you," he said. Each word was deliberate. Final. "Even if hell freezes over."

"It is just one term," I said. "I will accept the rest."

I saw his jaw clench. Saw the muscle there jump.

"I have always been of the opinion," I continued, "that men did not mind the face behind the warm body on their bed. That they could sleep with anyone... with anything."

He laughed again. This time it was uglier. Meaner.

"You have no shame," he said.

"Why would I?" I kept my chin up. Kept my shoulders back. "In your eyes, I am the worst kind of monster."

"Are you not?"

The question hung between us. I could feel the bond thrumming. I could feel his anger and disgust bleeding through.

"It is either that," I said quietly, "or you can keep denying me sex but the rest has to go."

I watched his face change. Watched the anger turn into something colder. More controlled.

He moved fast. Snatched the papers from my hand so quickly I didn't have time to react. The movement was violent. Barely restrained.

"You clearly have not spent a long time here," he said.

"I will not be changing my mind."

"You will."

He turned. Started walking toward the cell door. His footsteps were heavy against the stone floor. Deliberate.

I watched him reach for the lock. Watched his hand close around the iron bars.

My heart was hammering. I could feel the bond pulling tight. Could feel my wolf howling inside me to just shut up. To let him leave. To stop pushing.

But I couldn't.

"What about your mother?" The words came out before I could stop them. "How long can you keep me here when I know she is dying to put a face to the title?"

He went still.

I saw his shoulders tense. Saw his hand grip the bars hard enough that his knuckles went white.

Then he moved.

He was on me so fast I didn't have time to back up. His hand closed around my throat. Not squeezing. Just holding. The pressure was light but the threat was clear. Dman clear.

His eyes were red. Completely red. His wolf was right there at the surface. Close enough to taste.

"Are you threatening me?" His voice was low. Dangerous.

My throat hurt where his hand pressed. My wolf was screaming at me to submit. To bare my neck. To show him I wasn't a threat.

I kept eye contact. No, I forced myself not to look away.

I needed to keep playing the villain. Needed him to see me as someone who would use any leverage. Someone who had no scruples. Someone who deserved everything he was doing to me.

Because if he saw anything else, if he saw how scared I was, how much this hurt, I would break. And I couldn't break. Not here. Not in front of him.

"Why did that sound like a threat, Alpha Cian?" I kept my voice steady, kept my eyes on his.

His grip tightened, just enough for my pulse to leap against his palm. I saw the storm behind his eyes, the beast pacing just beneath his skin. His wolf wanted to break me, to remind me what I was—small, defiant, omega. His human side was the only thing holding that violence back, and even that thread was fraying fast.

The bond burned hot between us. Every breath, every heartbeat, every drop of anger pouring from him was mine too. I felt how much my words had cut him, how deep the wound went when I'd thrown his mother into the fire of my argument. I had found the one place he was still raw and dug my nails into it. Exactly what he expected me to do.

He released me. His hand fell away like a blade sheathed after the damage was done. He stepped back once, twice, his chest still rising like he was trying to cage something wild inside.

"You have until morning," he said. His voice was hollow now, stripped of emotion. "Sign the contract as it is. Or stay here for a month. No food. No water. Nothing."

I smiled, slow and deliberate. "Alpha Cian, we both know that's a lie. You need me. You wouldn't be down here, talking to me yourself if you didn't. You need your pretty little prisoner to play the part of a good mate. So here's my answer."

I leaned forward, just enough to provoke his rage. "Come morning, I won't be signing anything. So you either listen to what I want, or kill me and be done with it."

Chapter 25: No One But Me 3

FIA

Cian's jaw tightened. For a second, the silence between us was louder than his threat. He moved toward the bars, the sound of his boots echoing across the concrete floor, heavy and deliberate. When he unlocked the cage, the metal screeched like it was screaming for me to run. But I didn't. I sat still, watching him close the distance with that quiet fury that only he carried.

He stepped inside and the air changed. The cell shrank. Every breath I took felt shared, pulled from the same thin space between us. His eyes, a cold storm, locked on mine as if searching for a reason not to do what he said he would.

"What makes you think I won't?" His voice was low now, quieter, but sharper. A blade drawn slow enough to make me feel every inch.

I tilted my head. "Because I just know."

He laughed. The sound was sharp enough to draw blood. "You should know everything about me if you were so obsessed you trapped me in this marriage. You think I won't kill you because we're mates? Feel through the bond and tell me what you feel, because I want to do it."

I did feel it. The rage was there. Hot and vicious and ready to tear me apart. His wolf was screaming for violence. For blood. For an end to this mess I'd created.

But there was something else underneath. Something he was wrestling with. Something that made him hold back even when every instinct told him to let go.

"Yeah," I said. "*You want to.*"

I reached for his hand. He didn't stop me. I wrapped my fingers around his wrist and pulled it back to my throat. Pressed his palm against the place where my pulse hammered.

"But you wouldn't be holding on to control if there was no consequence for you." My voice was steady. I made sure of it. "So as much as you visualize crushing my throat, you can't. Why? I am not sure."

That was not entirely true. Everything Garret had told me pointed to Cian being capable of anything. Pointed to him being the kind of man who would eliminate problems without blinking. But Garret had also said Cian valued things. His mother. His superstitions. Maybe that was the only reason I was still breathing.

"But," I continued my lie. "I know that much."

His hand stayed where it was. Warm against my skin. Not squeezing. Not moving. Just there.

"You think you have me figured out." It wasn't a question.

"Maybe I don't." I kept my eyes on his. "But today, I do. So what is it going to be, Alpha Cian? More games that will take us nowhere?"

The silence stretched. I counted five heartbeats. Six. Seven.

Then his hand fell away.

He took a step back. Put space between us. The cold rushed in where his heat had been.

"What do you want?"

The question caught me off guard. Not because he asked it, but because he sounded tired. Like something in him had finally given up fighting.

I swallowed. Tasted blood where I'd bitten my cheek without realizing.

"I don't want a contract." The words came out clear. Firm. "I will not have you humiliate me."

He tilted his head. "But I will. Contract or no contract."

"Be vile to me." I shrugged like it didn't matter. Like his cruelty was just weather I had to endure. "I don't care. But not because I'm signing shit. But because you're a horrible person."

He scoffed. Actually scoffed. "Me? Horrible?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "You are the worst."

His jaw clenched. I saw the muscle jump there. Saw his hands curl into fists at his sides.

"I will not be having sex with you either." Each word was clipped. Precise. "If you want a child, it will be through in vitro."

"I don't want your child."

He blinked. I'd surprised him again.

"You wanted a clause change that involved my penis and now you says different?"

Heat crawled up my neck. I kept my face blank. "Whatever makes you sleep at night."

"You will simply be a figurehead."

"Aren't most Lunas?"

The question hung there. I watched something flicker across his face. Surprise maybe. Or anger. Or both.

He straightened his back. Squared his shoulders. The Alpha mask slid back into place.

"And you will make my mother happy. Best of your omega abilities."

My stomach twisted. His mother. The dying woman infected with the rot. The one person in this entire godforsaken pack who might actually be kind to me.

"I'll try."

He shot me a look. Sharp and cold.

"Okay." I sighed. "I'll make her happy. Are you happy now?"

"No."

Of course not. Nothing would make this man happy. Nothing except maybe watching me crawl.

"Swear before the goddess."

I hesitated. Swearing before the goddess meant something. It was binding in ways that went beyond words. Beyond contracts. It was sacred.

But what choice did I have?

"I swear before Selene."

The words left my mouth and I felt them settle. Felt the weight of them sink into my bones.

He sighed. Long and heavy. Like I'd just agreed to something that exhausted him.

"You're free."

I stared at him. Waited for the catch. The other shoe that had to drop.

He turned. Walked to where he'd left the contract on the floor. Picked it up.

Then he tore it.

The sound was loud in the quiet cell. The paper ripping. The shredding. He didn't stop until it was in pieces too small to read. Too small to matter.

He let the scraps fall from his hands. They drifted to the floor like snow.

"You must be so elated."

Was I? I couldn't tell anymore. My emotions were a tangled mess. Fear and relief and exhaustion all fighting for space in my chest.

"You have no idea."

He turned to look at me one last time. His eyes swept over my face. My dirty clothes. The bruises on my wrists.

"Someone will come for you in an hour." His voice was flat. Empty. "They'll take you to your rooms. You'll bathe. Change. Then you'll have dinner with my mother tomorrow evening."

"Okay."

"Don't make me regret this, omega."

The warning was clear. One wrong move and I'd be back in this cell. Or worse.

"I won't."

He didn't believe me. I could see it in his eyes. Could feel it through the bond. But he turned anyway. Walked out of the cell. His footsteps echoed as he crossed to the stairs.

I waited until I couldn't hear him anymore. Until I was sure he was gone.

Then I sank down onto the cot. My legs gave out. My whole body shook.

I'd done it. I'd pushed him and he'd bent. Not much. Not nearly enough. But he'd bent.

The mate bond thrummed in my chest. I could still feel him. His anger. His frustration. His confusion about what I actually wanted.

Good. Let him be confused. Let him wonder. Let him lose sleep trying to figure me out.

I looked at the torn pieces of contract on the floor. At the food the omegas had spilled. At the cell that had been my home for over a day.

Freedom. He'd called it freedom.

I knew better. This was just a different kind of cage. Bigger maybe. With better furniture and prettier bars. But still a cage.

I thought about his mother. About the promise I'd just made. About having to smile and play pretend while she looked at me with kind eyes and believed I was someone her son cared about.

My throat tightened. I swallowed hard.

I could do this. I had to do this. Because the alternative was dying in this cell. Or eventually dying at his hands.

So I would play the part. I would be the Luna he needed me to be. I would make his mother happy and keep my head down and survive.

And maybe, if I was lucky, I'd find a way out of this mess before it buried me completely.

The hour passed slowly. I counted the minutes. Listened to the distant sounds of the pack above me. Voices. Footsteps. Life continuing while I sat in the dark.

When the omega finally came, she was different from the ones who'd spilled my food. She was older, quieter and she didn't look at me with hatred. Just weariness.

"Come," she said. "The Alpha said to bring you up."

I stood. My legs were stiff. My whole body ached.

But I followed her out of the cell. Up the stairs. Into the light.

And I didn't look back.

Chapter 26: First Night at Skollrend

FIA

The room they took me to was awful.

Small. Shabby. There was mold climbing up one corner of the wall like black fingers reaching for the ceiling. The furniture looked like it had been pulled from storage and dusted off just enough to not be completely filthy. A bed with a thin mattress. A dresser with one drawer that hung crooked. A single lamp that flickered when the omega turned it on.

I looked around and tried not to let my face show anything. Maybe this was Cian's doing. Another punishment wrapped up in the illusion of freedom. Or maybe it was the omegas taking 'initiative' again. Deciding on their own that I didn't deserve anything better.

Either way, it didn't matter. I could clean. I didn't mind cleaning. I'd lived in worse.

I turned to the omega who'd brought me up. She was standing by the door, watching me with that same tired expression.

"Thank you," I said.

Her eyes narrowed. "You need a bath."

"I know."

"No. Now." She crossed her arms. "You need to get the grime and gunk off your skin so you don't break out meeting the Grand Luna tomorrow."

I felt my shoulders tense. "I can do that myself."

"I was told to take care of you." Her voice was flat. Final. "I will not leave it to chance. Who knows what you will spin to the Alpha if I leave without getting the job done?"

The accusation hung there. Like I was some kind of manipulator who'd twist everything to make them look bad. Like I had any power here at all.

"Please get out," I said. I kept my voice level. "I can take care of myself."

She clapped her hands.

The sound was sharp. Loud. Before I could process what was happening, three more omegas came through the door. They moved fast. Coordinated. Like they'd planned this.

They grabbed me.

I tried to pull away but there were too many hands. Too many bodies pressing in. They yanked at my clothes. Pulled at the filthy shirt until it tore. Grabbed at my pants.

"Stop!" I twisted. Fought. "Get off me!"

"You think you're special?" One of them hissed in my ear. "You think you can waltz in here and take what doesn't belong to you?"

They stripped me. Ripped the clothes from my body until I was standing there in nothing. Exposed. Vulnerable.

Then they dragged me toward the bathroom.

I dug my heels in. Tried to resist. But they were stronger together. They shoved me through the doorway. One of them turned on the water. It sprayed from the showerhead, cold at first, then scalding hot.

"Who do you think you are?" Another omega grabbed my arm. Her nails dug into my skin. "You trapped him. You ruined everything."

"He was supposed to marry someone who mattered," the first omega said. The one who'd brought me up. She was the ringleader. I could see it in her eyes. The hatred there was personal. "Not some pathetic omega who had to lie to get what she wanted."

They called me names. Whore. Homewrecker. Desperate. The words came fast and vicious. Each one designed to cut.

I kept trying to get away. Kept fighting. But there were four of them and one of me and they were so angry.

Then one of them spit on me.

I felt the saliva hit my cheek. Felt it slide down toward my jaw. Hot and degrading and so full of contempt.

That caused something inside me snapped.

I saw red. Actual red. Like a film had dropped over my vision and all I could see was rage.

I bit down on the hand closest to my face. Bit hard enough to taste copper. The omega screamed and jerked back.

I kicked out. Caught another one in the stomach. She doubled over with a wheezing gasp.

Then I was moving.

They tried to gang up on me. Tried to use their numbers. But I'd grown up fighting. I had learned young that sometimes the only way to survive was to hit first and hit hard.

I dodged a grab. Drove my elbow into someone's ribs. Heard the crack and the scream that followed.

Another one lunged. I sidestepped and shoved her into the wall. Her head hit the tile with a thud and she slid down.

The ringleader came at me last. The one who'd started this. The one with all that personal hatred burning in her eyes.

I grabbed her by the hair. Yanked her forward and drove my fist into her face.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Four.

Her nose broke. Blood sprayed across my knuckles. But I didn't stop. I couldn't stop. All the fear and humiliation and rage from the past day poured out through my fist.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

My hand was bleeding now. Slick with blood. I didn't know if it was hers or mine or both.

The other omegas were watching. Frozen. Horrified. Like they couldn't believe what they were seeing.

Only then did I let go of the ringleader. She crumpled to the floor. Her face was a mess. Swollen and bleeding and barely recognizable.

I looked at the others. I made sure to make eye contact with each one.

"Just because the circumstances that brought me here are unsavory," I said, "does not give you the power to disrespect me."

My voice was steady. Cold. Nothing like I felt inside.

"I will fuck your shit up," I continued. "Do you understand?"

They nodded. Quick and terrified.

"Now get out." I gestured toward the door. "Because I can go all night."

They scrambled. Picked up their leader from the floor. She was conscious but barely. They half carried, half dragged her out.

I waited until they were gone. Until I heard their footsteps fade down the hallway.

Then I went to the door. Locked it. The mechanism was old and stuck but I forced it until I heard the click.

My hands were shaking now. The adrenaline was wearing off and reality was crashing back in.

I slid down the door. Sat on the floor with my back against the wood. And I burst into tears.

Not sad tears. These were tears of fear. The kind that came when you realized how badly things could have gone. How close you'd been to something worse.

I pressed my bleeding hand against my mouth and tried to muffle the sounds. I even tried to breathe through the panic clawing at my chest.

What had I done? I'd beaten them. Brutalized one of them. They'd go to Cian. They'd tell him lies. And then I'd be right back in that cell. Or dead. Or worse.

Maybe he wouldn't even do any of that. But it would only solidify the idea that I was this horrid person.

I cried until my throat hurt. Until my eyes burned. Until there was nothing left.

Then I heard it.

A ringing sound. Faint but persistent. Coming from inside the room.

I stood, wiped my face with the back of my non-bleeding hand and proceeded to follow the sound.

It was coming from the bed.

I walked over. There was a nightgown laid out on the mattress. Simple. White. Clean. And next to it, partially hidden under a fold of fabric, was my phone.

My phone!

I picked it up. The screen was lit. The battery was full. My mind momentarily went back to Cian. I almost scoffed. There was no way he was that kind. But my train of thoughts went left when the phone vibrated again. Milo's name flashed across the caller ID.

I looked at the notifications. Twenty messages. All from him. And now a call.

I scoffed. Actually scoffed. Because of course. Of course Milo would be the one trying to reach me. What did he have to say after helping Hazel ruin my entire life?

I still could not imagine it. How someone I loved and cared so much about could just do that to me. How I was so blind that I even let it happen.

The phone kept ringing and his name kept flashing.

I knew I should let it go to voicemail. I knew the best thing to do was ignore him like I'd been ignored when I needed help. Nothing good could come from picking it after all.

But my thumb moved before I could talk myself out of it.

I answered.

"What?" My voice came out rough. Harsh. Still thick from crying.

There was a pause. Then Milo's voice came through. Tight with something I couldn't quite read.

"How are you Fi?"

I laughed. The sound was ugly. "What do you care?"

"Fia." He said my name like it was honey. "I've been calling for hours. I was worried about you."

"Why?" I sat down on the bed. The nightgown crinkled under me. "Why would you be worried about me? You should have done what would happen when you decided that you would assist Hazel to ruin me. Because I've been locked in a cell. Without my phone. Without food. Without anything. So forgive me for missing your calls despite the fact that you called for hours."

There was another pause. It was longer this time.

"A cell?" His voice changed. Got quieter. "Goddess, I am so sorry."

"Do not be." I looked at my bleeding hand. At the bruises forming on my wrists where the omegas had grabbed me. At the mess I'd become. "Why feel guilty? At least the love of your life is not here. She was not locked up. No one was trying to make her sign a contract or actively trying to break her spirit. So yeah. If anything you should be elated."

"Fia." He sounded strained now. Almost desperate. "I didn't know. I swear I didn't know that would happen."

"So what the fuck did you think would happen?"

Chapter 27: Promises Of An Ex

FIA

I stared at the phone. Waited for him to say something that would make sense of all this.

"I'm coming there tomorrow," Milo said finally. "I'm going to tell Alpha Cian the whole truth."

The words hit me wrong. Like they didn't fit together the way they should.

"Why?" I asked.

"What?"

"Why would you do that?" I shifted on the bed. The nightgown crinkled louder. "Isn't it too late? You already got what you wanted. Hazel is free. I'm trapped. Mission accomplished."

"Fia, it's not like that."

"Then what is it like?" I pressed the phone harder against my ear. "Because from where I'm sitting, you helped destroy my life and now suddenly you want to fix it? That doesn't make sense unless something changed for you."

Silence followed.

My stomach dropped.

"Something happened between you and Hazel." It wasn't a question. I could hear it in what he wasn't saying. "Did it? Did your little love affair turn sour?"

More silence followed.

"Milo."

There was nothing. No response. Just his ragged breathing.

"I guess I am right then." I laughed but there was no humor in it. "What happened? She get what she wanted and toss you aside?"

He made a sound. It was small and broken. Like the man that he was.

"All I want to know is what I did to deserve your resentment." My voice cracked. I hated that it cracked. "What did I do? When all I ever did was love you. When I gave you everything I had. What about that made you think it was okay to do this to me?"

That's when I heard it. The sound of Milo crying on the other end of the phone.

He was actually crying.

"I was foolish," he said through the tears. "I was so fucking foolish and I was blinded by power."

I waited. I let him continue.

"I thought she loved me." His voice was thick with snot and tears. "I really thought Hazel loved me. That we had something real. But she was just using me to escape Cian. That's all I was to her. A way out."

"But what about me?" The words came out steady. Firm. "I did love you. And you played me for a fool."

"I know."

"Alpha Cian might be a cruel man," I continued. "But at least he's honest in his cruelty. He doesn't pretend to care. He doesn't smile while he stabs you in the back. He's not a snake like you."

Milo sucked in a breath like I'd punched him.

"You're right," he said. "You're absolutely right. But I can fix this. I swear I can fix this."

"How?"

"Tomorrow." He was talking faster now. Desperate. "Tomorrow I'm coming to Skollrend. I'm going to tell Cian everything. What Hazel and I did. How we planned it. How we

tricked you into getting into Hazel's wedding gown and put all the blame on you. All of it."

I sat up straighter. "You'll take the consequences of lying to an Alpha? A powerful Alpha Like Cian?"

"Yes."

"I don't think so."

"I will prove you wrong." His voice was stronger now. More certain. "I swear to you, Fia. I will come there tomorrow and I will tell him the truth. I'll take whatever punishment he gives me. I don't care anymore."

I wanted to believe him. Goddess, I wanted to believe him so badly it hurt.

But this was the same man who'd stood by while Hazel and my stepmother manipulated me. The same man who'd watched me throw away my future and said nothing. The same man who'd probably smiled and kissed or fucked Hazel after it was done.

Why would he suddenly grow a conscience now?

Unless Hazel really had broken his heart. Unless he was hurting so badly that he needed to strike back at her somehow. And if telling the truth would hurt Hazel, then maybe he'd actually do it.

It was a selfish reason. A petty reason. But it was the only one that made sense.

"Okay," I said.

"Okay?"

"Tomorrow." I looked at my bleeding hand again. At the dried blood crusted between my fingers. "Come tomorrow. Tell him. We'll see what happens."

"Thank you." Relief flooded his voice. "Thank you, Fia. I promise I won't let you down."

"You already did that." I moved the phone away from my ear. "Bye, Milo."

I cut the call before he could respond.

The phone screen went dark. I stared at my reflection in the black glass. I looked terrible. My face was splotchy from crying. My hair was a tangled mess. There was a smear of blood on my cheek that I didn't remember getting.

I should clean up. I should take that bath the omegas had tried to force on me. I should put on the nightgown and try to sleep and prepare myself for breakfast or dinner with Cian's mother tomorrow.

But I just sat there holding the phone.

Hope was a dangerous thing. I knew that. I'd learned it over and over again in my life. Hope made you weak. Hope made you vulnerable. Hope was what got you hurt when reality came crashing down.

I should not hope that Milo would actually show up tomorrow.

I should not hope that he'd tell the truth.

I should not hope that Cian would believe him or that it would change anything even if he did.

But I was hoping anyway.

I could feel it growing in my chest like a weed pushing through concrete. Stubborn and persistent and completely unwanted.

What if Milo really did come? What if he really did confess? What if Cian found out that I'd been manipulated? That Hazel and her mother had tricked me into taking her place?

Would it matter?

Would Cian care that I'd been used? Or would he just see it as more proof that I was weak and foolish and deserved everything I got?

I didn't know. I couldn't predict what that man would do or think or feel. He was a mystery wrapped in cruelty wrapped in that bond that pulsed between us like a living thing.

But maybe, just maybe, knowing the truth would shift something.

Maybe it would give me leverage. Or sympathy. Or at least enough doubt that he'd stop looking at me like I was the villain in this story.

I set the phone down on the nightstand. My hand was still bleeding. Not a lot, but enough that I should probably do something about it.

I stood up. Walked to the bathroom. The floor was still wet from where the omegas had turned on the shower. There were drops of blood near the door. The ringleader's blood probably. Or mine. Hard to tell.

I turned on the faucet. Ran cold water over my knuckles. Watched the blood swirl down the drain in pink spirals.

The cuts weren't deep. They'd heal. Everything would heal eventually.

I washed my face next. Scrubbed away the tears and the blood and the grime from the cell. The water ran brown at first. Then gray. Then finally clear.

I looked at myself in the mirror. The woman staring back looked tired. Beaten down. But still standing.

I thought about what Milo had said. About being blinded by power. About thinking Hazel loved him when she was just using him.

Had I been blind too? Had I missed all the signs? Had I been so desperate for love and connection that I'd ignored every red flag?

Probably.

But that didn't make what they did okay. That didn't excuse the betrayal.

I dried my face with a towel that smelled like mildew. Made a mental note to wash everything in this room tomorrow. Or maybe just burn it all and start over.

The nightgown was still on the bed where I'd left it. I picked it up. The fabric was soft. Clean. It felt like luxury after wearing the same filthy wedding gown for over a day.

I pulled it over my head. It fell to my ankles. The sleeves were too long. I had to roll them up to free my hands.

Then I climbed into bed.

The mattress was thin but it was better than the cot in the cell. The pillow was flat but it was better than nothing. The blanket smelled stale but it was warm.

I lay there staring at the ceiling. At the water stain in the corner that looked like a map of some country I'd never visit. At the flickering light from the lamp that needed a new bulb.

Tomorrow I'd meet with Cian's mother. The Grand Luna. The woman who was dying from the rot.

I'd have to smile and be charming and pretend like everything was fine. Like I was happy to be here. Like I wasn't trapped in a nightmare I couldn't wake up from.

And maybe, if the goddess was feeling merciful, Milo would show up before that dinner. He'd confess. He'd tell Cian everything. And something would change.

Or maybe he wouldn't show up at all. Maybe he'd wake up tomorrow and realize he had too much to lose. Maybe Hazel would sweet talk him back into keeping quiet. Maybe I'd been stupid to believe him even for a second.

I closed my eyes. Tried to quiet my mind. Tried to stop the endless loop of what ifs and maybes and possibilities.

The bond hummed in my chest. Cian was somewhere in this house. I could feel him. His anger had cooled to something else. Exhaustion.

He wasn't thinking about me. I could tell that much. Whatever occupied his mind right now, it wasn't me.

Which was good, I guess.

I had enough of my own problems.

Sleep came slowly. It crept up on me in pieces. One minute I was wide awake and the next I was drifting. My body finally giving up the fight to stay alert.

And somewhere in that space between awake and asleep, I let myself hope.

Just a little.

Just enough to get through tomorrow.

Chapter 28: Milo's Ruin 1

HAZEL

I couldn't sleep.

Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Milo's face when I'd told him the truth. The way his hope had shattered. The way he'd looked at me like I was something rotten.

I told myself it didn't matter. He'd fall in line eventually. They always did.

But something gnawed at me—a feeling I couldn't shake.

I sat up in bed and reached for my phone. Scrolled through my contacts until I found the name I needed. Delta. One of the omega servants who'd been loyal to me since I was sixteen. She owed me favors. Big ones.

I typed out a message.

Need you to watch someone for me. Sentinel Milo. Report back if he does anything suspicious.

The reply came fast.

Of course, Miss Hazel.

I set the phone down. Tried to relax. This was just insurance. Just me being careful. Milo wouldn't actually do anything stupid. He was hurt and angry but he wasn't suicidal.

Except.

Except he'd looked at me with tears in his eyes and said he loved me. Past tense. Loved. Like it was already over.

My phone buzzed twenty minutes later.

You were right to be concerned. He's packing a bag. I overheard him say he's going to Skollrend tomorrow to tell Alpha Cian everything.

I read the message three times.

My hands started shaking.

No. No, he wouldn't. He couldn't be that fucking stupid.

I called Delta.

She picked up on the first ring. "Miss Hazel?"

"Are you sure?" My voice came out sharper than I meant it to. "You're absolutely sure that's what he said?"

"I heard him on the phone with someone. Your sister, I think. He kept saying he was going to fix it. That he'd tell the truth tomorrow and take whatever punishment came." Delta paused. "He sounded determined."

My stomach dropped.

Milo was going to destroy us both. He was going to walk into Skollrend and confess everything to one of the most powerful Alphas in the region. An Alpha who could crush Silver Creek without breaking a sweat if he wanted to.

"Miss Hazel?" Delta's voice pulled me back. "What should I do?"

"Take me to him." I was already out of bed. Already pulling on clothes. "Now."

"Are you sure that's wise? If anyone sees you going to the sentinel quarters at this hour..."

"I don't care." I grabbed a jacket. "Meet me at the side entrance in five minutes."

I hung up before she could argue.

My mind was racing. Milo couldn't go through with this. He was my accomplice. If he went down, I went down with him. Worse, actually. Because I was the one who'd planned everything. I was the one who'd orchestrated Fia's downfall.

And Milo was apparently the type to destroy himself for love. For guilt. For whatever twisted sense of honor he thought he still had.

I felt sick.

Delta was waiting when I got to the side entrance. She didn't say anything. Just led me through the dark paths toward the sentinel quarters. The buildings were squat and functional. Nothing like the main pack house where I lived.

We stopped outside Milo's door.

"Wait here," I told Delta.

She nodded and stepped back into the shadows.

I knocked. Three sharp raps.

I heard footsteps. Then the door opened.

Milo stood there in sweatpants and nothing else. His eyes widened when he saw me. "What do you want?"

I pushed past him into the room. It was small. Sparse. A bed, a dresser, a single chair. Everything a sentinel needed and nothing more.

"Hazel, you can't just..."

"Are you stupid?" I spun to face him. "Are you actually stupid enough to think you can walk into Skollrend and confess to Alpha Cian?"

His jaw tightened. "I'm doing what's right."

"Right?" I laughed. The sound was harsh even to my own ears. "Right for who? Fia? The girl who you helped me destroy? Or is this about you feeling guilty now that you realize I don't actually love you?"

"Don't." His voice was low. Dangerous. "Don't make this about that."

"But it is about that." I moved closer. "You're throwing a tantrum because I hurt your feelings. You're willing to destroy both our lives because you can't handle the truth."

"The truth is that we lied." Milo's hands clenched into fists at his sides. "We manipulated Fia. We tricked her into taking your place. We ruined her life for our own gain."

"Our gain?" I raised an eyebrow. "What exactly did you gain, Milo? Because from where I'm standing, you got to fuck me a few times and now you're crying about it."

He flinched.

Good.

"Do you know what Alpha Cian will do to you?" I kept my voice steady. Reasonable. "He'll kill you. Or worse. He'll make an example out of you. Show every other pack what happens when you lie to an Alpha."

"I know the risks."

"Do you?" I stepped closer again. Close enough to see the conflict in his eyes. "Because I don't think you do. I don't think you understand what you're throwing away here."

"I'm not throwing anything away." But his voice wavered. Just slightly. "I'm fixing what we broke."

"You can't fix it." The words came out flat. Final. "It's done. Fia is with Cian now. They're mated. Nothing you say will change that."

"But it will give out the truth." Milo's eyes met mine. "Alpha Cian deserves to know we manipulated her. That it wasn't her fault. Do you know the hell she is going through over there?"

"And what about me?" I let my voice soften. Let a hint of vulnerability creep in. "What happens to me when you tell him everything? What happens to my father, the Alpha who is supposed to have your loyalty? This pack? What happens to us? You know what will happen right?"

"You'll face consequences too."

"Consequences." I shook my head. "Milo, I'm a woman. A Luna's daughter. Do you understand what that means? I don't get to choose my fate the way you men do. If Cian comes after our pack, if he demands retribution, my father will hand me and you over without blinking."

Something flickered across his face. I had cut into something. "We pay for our crimes."

I pressed the advantage.

"Crime? I had to play games to avoid marrying Cian in the first place." I moved closer. Close enough that he could feel my breath. "I had to scheme and manipulate because I don't have the luxury of just saying no. That's how it works for women like me."

"Hazel..."

"I just wanted to get out." My voice cracked. Just enough to sound real. "I just wanted a choice. And yes, I used you. I used Fia. But what else was I supposed to do?"

He was listening now. Really listening.

"Please don't do this." I reached up. Touched his face. Let my fingers trace the line of his jaw. "Please don't throw us both away because you're hurt."

Chapter 29: Milo's Ruin 2

HAZEL

"Us?" He caught my wrist. Held it firm. "There is no us. You made that very clear."

"I was being realistic." I let tears gather in my eyes. Not real tears. But he wouldn't know the difference. "I was trying to protect myself from the inevitable. From the moment when my father marries me off to some Alpha I've never met and I lose everything."

"But Fia..." he started.

"Fia is different." I cut him off. "We made that happen. We orchestrated it. And Cian is a man. Men get to choose. I don't."

The tears spilled over. I let them fall.

"I couldn't take the heartbreak," I whispered. "Of getting close to you. Of letting myself really love you. And then losing it all anyway."

Milo's grip on my wrist loosened.

"But if it's what you want." I looked up at him through wet lashes. "If you really want to tell Cian everything. Then I'll accept it. I'll accept whatever comes."

"Hazel..."

"Just." I stepped closer. Pressed against him. "Just let me have tonight. Before you destroy everything. Let me have one more night where I can pretend."

I kissed him.

He didn't kiss back at first. His body was rigid. Resistant.

"I love you," I breathed against his lips. "I do. I was just scared to admit it."

His hands came up. Pushed me away.

"You're doing it again." His voice was hard. "You're using me. Playing games."

"I'm not." I wiped at my tears. Real ones now, because this wasn't working. "Milo, please. I'm not playing games. I'm trying to tell you the truth."

"The truth." He laughed. Bitter and broken. "You don't know what truth means."

"Then let me prove it." I moved back toward him. Slower this time. "Let me show you."

"How?"

I took his hand. Placed it over my heart. Let him feel how fast it was beating.

"You could stay by my side," I said softly. "At all times. Even after I marry whoever my father chooses or the next Alpha that comes knocking. You could be with me."

His face darkened. "Like a mistress."

"Like a lover." I corrected. "My true love. The person who actually matters."

"While you marry some Alpha for political gain."

"Yes." I didn't look away. "Is that so terrible? To have part of me instead of none of me?"

He pulled his hand back. "This is exactly what I'm talking about. You're manipulating me. Using my feelings to get what you want."

"I'm trying to find a way for us both to survive!" My voice rose. "Don't you understand that? If you go to Cian, we both lose everything. But if you stay quiet, we can figure something out. We can find a way to be together."

"By lying."

"By surviving." I grabbed his shirt. Held on tight. "Please, Milo. Please don't do this. Do not let your male pride which is what I have been most afraid of, to fuck our lives over."

He looked at me for a long moment. I could see him weighing it. See him trying to figure out if I was telling the truth or spinning another web.

"Prove it," he said finally.

"What?"

"Prove you're not lying." His eyes were hard. "Prove you actually love me and this isn't just another manipulation."

My mind raced. What could I say? What truth could I give him that would convince him without actually giving anything up?

Then it hit me.

"You're the only man I've ever had sex with."

The words hung in the air.

Milo's expression changed. Softened. Just slightly.

"What?"

"You heard me." I held his gaze. "I've never been with anyone else. Not before you. Not during. Only you."

It was true. Technically. I'd fooled around with others. Kissed. Touched. But actual sex? That had only been Milo. And that was simply because he had a remarkable penis.

And I could see it working. Could see the way his face shifted. The way the hardness cracked just a little.

"Hazel..."

"I gave you something I've never given anyone else." I moved closer again. "Doesn't that count for anything?"

His hands came up. Hesitated. Then settled on my waist.

"You're still manipulating me," he said. But his voice was quieter now. Less certain.

"Really?" I touched his face again. "Or maybe I'm just desperate. Maybe I'm scared of losing the one person who actually made me feel something real."

I kissed him again.

This time, he kissed back.

Milo's mouth was still damp from the kiss, his lips parted just slightly as if stunned by the weight of what I'd said. His breath caught when I dropped to my knees.

The tile of his room was cold. His body wasn't. I reached for his pants and worked them off. His cock was already reacting to me and begging for release. When I tore his pants down to his knees, his already-thick and rising in front of me-cock flushed red and angry, like it had been waiting just as long as I had to be let back in. I wrapped a hand around him without ceremony, feeling the twitch, the heat, the way he stiffened even more just from that first glide of my palm.

"You're really doing this?" he asked, voice lower now, gutted with disbelief.

"Shut up," I murmured, not looking up. "I'm not asking."

And I didn't. I dragged the flat of my tongue from base to tip, wetting him in long, slow strokes, tasting salt, heat, and something distinctively Milo. He was throbbing already. I could feel it in the way his thighs flexed when I took the head in my mouth, the way his fingers fisted at his sides.

"Ffuck—Hazel—"

That tone. Half warning, half plea. I sucked harder, lips stretched, cheeks hollowing as I worked him deep, deeper still, until the thick crown nudged the back of my throat and I moaned around him. Not for performance. For real. He filled my mouth like nothing else ever had, and I wanted it all. My jaw ached, but I didn't pull back. I pushed through it, spit slicking down my chin, my fingers massaging the base, stroking in time with every bob.

"Shit—shit, that mouth," Milo groaned, hand finally coming to the back of my head, fingers knotting in my hair. "You fucking—Hazel—"

His hips jerked, just once, just enough to choke me briefly on his length. I gagged, eyes watering, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. He was close. I felt it... How the base of his cock pulsed, how his thighs tensed harder, how his breath stuttered into a growl.

I pulled off with a lewd pop just long enough to whisper, "Come for me."

And he did.

Grunting low and filthy, he pumped ropes across my face, my lips, my tongue. Warm, thick jets coating my cheek, dripping from my chin as I gasped, licking at the head like I couldn't get enough. His whole body trembled with the release, groaning my name like it hurt to say it, and I stared up at him, glistening, triumphant, still catching my breath.

His hand came to my face, thumb wiping at the mess even as his mouth dipped closer for a kiss.

I leaned back.

"No," I said, my voice quiet but cutting. "You don't get to kiss me like that. Not when I never know what the fuck you're going to do next."

His eyes searched mine, conflicted, still catching his breath.

"I can't take it hot and cold anymore," I said, licking a stray drop off my lip. "But goddamn it, I'll miss that cock."

He blinked. "Hazel— what the fuck, are you talking about?"

"I said I will miss your penis," I said.

Then I screamed.

"HELP!" I shrieked, raw and real and echoing off the room's tile. "HEEELP—!"

Chapter 30: The Hearing 1

HAZEL

The room erupted.

Sentinels poured in like water through a broken dam. Delta was there first, her face twisted in false horror, and she grabbed the bedsheet off Milo's bed and threw it over me. The fabric was warm and smelled like him and I clutched it to my chest while I kept screaming.

"What happened?" someone shouted.

"Goddess, what did he do?"

"Get away from her!"

Hands grabbed me. Pulled me toward the door. I caught a glimpse of Milo's face over someone's shoulder. His eyes were wide. Shocked. He was saying something but I couldn't hear it over all the noise.

Then someone hit him.

The sound was sharp. Wet. Milo went down hard and the sentinels swarmed him like wolves on wounded prey. Fists flew. Boots connected with ribs. I heard him shouting

that he was innocent but his voice got drowned out by all the angry voices calling him monster and scum and worse things I would definitely be repeating.

Delta wrapped her arm around me and pulled me out into the hallway. The cold night air hit my skin and I realized I was still half dressed. Still covered in the evidence of what we'd done. What I'd let happen and then twisted into something else entirely.

"Come on," Delta whispered. Her voice was shaking. "We need to get you cleaned up before anyone else sees."

She led me through the dark paths back to my quarters. My legs felt weak. Like they couldn't quite support my weight. I leaned on her and let her guide me inside.

The door clicked shut behind us.

Delta steered me toward the bathroom. Turned on the water. I stood there while she wet a cloth and started wiping my face. The water was warm. Gentle. She cleaned away every trace of Milo with careful strokes like she was handling something precious and breakable.

"Is this smart?" Delta asked suddenly.

I looked at her. "What?"

"This." She gestured vaguely at my face. At the situation. "Your parents will have to intervene. There will be an investigation. The elders..."

I slapped her.

The sound echoed in the small bathroom. Delta's head snapped to the side and she pressed a hand to her reddening cheek. Her eyes watered but she didn't cry.

"Do I look like a fool to you?" I kept my voice low. Controlled. "Do you think I would do something like this without thinking it through?"

"No, Miss Hazel." Delta's voice was barely a whisper.

"I'm smart." I grabbed the towel from her hands and dried my own face. "I can handle this. My mother will support me no matter what. And who will believe a mere sentinel over me? Over the Alpha's daughter?"

Delta said nothing. She just stood there with her hand pressed to her cheek and her eyes on the floor.

I finished drying my face. Checked my reflection in the mirror. My eyes were red from all the false tears and maybe the strings of cum that soared to the wrong place. My hair

was messy. I looked exactly like someone who'd just been through something terrible. Perfect.

A knock came at the door.

"Come in," I called.

Another omega servant stepped inside. She was younger than Delta. Newer to the household. Her eyes were wide when she saw me.

"Luna Hazel," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "Your presence is needed in the circle of the elders."

Delta sucked in a breath. I saw the horror flash across her face. But inside my chest, something bright and hot bloomed. Triumph. The elders were fast. This was good. It meant this shit-show would be over quickly.

"Tell them I'll be there shortly," I said.

The young omega nodded and scurried out.

The moment the door closed, Delta turned to me. "This is bad."

"Bad?" I raised an eyebrow.

"If a sentence is made..." Delta's hands were shaking now. Badly. "Sentinel Milo will be put to death."

I smiled. "Is that not the whole point?"

"I don't know if I'm comfortable with doing that." The words tumbled out of Delta's mouth in a rush. "Miss Hazel, he'll die. They'll execute him. For something he didn't actually do."

I looked at her. Really looked at her. Delta had been loyal for years. She'd helped me with countless schemes. Covered for me. Lied for me. But now I saw something in her eyes that made my stomach tighten. Fear. And worse. Doubt.

"Are you switching up on me now, Delta?" I kept my voice soft. Dangerous. "I thought you were smart enough to know when our darlings need to be killed."

Delta's face went pale.

"I really did try my best with Milo," I continued. "But he is a spark that will explode in my face. I cannot let that stand. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes," Delta whispered.

"Good." I turned back to the mirror. "Now dress me. I need something that is white and feminine but not try hard. Something to appeal to the senses of those old fucks and paint me as innocent and worthy of saving."

Delta got to work.

She pulled dresses from my closet. Held them up one by one for my approval. Too elaborate. Too casual. Too revealing. Finally she found one that was perfect. A simple white fabric that fell to my ankles. Long sleeves. A high neckline. It looked pure. Untouchable.

I let her help me into it. The fabric whispered against my skin as it settled into place.

"Jewelry?" Delta asked.

I tried on earrings first. But it was too much. Then a bracelet. Wrong again. Then I saw the simple silver pendant on my dresser. I picked it up and fastened it around my neck. It sat perfectly at my clavicle. Delicate. Innocent. It tied the whole look together.

"Perfect," I said.

Delta didn't respond. Just stood there with her arms wrapped around herself like she was cold.

I left her in the room and stepped out into the hallway.

The walk to the elders' chamber felt longer than it should have. My footsteps echoed off the stone walls. Torches flickered in their sconces. Shadows danced across the floor like living things.

When I reached the heavy wooden doors, I paused. Took a breath. Let my shoulders slump just slightly. Let vulnerability show in my posture.

Then I pushed the doors open.

The chamber was circular. The elders sat in their high backed chairs arranged in a semicircle. Seven of them. All old. All powerful. All men except for Elder Moira who'd survived four Alphas and buried two husbands.

My parents were there too. My father stood near the elders with his arms crossed. His face was hard. Unreadable. My mother sat off to the side with her hands folded in her lap. When she saw me, something flickered in her eyes. Recognition. Worry.

And on the floor, not too far from the elders' feet, was Milo.

They'd beaten him worse since I'd left. His face was swollen. Blood dripped from his nose. One eye was completely shut. His hands were bound behind his back with thick rope soaked in wolfsbane. He was on his knees.

When he saw me, he tried to speak. But one of the guards kicked him in the ribs and he doubled over with a choking sound.

"Welcome to the hearing," Elder Cormac said. He was the oldest. The one who'd served the longest. His voice was dry as old paper. "We thank you for coming, Luna Hazel."