

# **To ruin an Omega #Chapter 221: Ghosting - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 221: Ghosting**

## **Chapter 221: Ghosting**

### **CIAN**

I left my mother's room with my head clearer than it had been before I went in. I knew what I had to do now.

The hallway stretched before me and I moved through it with purpose. My feet carried me down the stairs, through the main doors, out into the grounds where everything had fallen apart earlier.

The sun was lower now. The light had turned warm and golden. It painted everything in soft amber tones that made the world look gentler than it actually was.

I headed toward the trees where I'd last seen Madeline run. My chest was tight but not with the same suffocating pressure from before. This was different. This was the kind of tightness that came from knowing you were about to do something difficult but necessary.

Movement caught my eye.

Two figures emerged from the tree line. Madeline and Wilhelm walked side by side. Her face was blotchy and her eyes were red rimmed. She'd been crying. My stomach twisted.

Then she saw me.

She stopped dead in her tracks. Wilhelm stopped beside her. His expression went cold immediately.

"We need to talk," I said.

Madeline's jaw tightened. "Do you still have more things you want to accuse me of?"

The words hit like a punch. I deserved that. I deserved all of it.

"I'm sorry about that," I said.

"It's too late for that." Her voice was flat. Empty. "I'll spend the night here and leave tomorrow. I'll get out of your hair. Before the accusations worsen."

She started walking. She moved to pass me and I knew if I let her go now, if I let this moment slip away, I'd regret it for the rest of my life.

I reached out and caught her hand.

She froze.

"Please," I said. "Just listen."

She didn't pull away but she didn't look at me either. Wilhelm stood a few feet behind her and his glare could have melted steel.

I swallowed hard and forced the words out.

"I said all that stuff because I was genuinely sure that my suspicions had solid ground," I said. "But the truth has layers to it. I also didn't want to admit that there was something more to it."

Now she looked at me. Her eyes were wary and guarded.

"What more?" she asked.

I took a breath. Here it was. The truth I'd been avoiding.

"I hated you," I said. The words came easier now that I'd started. "I hated you so much. But I still held on to the idea of you for dear life. Even when I thought I finally got rid of you at the back and forefront of my head. I hoped that one day we would meet again and I would be patched up and you would be in perpetual hell."

Her expression didn't change but something flickered in her eyes.

"I wanted you to hate your life and regret leaving me," I continued. "Even when I married, I hoped you'd hear about it. I hoped it would twist and it would hurt because you were the one who pushed me into an arranged marriage at the end of the day."

My grip on her hand tightened slightly.

"Then... The fact that you could upend your life for my sake must have made an innate part of me lose it," I said. "Because it told me that you could have stayed back then."

Madeline stared at me for a long moment. Then she pulled her hand free.

"What are you telling me?" Her voice was sharp now. "That you're in love with me still? And that's why you said all that stuff?"

I shook my head. A laugh bubbled up out of me. It sounded wrong. Too high. Too strained. Almost manic.

"No," I said. "I'm sure now. I'm not. I'm not in love with you at all. I just had a little bit of resentment left."

The words hung in the air between us. They felt true. They felt right. Like something that had been festering finally being lanced and drained.

Madeline looked at me for another long moment. Then something in her face shifted. Her shoulders dropped slightly. Some of the rigidity left her spine.

"You know what?" she said. "I have resentment too."

I waited.

"If I'm being honest, I still have feelings for you," she said. Her voice was quieter now. "And that was part of the reason I was willing to upend my life for you. Because I was certain I could get you back. After all, everyone could see that the union you had was an arranged marriage."

Her own confession hit me harder than I expected.

If mother had been here, I would never hear the end of it.

"But when Fia was hurt at Alpha Julius' Knight's wedding," Madeline continued, "I realized that it couldn't be just an arranged marriage."

She looked away. Out at the trees. At the golden light filtering through the leaves.

"That was when I did sort of regret it at the time," she said. "Saving your mother and your new partner Fia. As crazy as it sounds."

I didn't say anything. What could I say?

"But I eventually needed to realize it was my last gift," she said. "A final goodbye to you for how bad I hurt you."

She let out a long breath. When she looked back at me, her eyes were clearer and less haunted.

"Wooooowwww. It feels good to get that out of my chest," she said.

"Me too," I said.

The silence between us was different now. Not comfortable exactly. But not suffocating either.

"I'm sorry for the crazy things I said," I told her. "You know how I am."

Madeline shook her head slowly. "I don't think I do as much anymore. You've changed a lot."

The words stung but they were true. I had changed. We both had.

"I might have changed. But I am indeed sorry. I'm begging you," I said. "Stay."

She hesitated. I could see the conflict playing out across her face.

"I don't know," she said finally.

"Think about it," I said.

She nodded.

My eyes went to Wilhelm. He was still standing there and the look he gave me could have stripped paint off walls. There was no mercy or forgiveness. All that existed in the depths of his irises were pure protective fury.

I took that as my cue to leave.

I turned and walked away. My steps felt lighter somehow. Like I'd been carrying something heavy and finally set it down.

I made my way back through the grounds, through the main doors, up the stairs. The familiar path to my bedroom felt different now. Everything felt different.

I pushed open my door and went straight to my drawer.

The top drawer was where I kept it. Hidden under old letters and forgotten notes. The broken, bloodied picture frame.

I pulled it out and stared at it for a moment.

It was from years ago. Madeline and I were young and happy and completely unaware of how everything would fall apart. The glass was cracked. There were dark stains on the frame from where I'd cut my hand open with it after Fia dropped it.

Ronan did know me inside and out.

I'd kept it all this time; even after I thought I was over it. That should have been a glaring neon sign. But I was too blind to it.

Looking at it now though, I felt no tug.

Not anymore.

It brought me peace to know that there was no lingering feelings I needed to confront. Whatever had been bottled inside of me was popped open and let out.

I walked to the waste bin beside my drawer and tossed it in. The frame hit the pitch black bottom with a dull thud.

I stood there for a moment and just breathed.

In. Out. In. Out.

I felt completely and utterly free now.

The secret dead weight I'd been carrying for so long was gone. Not just the weight of the resentment. But the weight of not knowing. Of uncertainty. Of wondering if maybe, possibly, there was still something there.

There wasn't.

And that was okay.

My phone chimed.

I pulled it out and saw a message from Garrett.

*We are heading to Skollrend now.*

A smile spread across my face.

Fia would be back home soon.

I couldn't wait.

"Drive safe," I typed out before setting my phone down.

## **Chapter 222: Accidents happen 1**

### **HAZEL**

I stared at the door long after Lysander left. The silence felt thick enough to choke on.

Mother and Grandmother filed back in. The air shifted with their presence, heavier somehow. More suffocating.

"What did you talk about?" Mother asked.

The words sat on my tongue, bitter and sharp. *Your chosen savior is hopelessly in love with Fia*. I could already see it so clearly—the shock they'd have on their faces, the way Grandmother's carefully laid plans would crack down the middle.

But I swallowed it down.

"What did you promise the Lily of the Valley for their help?" I asked instead.

Grandmother's expression went flat. "Forget about that."

She walked to the bedside table and picked up Lysander's card. The gold lettering caught the light as she turned it over in her fingers.

"What you should do right now is obsess over that weird, twitchy little man and the marriage that needs to happen quickly." She set the card back down with a soft click. "The price was not cheap at all."

I reached out and grabbed her hand. Her skin felt papery thin under my grip.

"I do not appreciate being kept in the dark."

She tried to pull away. But I only held on tighter.

"I'm already a fucking Omega. Blind reliance will not just cut it." My voice came out steadier than I felt. "Lysander told me enough. But either he doesn't know much himself or that's as much as he wants to disclose." I loosened my grip slightly. "Why would Lily of the Valley sacrifice their own heir for measly healers? It makes no sense."

Grandmother smacked her red lips together. The sound was wet and deliberate.

"It is best you stay in the dark. Trust me, it is for the best."

My teeth ground together. The urge to argue burned through me like acid, but I forced myself to stay quiet. I released her hand and settled back against the pillows. The ceiling stared down at me, blank and white and endless.

"The good thing to come out of this is the fact I will become a Luna regardless. The fact that what I was born with will now be given to be honorarily still bums me. But I will make due." The words tasted strange in my mouth. Like I was trying to convince myself more than them. "I will be affiliated to an even stronger pack. So maybe I'll just close my eyes this one time."

Grandmother smiled. "Smart."

I tilted my head to look at her. "But if the bitch who did this to me thinks this is done and dandy, I will show her I am still her biggest threat. I'm grateful for your help. But you need to know off the bat that I am not quite done with it."

Mother's footsteps came fast. She appeared at my bedside, her face twisted with something between fury and fear.

"Are you fucking stupid, Hazel?" Her voice cracked. "Fia just decimated you and it took a lot to ensure you didn't get killed, which if you didn't know before, I will tell you now. That was her intention. Revenge for what I did to her mother."

The room went still.

I turned my head slowly to look at her. "What does that mean? What did you do?"

Mother's face drained of color. "Forget it."

"What did you—"

"Forget it." She spun toward Grandmother. "You really should knock some sense into her, Mother. It's like I have failed completely in that regard."

Grandmother waved a dismissive hand then turned to face me.

"I understand completely what that can feel like." She said. "But you need not worry about the girl."

Mother's eyes went wide. "What? What does that mean, Mother?"

"Hazel is not the only one who has it out for the bitch. She dared to walk over me." Grandmother's voice went cold and flat. Dead in a way that made my skin prickle. "Not to mention her face." She paused. "It reminds me of that evil, conniving woman. It was like the universe was working overtime against her, making our paths cross."

Something shifted in my chest. A spark of interest I couldn't quite name. The fact that Pauline was against that bitch too brought me inner peace.

"Mother, she is now Skollrend and that Alpha of hers loves her like it's breathing." Mother's words came out rushed and desperate. "If she is harmed, harm will come to us all."

"I am not fucking stupid." Grandmother's tone could have cut glass. "It will happen in Skollrend territory. Accidents happen all the time after all." She tilted her head,

thoughtful. "She has a sentinel with her. He will probably survive. She will not. That'll give us plausible deniability."

The words hung in the air like smoke.

Mother grabbed Grandmother's arm. "Mother, what the hell are you talking about? That is insane. The girl is out of our hair now and will never bother us again. No need to play fucking games."

"Shut up."

The command cracked through the room. Mother flinched.

Grandmother continued, voice steady and certain. "This isn't just about pride. Something about that girl just rubs me wrong." She turned to look at Mother fully. "You might not remember. But she looks exactly like that Omega whore your father cheated on me with before I took care of her."

A smile pulled at my lips before I could stop it. "You'll kill her?"

Grandmother met my eyes. "I will definitely try. I really don't care if she survives or not. But I trust she will get the message regardless. The universe speaks to us all."

The honesty of it was almost beautiful.

"You should know Lysander seems to be weirdly fixated on Fia." The words slipped out easy now as I tested the waters and watched.

"Oh I noticed." Grandmother's expression didn't change. "Another reason why I have to take the girl out. I know that look and I know the best time to take care of it is before it takes root."

Pride bloomed warm in my chest. It spread through me like heat, chasing away the cold that had settled in my bones since I woke up powerless. This was what family looked like. This was what protection meant.

Grandmother saw the threat and she was willing to eliminate it.

For me.

Because I mattered.

Because despite everything, despite losing my wolf and my rank and a future I wanted, I was still worth protecting.

I let my smile widen. Let it show teeth.



Fia thought she'd won.

She had no idea what was coming.

The thought settled in my mind like a promise. Like a vow.

I hoped she didn't survive whatever Grandmother had planned. I hoped whatever accident befell her in Skollrend was slow, painful and terrifying.

I hoped she felt every second of it. I hoped she understood, in those final moments, that this was what happened to tongues that rose against me, and to those who tried to rise above their station.

It was what needed to be when you forgot where you came from.

When you forgot who really held the power.

Mother was still arguing with Grandmother, voice high and frantic. The words washed over me like static. I stopped listening. It didn't matter what Mother thought. She'd always been too soft. Too worried about consequences, politics and keeping a semblance of peace even when teeth was involved.

Grandmother understood. Grandmother knew that sometimes you had to get your hands dirty. That sometimes mercy was just weakness in a barely covered disguise.

I looked down at my hands. They were pale against the white sheets. Delicate. Omega hands now, without the strength of my wolf behind them.

But I didn't need strength.

I had Grandmother.

I had Lysander, whether he knew it yet or not.

I had a plan forming in the back of my mind, pieces clicking together like a puzzle I'd been working on my whole life.

Fia could have her Alpha. Her little win. Her sentinel. Her new pack and her new rank and her new life.

It wouldn't save her.

Nothing would save her.

**Chapter 223: Accidents happen 2**

## FIA

I stared at the card in my hands. Gabriel's name gleamed in simple lettering, too pretty for what it represented. The car had left Silvercreek behind hours ago. We were deep in Skollrend territory now. The sun was completely gone too, leaving only darkness beyond the windows.

I turned the card over between my fingers. There had to be a way to use this. To use what I knew bow to my advantage. I had leverage somewhere in this mess. I just needed to find it.

Baruch came to mind first. After what I'd done for him at the trial, he owed me. Since Gabriel took interest in Hazel, she would be useful and it would be a safe bet to watch her. But the thought died as quickly as it came. If anyone in that ground found out he'd helped me against Gabriel or Hazel, they'd execute him.

And his grandmother needed him.

I couldn't do that to her. To him.

I let my head fall back against the seat. The leather was cool against my scalp. Maybe I could talk to the grand Luna directly. But no. Aldric would have already prepared for that possibility. I was too many hours late. He was always three steps ahead, always had contingencies stacked on contingencies.

The smart thing to do was pretend I knew nothing. Let them think their little game was working. Let Gabriel keep showing his teeth while Aldric hid his.

Good cop. Bad cop.

It made perfect sense now. They'd probably been working together from the beginning.

I looked at Garrett through the rearview mirror. His eyes were fixed on the road, both hands on the wheel. Focused. Alert.

"You'll have to watch Ronan even harder," I said. "Maybe ask for help from people you trust."

His eyes flicked to mine in the mirror. "Is there more you hope to find?"

"I have a feeling Aldric and Gabriel have been working together since the beginning." The words tasted bitter. "It makes sense. Gabriel shows himself as the monster and the enemy everyone needs to point at. While Aldric hides his. One threatens, one comforts. Classic manipulation."

Garrett's jaw tightened. "No problem at all, Luna."

I went back to staring at the card. The letters seemed to shimmer in the dim light from the dashboard.

Then I smelled it.

At first, it was faint. Barely there. Like someone had sprayed perfume several cars ahead and it had drifted back to us. I paid it no mind. But it got stronger.... thicker. Like someone had dumped an entire bottle in the car. The sweetness burned my nose, cloying and wrong.

I coughed once then again.

"Did you spray something?" I asked.

Garrett shook his head. "No." He looked at me in the mirror. "Are you alright?"

I coughed harder. "Yeah. I just don't know what that smell is."

Then the sensation hit me.

It rushed through my body like a wave, not painful exactly but wrong. Invasive. Like something was trying to push its way inside me, trying to find a crack to slip through.

I knew this feeling.

I'd felt it before.

The night I'd hurt myself to frame Hazel. In my weakened state, drifting through consciousness and unconsciousness, I'd felt this exact thing when magic had been performed on me.

When Madeline had laid her hands on my skin to stitch me up.

My heart kicked hard against my ribs. I twisted in my seat, looking out the back window. The road behind us was empty. There were no cars or people. Nothing but darkness and trees.

"Garrett." My voice came out sharper than I meant it to. "Something's wrong."

He slowed the car immediately. "What is it?"

"This is going to sound crazy." I turned back to face front. "But I think you need to drive faster."

He didn't question it. His foot hit the gas and the car surged forward. The speedometer climbed.

Sixty.

Seventy.

Eighty.

I pulled out my phone. My hands shook as I unlocked it. I needed to call Cian. I needed to tell him something was happening, even if I didn't know what.

When I reached my contact, something caused me to glance up.

To my surprise, there was a woman standing in the middle of the road.

She was impossibly thin, like something carved from wood. Her head was shaved down to a black buzz cut and she wore all black as if to solidify whatever she was going for. She didn't move. She just stood there waiting.

"Garrett." My voice cracked. "You see that person?"

"Who?" He leaned forward slightly, squinting.

"The woman. In the middle of the road."

We were getting closer. The car ate up the distance between us and her with terrifying speed.

"There's no one there," Garrett said.

"Yes there is." I pointed straight at her. "Right there. In front of us."

He looked at me for a second, confusion clear on his face. "I swear to you, there is no one there."

"There is."

The woman didn't move. She didn't flinch either despite how fast the car was coming. At that rate, we were going to hit her.

"Turn to the side," I said. My voice was rising. "Garrett, turn—"

"I don't see anyone."

We were seconds away.

And all my humanity kicked in and made me grab at the wheel.

Garrett shouted something but I was already yanking it hard to the right. The car swerved violently. Tires screamed against asphalt.

The road ahead was clear when the wheel finally obeyed me.

Nothing stood there. No body. No dark shape. Just the stretch of black road bending away into the trees, smooth and empty like it had always been that way. My stomach dropped so fast it made me nauseous, shame and relief crashing together in my chest, and for one awful heartbeat I wondered if I had done this for nothing. If I had scared myself into seeing something that was never there.

The thought hadn't even finished forming when the light hit.

There was nothing there before and then there was suddenly something.

It came from the right, sudden and violent, flooding the inside of the car until there was nothing else. My eyes burned instantly, tears springing without permission as my body locked up, every muscle pulling tight in the same useless direction. I knew that light. I knew what it meant. My heart slammed so hard it felt like it might tear something loose inside me.

Headlights of another car.

I tried to breathe. I tried to say Garrett's name. All that came out was a broken sound in my throat as guilt surged through me, hot and choking, because this was my fault, because my hands were still on the wheel, because I had turned us into this.

The impact stole everything.

Sound collapsed into pressure. The world lurched sideways and then fractured completely, metal screaming as the car was hit hard enough to lift it, spin it, tear it apart.

The impact threw me forward. The seatbelt locked across my chest, cutting into my skin. Glass exploded inward. The sound was massive, all-consuming. Metal shrieked as it crumpled. The world tilted sideways and then I was flying.

The seatbelt had snapped or I'd torn through it. I didn't know. It didn't even matter.

My body hit the asphalt and the road peeled my skin away in long strips. I rolled, unable to stop myself. The world was just pain, motion and the terrible grinding sound of flesh on bitumen.

When I finally stopped, I couldn't breathe.

Something was wrong with my throat.

I tried to inhale but only got a wet, gurgling sound. My hand moved to my neck on instinct. My fingers touched something hard and smooth.

Glass.

A shard of it, huge and jagged, buried deep in my throat.

I couldn't pull it out. I couldn't speak either. Blood filled my mouth when I tried. It poured out instead of words, hot, thick and wrong.

My vision started to go red at the edges. Like someone was slowly pouring blood over my eyes.

I turned my head. It took all my strength. Garrett was lying several feet away. He wasn't moving. But I didn't see any glass in him. No blood pooling beneath him.

Was I dying?

The thought came calm and distant. Like it belonged to someone else.

My phone. I needed my phone.

I saw it lying on the road a few feet away. The screen was cracked but still glowing. I reached for it. My arm barely moved. My fingers scraped against asphalt.

Then my phone started sliding away from me.

It was not a play on my mind or a sight I was seeing because I was finally dying. It was actually moving. Like someone was pulling it on a string I couldn't see.

Through the smoke rising from the wreckage of the cars, through the flames starting to lick at twisted metal, I saw a figure.

The phone floated toward it, lifting off the ground and drifting through the air like it weighed nothing.

My vision was getting darker. The red was spreading inward, eating away at the edges of the world. I tried to focus on the figure but couldn't make out details. Just a shape. A person.

A witch.

It had to be.

My phone had just floated away after all. That was magic.

The darkness pulled at me. My body felt so heavy. So cold. I couldn't feel my fingers anymore. I couldn't feel much of anything except the glass in my throat and the blood still pouring out.

Then a voice cut through the gathering dark.

Unfamiliar. Neither male nor female. Just wrong somehow. Like it didn't quite belong to anything human. But I knew it belonged to the figure.

"You are actually resistant to magic in a way."

The words seemed to come from very far away and very close at the same time.

"Not enough though."

The darkness rushed in all at once.

I tried to fight it. I tried to hold on to consciousness, to the world, to anything. But it was like trying to hold water in my hands. It just slipped through my fingers and then there was nothing.

Nothing at all.

Just pitch darkness.

## **Chapter 224: Vital**

### **CIAN**

I stood there staring at my phone, at Garrett's message, still smiling like an idiot. Fia would be home soon. Everything was falling into place. The weight I'd been carrying was gone, and now she'd be back where she belonged.

A knock at my door pulled me from my thoughts.

"Come in," I called out.

An Omega pushed the door open and bowed her head slightly. Her hands were clasped in front of her.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Dinner is ready, Alpha Cian. The Grand Luna requests everyone at the table."

I nodded. "I'll be right there."

She stayed in the doorway for a millisecond waiting while I glanced at the waste bin beside my drawer where the broken frame had landed.

"Actually, can you help me toss this out?" I gestured toward the bin.

She bowed again and stepped inside to retrieve it. I left the room then and made my way down the hall, my footsteps echoing against the walls.

The dining room was already full when I arrived. Elara sat near the head of the table, her posture perfect. My mother was seated beside her, looking more relaxed than I'd seen her in days. Ronan occupied his usual spot, and even Madeline and Wilhelm were present. Madeline's eyes met mine briefly before she looked away.

I found an empty seat and settled into it.

"Uncle Aldric isn't here," I said, scanning the table once more.

Elara shook her head. "He had to leave to attend to some matters at our estate."

I nodded. It made sense.

My gaze shifted to my mother. "Should we be worried about this semi mandatory dinner?"

She chuckled, the sound warm and familiar. "No. I just missed this, I guess. It's been a while since we've all sat together like this."

"Yeah," I agreed. "It has been."

More Omegas entered carrying trays laden with food. The scents hit me immediately. Rich, savory, with hints of herbs and spices I recognized from childhood. This wasn't the usual formal dinner fare. This was home cooking. My mother's cooking.

They moved around the table, placing dishes and plating food with practiced efficiency. When one of them set my plate in front of me, the aroma made my mouth water. Roasted meat with a glaze that caught the light. Vegetables seasoned exactly the way I remembered. Fresh bread that was still warm.

"Did you cook this?" I asked my mother.

She smiled. "I did."

I picked up my fork and took a bite. The flavors exploded across my tongue. Familiar and comforting in ways I couldn't put into words.

"I missed this," I said.



"Me too." Her eyes softened. "Is Fia not yet back?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. But they're close. They should arrive in an hour at most."

"That's good."

I turned back to my plate, cutting another piece of meat. The conversation around the table hummed quietly. Ronan said something to Elara that made her laugh. Wilhelm was focused entirely on his food. Madeline picked at hers, pushing vegetables around with her fork.

When I brought another forkful to my mouth, that was when pain exploded through my chest.

It hit like a freight train, sudden and devastating. My throat seized and I choked on the food, but this wasn't choking. This was something else entirely. Something wrong and deeply unsettling.

The fork clattered from my hand.

"Cian?" someone said.

Ronan was beside me in an instant. His hand slammed against my back, once, twice, trying to dislodge whatever he thought was stuck in my throat.

But the pain only intensified. It spread through my chest like wildfire, burning, tearing and ripping at me. My hands clutched at my shirt, fingers digging into the fabric.

This wasn't my pain.

It was Fia's.

The mate bond vibrated with agony. Every nerve in my body screamed. My vision blurred at the edges and I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything except feel the overwhelming wrongness of it all.

She was... she was dying.

The knowledge slammed into me with absolute certainty. Somewhere out there, Fia was dying, and I could feel every second of it through the bond that connected us.

Then, just as suddenly as it had come, the pain vanished.

It did not fade. Or suddenly lessen. It was completely gone.

And in its place was nothing.

I reached for the bond instinctively, the way I'd done a thousand times before. That constant awareness of her, that pull that let me know she existed somewhere in the world.

It wasn't there.

The space where it should have been was empty and hollow. It felt like I was reaching for something in the dark and finding only air.

My chest felt wrong and incomplete. There was a void where something vital should have existed.

I stared at the table. At my plate. At the food I'd been eating just moments ago. The room had gone completely silent.

My mother's voice cut through the quiet. "Cian, what's wrong?"

I looked up at her... At Ronan standing beside me with his hand still raised... At Elara's concerned expression... At Madeline and Wilhelm watching with wide eyes.

I pushed back from the table and stood. My legs felt unsteady, like they might give out at any moment.

"Fia," I said. My voice sounded strange. Distant. "I can't feel her."

The words hung in the air.

Then I was moving. Running. My feet carried me through the dining room, down the hall, out the main doors. The night air hit my face but I barely registered it.

I needed to get to her. Now.

The cars were parked in the circular drive. I headed straight for the nearest one, fumbling in my pocket for keys I didn't have.

"Cian, wait up!"

Ronan's voice came from behind me, followed by the sound of his footsteps pounding against the ground.

I yanked on the car door handle. It was locked.

"Damn it," I hissed.

Ronan caught up to me, breathing hard. "What are you doing?"

"I need to get to her." I pulled at the handle again like it might magically open this time. "Something's wrong. Something happened."

"Okay. Okay." Ronan pulled out his phone. "Let me call Garrett. Find out what's going on."

"There's no time for that."

"Cian, you can't just—"

"The bond is gone, Ronan." I turned to face him. Whatever he saw in my expression made him stop mid-sentence. "I can't feel her anymore. At all. She's either.... She is either dead or something so catastrophically wrong happened that it feels like the mate bond severed."

He stared at me. Then he was moving, pulling keys from his pocket and heading toward another car.

"Get in," he said.

I didn't need to be told twice. I wrenched open the passenger door and threw myself inside. Ronan slid into the driver's seat and jammed the key into the ignition.

The engine roared to life.

He threw the car into gear and we peeled out of the drive, gravel spraying behind us. The estate gates loomed ahead, already starting to open.

My hands were shaking. I pressed them against my thighs, trying to steady them, but it didn't help. Nothing helped. That emptiness in my chest was growing, expanding, threatening to swallow me whole.

"Call Garrett," Ronan said, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. "See if he answers."

I pulled out my phone with trembling fingers, found Garrett's number and then hit call.

It rang once. Then twice. I started to lose count after the third time.

But the damning part of it was Garrett wasn't picking.

"Come on," I muttered. "Pick up. Pick up."

He didn't. And the call went to fucking voicemail.

I ended the call and immediately dialed again.

The same endless ringing happened. It ended with the same voicemail mess.

"He's not answering," I said.

Ronan's jaw clenched. He pressed harder on the accelerator and the car surged forward. Trees blurred past the windows.

I tried the bond again. I reached for it desperately, hoping maybe I'd been wrong. Maybe it was just weakened somehow. Maybe if I focused hard enough I could find that thread that connected us.

But there was nothing.

Just that horrible, yawning emptiness.

My throat tightened. My chest felt like it was caving in on itself.

"She's okay," Ronan said. "She has to be okay."

I didn't answer. I couldn't answer. Because I didn't know. And the not knowing was worse than anything else.

The road stretched out endlessly before us. Every second felt like an eternity. Every mile might as well have been a thousand.

And somewhere out there, the thought that Fia was either dying or already gone burned through my very soul.

I couldn't take it.

My hands were shaking so badly I had to steady my wrist with my other hand as I unlocked my phone again. Logic had already told me this was pointless. Fear did not care about logic.

I dialed her number.

It rang.

Once.

Twice.

The sound drilled straight into my skull. Each ring felt heavier than the last, like it was pressing down on my chest, stealing air from my lungs. I leaned forward in my seat, as if getting closer might somehow make her answer.

"Please," I whispered. I did not know who I was begging anymore. "Fia, please."

The ringing stopped.

For half a second, hope flared so sharp it hurt.

Then her voicemail picked up.

"Hey, you have reached Fia," Her voice filled the car, calm and familiar, so painfully alive that something inside me snapped. My vision blurred. The sound became unbearable, like salt in an open wound.

"No," I choked. "No, no, no."

I ended the call and stared at the screen, my reflection warped and shaking. My chest seized, breath coming in broken, ugly gasps. The emptiness from the bond surged again, vast and merciless, swallowing every thought.

"Fuck!" A raw sound tore out of me before I could stop it. Rage, terror and grief all twisted together until I couldn't tell them apart. I reeled back and hurled my phone with everything I had.

It smashed into the windscreen in front of me.

Glass cracked with a violent snap, splintering outward in a jagged spiderweb that crawled across the pane.

## **Chapter 225: Honored one**

### **FIA**

The darkness should have been final. It should have been the end of everything. But slowly and impossibly, color bled back into my world.

I opened my eyes to reeds.

They stretched across the entire space, tall and golden, swaying in a breeze I couldn't feel. The sky above me was impossible. A blanket of colors that shifted and moved like liquid silk. Purples bled into deep blues, then brightened to coral and amber. And scattered across that shifting firmament were moons. All the phases at once. Crescent and full, waxing and waning, hanging suspended like jewels against that painted sky.

I pushed myself up. My hands sank into soft earth. No pain shot through my body. No glass jutted from my throat. I touched my neck with trembling fingers and found smooth, unbroken skin.

Was this the afterlife?

The thought hit me like a physical blow. A pang started to form in my chest, spreading outward until it felt like my ribs might crack from the pressure. If I died, what would Cian feel? The question twisted something deep inside me. He would hate himself. He would hate that he didn't follow me despite wanting to. That hurt worse than any wound. Worse than the memory of glass tearing through flesh, worse than the road peeling my skin away in strips.

"Fancy meeting you here." Someone said.

That made me spin around.

A woman stood among the reeds. She wore white robes that seemed to glow with their own light, fabric that moved like water even though there was no wind. A crown sat on her head, delicate and fierce at once. A crescent moon wrought in silver that caught the light from the impossible sky above. Her hair was silvery white, long and curly, reaching all the way to her hips. It moved around her like it was alive, each strand catching light and throwing it back in soft gleams.

Her skin was a beautiful mix of tones, like someone had blended sunlight, the earth and moonbeam into flesh. And her eyes held warmth. Not the kind you find in fire but the kind you find in summer nights, in gentle hands, in things that feel like home even when you've never been there before.

I didn't know her. I had never seen her face. But when she moved closer, when her bare feet disturbed the reeds and sent them whispering against each other, I felt like I had known her my entire life.

"I know you," I said. The words came out soft, almost a question.

"Of course you do." Her voice was strange. Not male or female but something beyond both. It resonated in my chest, in my bones, like it was speaking directly to something deeper than my ears could reach. She smiled and the expression transformed her face into something almost blinding. "I have known you all your life. I know all my children."

My breath caught.

The pieces fell into place all at once. The crown. The moons scattered across the sky. The way she seemed to exist slightly outside of reality itself, like she was more real than everything around her.

"Lady Selene."

I dropped to my knees. The earth was soft beneath me but I barely felt it. I bowed my head, pressing my forehead toward the ground. My heart hammered against my ribs. The Moon Goddess. I was in the presence of the Moon Goddess herself.

"Please." Her voice came closer. "There is no need for that."

I lifted my head slowly. She stood right in front of me now, close enough to touch. The light from her robes cast everything in soft white.

"That means I'm truly dead," I said. My voice sounded hollow. Empty. "Doesn't it?"

"No." Selene tilted her head slightly. "Not yet. Not if you don't want to stay."

"What does that mean?"

Instead of answering, she reached out. Her hand was elegant, fingers long and graceful. She pointed to my chest. Right where my heart would be.

"You are a fascinating specimen." Her eyes met mine and I saw galaxies in them. Actual galaxies, spinning, colliding and being born. "It is rare for an abomination of nature and divinity to catch my eye. But you did. You have for a long time now. So I stayed by you and watched."

She turned away from me. Her hand reached out and touched the reeds. They bent away from her fingers like they were afraid. Or maybe in awe. Then she grabbed a handful and pulled.

The reeds tore apart like fabric.

Reality ripped open and suddenly we were somewhere else. The golden field was gone. Instead, I saw twisted metal and smoke. Flames licking at the wreckage of two cars. And there, on the road, was my body.

I looked dead. Blood pooled beneath me, dark and thick. My skin was pale, almost gray. Glass still jutted from my throat. But Garrett was there. He was up, moving, his uniform jacket pressed hard against my neck. His hands were soaked red. His face was twisted with desperation.

"You aren't dead yet," Selene said beside me. "So you can still go back. But only if you want to."

I stared at my broken body. At Garrett frantically trying to stop the bleeding. At the way my chest barely moved at all with each—if you could even call it shallow—breath.

"I'm not sure how," I said.

"I'm surprised you think that." Selene's voice carried something like amusement. "It is in your genes after all."

I turned to look at her. "What?"

"The way your nose is sensitive." She gestured gracefully, like she was pointing to things I couldn't see. "Your skill with poison. How you managed to break the power of alchemy because of your connection to the source."

My mind raced. The source? I thought about that night with the Grand Luna. When I had fed her the supposed cure we made.

"Are you saying I actually did help the Grand Luna that time? I wasn't so sure it was us."

"Us? No, you did." Selene moved closer to the scene. Her robes didn't disturb the smoke. She existed separately from it, like she was watching through glass. "And there is so much more you can do. I'm sure you feel it much more now."

She laughed. The sound was like bells and thunder at once. "They thought they could create like we the gods do. One of their twisted creations even tried to take you out right now." Her expression shifted. The warmth was still there but something harder edged it. Something ancient, something powerful and not to be tested. "But I, Selene, will not be mocked. They want the age of legends back. Well. It is back now."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Lady Selene."

"I know." She turned to face me fully. "I'm not allowed to reveal much. Even the gods have their rules. But know this, child. There is power within you. Heaven, you called me here." She stepped closer until she was right in front of me. Her hand cupped my face with impossible gentleness. "So I will tell you this much. You are favored by me. Enjoy being loved by a god."

She leaned in and then pressed a kiss to my cheek.

Her lips were warm. The sensation spread from that point of contact through my entire being, like sunlight flooding a dark room. Something inside me shifted. No. More like unlocked. I felt it wake up, whatever it was, stretching after a long sleep.

When she pulled back, I grabbed her arm without thinking. "Does that mean you'll help me back into my body?"

Selene smiled. "Your heart still beats. Strengthen it."

Then she was gone.



One moment she stood in front of me, solid and real. The next, there was only smoke and flames and the wreckage of the accident.

"Wait," I said to the empty air.

Nothing answered.

I turned back to the scene. Garrett was still working frantically. His lips moved and I strained to hear.

"Stay with me, Luna Fia. Please." His voice cracked. He looked around desperately, patting down his pockets. Looking for his phone probably. But I remembered seeing mine float away toward that figure. Toward the monster who had done this. She probably took his too.

I moved closer to my body. It looked so fragile. So broken. Blood still seeped from around Garrett's makeshift bandage. My chest barely rose and fell in tiny, irregular movements.

Could I even make it?

Then I heard it.

A hum. Low and resonant, like the earth itself was singing. I looked down at my hands and froze.

They were glowing.

A curious blue light emanated from my palms, spreading up my wrists. It pulsed in time with something. A rhythm I couldn't quite place. Then I realized it matched my heartbeat. The one still struggling in my broken body.

"What the hell," I whispered.

But even as I said it, something inside me knew. It was like muscle memory I'd never formed. Knowledge I'd never learned but somehow possessed anyway. My hands knew what to do even if my mind didn't understand.

I knelt beside my body. The blood didn't touch me. Nothing in this half-state touched me except what I wanted it to. I reached out with those glowing hands and pressed them to my chest. Right over my heart.

The glow intensified immediately.

It spread from my hands into my body, racing through veins and arteries like liquid light. I felt it in a way I couldn't explain. Felt it strengthen what was weak, shore up what was failing. My heart responded. The rhythm grew stronger and more steady.

The light grew brighter and brighter until I couldn't see anything else. It consumed everything. The wreckage, Garrett, the night sky. There was only blue light, brilliant and blinding, and the feeling of my heart remembering how to beat.

Then the light swallowed me whole.

## **Chapter 226: See no evil**

### **MADELINE**

I watched Cian choke.

He was choking on Morrigan's cooking, That was my first thought, which seemed impossible because the woman could make even simple bread taste like heaven. But his fork clattered to the table and Ronan was already moving, slamming his hand against Cian's back with enough force to dislodge anything stuck in his throat.

Except Cian's face told me this wasn't about food.

His hands clawed at his chest like he was trying to rip something out from inside. His eyes went wide and unfocused. The color drained from his face so fast I thought he might pass out right there at the table.

"Cian?" Morrigan's voice cut through the silence.

He didn't answer. He just sat there, gasping, his fingers digging into the fabric of his shirt. Then, just as suddenly as it started, he went still. Like someone had flipped a switch and turned off whatever had been tormenting him.

But the look on his face got worse.

He stared at his plate like he'd never seen food before. Like the entire world had just shifted on its axis and he was the only one who noticed. His breathing was shallow and uneven.

"Cian, what's wrong?" Morrigan leaned forward, her own plate forgotten.

He looked up at her. Then at Ronan. Then at Elara. His gaze swept across the table and landed on me for half a second before moving on. When he spoke, his voice sounded hollow.

"Fia. I can't feel her."

The words hung in the air like smoke.

Then he was moving. The chair scraped back so violently it nearly tipped over. He stumbled toward the door, his legs unsteady but his purpose clear. He needed to get to her. Now.

I pushed back from my own seat without thinking.

Wilhelm's hand clamped around my wrist.

"No," he said quietly.

I tried to pull away. "He needs help."

"We have things to do." His voice was barely above a whisper, but the weight behind it made me freeze.

I yanked my hand free anyway. "I can't. It's Cian."

Morrigan stood before I could take another step. Her face was composed but her eyes were wet.

"Don't," she said.

I stopped.

She pressed her lips together, blinking rapidly. "He looked so horrified. Goodness knows what happened to her. But Cian will be full of different emotions right now and the last thing you need to do is stand in his way."

"I don't want to do that." My throat felt tight. "I want to help him."

"I want to help him too." Her voice cracked slightly. "He's my son, for goddess sake. But Cian is in his own head right now. Whatever happened..." She paused, drawing in a shaky breath. "I hope to the goddess it's not bad. Not feeling your mate is a scary thing."

She pressed a hand over her mouth and the tears started falling in earnest. "I know what it was like when his father died." The words came out broken. "I pray to the goddess that Fia is fine."

She turned away from the table, her shoulders shaking. "Excuse me."

Elara rose immediately. "Aunt." She followed Morrigan out of the dining room, leaving just Wilhelm and me in the oppressive silence.

I ran both hands through my hair and let out a breath. "Fuck."

"It is sad, I'm sure." Wilhelm's tone was measured and clinical. "But our family comes first."

I turned to look at him. Really look at him. His expression hadn't changed since Cian ran out. There was no concern or sympathy. Just that same calculating look he always wore when he was thinking three steps ahead.

"You heard Elara," I said. "Aldric isn't here. He went back to his estate."

Wilhelm tilted his head slightly. "Like I said, my gifts have grown significantly. All we need is an anchor. Something from him and I can create a temporary bridge and latch onto any animal nearby him." He paused. "I'll need you as well. The farther the target, the shorter the viewing window."

My mind was still on Cian. On the way he'd looked at that table. On the emptiness in his voice when he said he couldn't feel her.

"Oh, get it together." Wilhelm's voice sharpened. "The man just told you he doesn't love you anymore."

"I know that." The words came out harsher than I intended. "But I still care for him."

Wilhelm stood and grabbed my arm, pulling me toward the door. "Let's go get something from that bastard's room."

I let him drag me through the halls. My feet moved on autopilot while my mind kept circling back to Cian's face. To the fear I'd seen there. To the absolute certainty in his voice when he said the bond was gone.

We reached the corner near Aldric's quarters and found a sentinel posted outside his door.

Wilhelm didn't hesitate. He whispered something under his breath and the man's eyes rolled back. He crumpled to the floor like a puppet with cut strings. Wilhelm waved his hand and the lock clicked open with a soft snick.

The room inside was pristine. Everything had its place. The bed was made with military precision. Not a book out of alignment on the shelf. Not a speck of dust anywhere.

"This man is a psycho," Wilhelm muttered, moving to the dresser and pulling open drawers.

I stayed near the door, watching him rifle through Aldric's things.

"What can we even take as an anchor?" He pushed aside neatly folded clothes.  
"Nothing here seems like he would look at twice."

He pulled out a watch from the back of one drawer and held it up to the light. "Hey, this looks expensive. Perhaps this."

I moved closer, studying the timepiece. It was beautiful. Ornate. Probably worth more than most people made in a year.

"What happens to the anchor, given the distance?" I asked.

"Degradation."

I almost smiled. "Yeah. Let the expensive watch degrade. Aldric will not suspect a thing."

But even as I said it, I shook my head. "Drop it. I don't think he even has a connection to that thing."

I crossed to the bookshelf and ran my fingers along the spines. These were different. These had been touched. Read. Valued.

"His books, however." I pulled one free. "These mean something to him. I know him enough to know that."

Wilhelm came to stand beside me, eyeing the worn leather binding. "Well, let's get to work."

We made our way back to my room. I locked the door behind us and pulled out my scrying bowl while Wilhelm cleared space on the table. The book went into the center of the bowl. We stood on opposite sides, our hands meeting over the rim.

Wilhelm closed his eyes and began whispering. The words were old and ancient and they made the air in the room feel heavier.

Power thrummed between our joined hands. My own magic rose to meet his, twining together like threads in a rope. The bowl started to lift. Slowly at first, then faster. It rose into the air with the book still inside, spinning in lazy circles.

Wilhelm's eyes snapped open. They were pure white, no iris or pupil were in there as blank white orbs that seemed to glow faintly in the dim light just stared back.

He sucked in a sharp breath. "I'm connected."

His head tilted like he was listening to something I couldn't hear. "I believe I'm a roach." He paused. "Now I just have to find him."

"Have you found him yet?" I kept my voice low, not wanting to break his concentration.

"No. The estate is big enough."

I chewed my lip. "Can you switch animals? Maybe to something that can track a scent."

"I can't. Distance has its constraints. I cannot choose the beast I possess."

We waited. The bowl continued spinning above us, the book a dark blur at its center. My arms were starting to ache from holding the position but I didn't dare move.

"Wait." Wilhelm's blank eyes focused on nothing. "I found him."

"What is he doing?"

"He's carrying a tray of food."

I frowned. "There's nothing special about that."

"I'll keep watching."

The silence stretched. I could hear my own heartbeat in my ears. Could feel the pulse of magic flowing between us.

"Wait." Wilhelm's voice went sharp. "He's heading to the underground level. Why would he be heading to the underground level with food?"

My stomach dropped. "I don't know. But don't lose him."

Wilhelm smiled despite those eerie white eyes. "Trust me, I won't—"

He didn't finish.

Something slammed into him. I felt it through our connection, like a shockwave that rippled from him to me. His nose exploded with blood. It poured down his face in thick streams.

The book in the bowl burst into flames.

Wilhelm fell. He went down hard, his body hitting the floor with a sickening thud. Then he started convulsing. His limbs jerked and spasmed. His back arched off the ground. Blood from his nose spread across the floor in a dark pool.

"Will!" I dropped to my knees beside him, my hands hovering over his chest, not sure where to touch, what to do. "Will!"

I grabbed his face between my palms and his skin was burning hot. His eyes were still white, still rolled back in his head.

I slapped his cheek several times as his condition worsened in seconds. "Wilhelm!"

He didn't respond. He just kept seizing on my bedroom floor while smoke from the burning book filled the air above us.

I had to do something.

## **Chapter 227: Aldric says**

### **ALDRIC**

The estate breathed differently when empty.

I'd given the Omegas the afternoon and night off. I even sent the sentinels to patrol the outer perimeter. The guards could stand at the gates for all I cared. I wanted the house to myself. I wanted the silence that came with solitude.

No footsteps in distant hallways.

No murmured conversations bleeding through walls.

Here and now, it had to be just me and the vast emptiness of the estate.

Elara's absence made it better. The girl had been a constant buzz of need and questions. Daddy this, Daddy that. I loved her in the way one loves a prized possession, but her presence demanded energy I didn't always want to expend. With her gone, the house settled into something peaceful.

Something truly mine.

I moved through the kitchen with practiced ease. Cooking had always been meditative for me. The precision of it. The control. Every ingredient measured, every temperature monitored, every step executed exactly as intended. There was no room for chaos in a well-made dish. No space for error or weakness.

I'd decided on boeuf bourguignon. Not the simplified version most people attempted. The real thing. The kind that took hours and demanded attention at every stage.

He loved it and considering how mad he was going to be when I showed up, I needed to make an effort.

The beef had been seared earlier, each cube caramelized to develop that deep, almost sweet crust that would dissolve into the sauce later. I'd deglazed the pan with cognac,

watching the alcohol ignite in a brief flash of blue flame before settling into something richer. The wine had been added next. A proper Burgundy, not some cheap substitute. The liquid bubbled and reduced, concentrating flavors until the smell alone could make a person's mouth water.

Pearl onions sat in a separate pan, glazed with butter and sugar until they turned golden and tender. I'd peeled each one by hand. Dropped them in boiling water for thirty seconds, then shocked them in ice. The skins had slipped off like silk. Most people used frozen. Most people were lazy.

The mushrooms had been cleaned with a damp cloth, never washed. Water ruined mushrooms, turned them soggy and flavorless. I'd quartered them and sautéed them in butter until they released their moisture and then reabsorbed it, concentrating everything they had to offer.

The meat had been braising for three hours now. Low and slow in the oven, covered, the liquid barely bubbling. I checked it periodically, turning the pieces, skimming fat from the surface. The sauce had thickened to something glossy and dark. Rich enough to coat the back of a spoon.

I added the onions and mushrooms in the final thirty minutes. Let them heat through and marry with the sauce. Added a bouquet garni I'd tied myself: fresh thyme, parsley, bay leaf. The aromatics filled the kitchen with something that smelled like comfort, though I wasn't sure I'd ever actually felt that emotion.

When I pulled it from the oven, the meat was fork-tender. It fell apart at the slightest pressure. The sauce clung to everything, thick and luxurious. I plated it carefully. Spooned the vegetables around the meat. Made sure the presentation was clean. Professional.

I poured a glass of water and then filled another glass with fresh-squeezed orange juice before I set both on the tray beside the plate.

Then I took a bite.

It was fucking divine.

The meat dissolved on my tongue. The sauce was perfectly balanced: rich but not heavy, complex but not muddled. The wine had reduced just enough to lose its harsh edges while keeping its depth. The onions were sweet. The mushrooms earthy. Everything worked together the way it should. The way I'd designed it to.

I allowed myself a moment of satisfaction. Most people couldn't cook like this. Most people didn't have the patience or the precision or the understanding of how flavors built on one another. But I wasn't most people. I'd never been most people.



My phone buzzed on the counter.

I set down my fork and picked it up. Pauline's name flashed across the screen.

Right on schedule.

I answered. "I assume you succeeded."

Her voice came through tight and clipped. "Did I have a choice?"

"Come on." I leaned against the counter, watching steam rise from the plate. "That was your granddaughter. Did you really want her to die?"

Silence stretched between us. I could picture her face: pinched with anger, lined with resentment. She hated me. The feeling was entirely mutual.

"What do you even want with the girl?" she finally asked.

I smiled even though she couldn't see it. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"That's cryptic."

"I hate the guts of her half-sister who happens to be my nephew's bride." The words came out smooth, almost conversational. "If I have to keep her thorns to get her off my own back, then why would I not seize the opportunity?"

Pauline said nothing.

"I also need to know more about Fia," I continued. "Your granddaughter Hazel might not know much. But she's about to."

Another pause followed. Then Pauline's voice slowly came through: "The girl, Fia..."

"Yes?" I straightened slightly. "What about her?"

"Forget it." Her voice went flat. "I always seem to forget you're no ally of mine when we speak."

"I'm not your enemy." I kept my tone pleasant and reasonable. "I just had to threaten you to make you fall in line."

"How long will you hold it over my neck?"

"Until I can no longer use it."

She drew in a sharp breath. "The girl reminds me of someone from my past. I hate her guts too. That's all."

The line then immediately went dead. That wasn't all. But I would let it go for now.

I set the phone back on the counter. Pauline's grudges were her own problem. I had what I needed from her. Everything else was just noise.

I picked up the tray and headed for the door.

The estate was large enough that most people never explored all of it. Surface level rooms for guests and daily life. Upper floors for private quarters. But beneath everything, carved into the earth itself, there were spaces most people didn't know existed.

I took the stairs down. Past the main floor. Past the cellar where we kept wine and storage. Past the old servant quarters that hadn't been used in decades. Down and down until the temperature dropped and the air grew stale.

The lights flickered here because of wiring that hadn't been updated in years. It was the only imperfection in these walls that I allowed.

The bulbs buzzed, dimmed and brightened in irregular patterns. It gave everything a sickly, uncertain quality. Like the basement itself was breathing.

I didn't mind. It kept people away.

The hallway stretched ahead of me, concrete walls painted institutional white that had yellowed with age. My footsteps echoed. The tray didn't shake in my hands. I had perfect balance... perfect control.

I stopped at a door at the very end. It was made from heavy steel and there was no window or decoration in sight. All that was present was a lock that required a key I kept on a chain around my neck, hidden beneath my shirt.

I balanced the tray on one hand and pulled out the key. The lock turned smoothly because how well-oiled it was. This room was the only one I maintained with the same precision I used to maintain everything else.

The door swung inward and I stepped through, locking it behind me with a decisive click.

The room inside was nothing like the hallway. It had bright overhead lights, white walls that were actually white because they were cleaned regularly by me. The floor was equally spotless and sterile.

And in the center of the room sat a cage.

Large enough to stand in. But not large enough to be comfortable. The bars were thick steel, spaced close enough that nothing bigger than a hand could fit through.

Inside the cage was a man.

He lurched forward the moment he saw me. His hands gripped the bars and his face pressed between them. He had wild eyes and an unkempt beard that had grown long and scraggly. His hair hung in greasy strings around his face.

"You fucking monster!" His voice cracked. Raw from disuse and probably thirst. "Four days without food or water?!"

I walked closer, my steps measured and calm. The tray didn't waver.

"I apologize, big brother." I let the words hang in the air for a moment. "I was busy."

Gabriel's face twisted. Rage, desperation and something that might have been despair all fought for dominance in his expression. He looked terrible. Smelled even worse.

"But I made your favorite," I added, sliding the tray across the floor toward the cage.

It stopped just within his reach. The boeuf bourguignon sat there, still steaming slightly. The glasses of water and orange juice beside it. All of it perfect. All of it exactly what it should be.

Gabriel stared at the food. Then at me. His hands were shaking.

"Eat up, Gabriel." I smiled. The same smile I used at dinner parties and business meetings and family gatherings. Pleasant, unthreatening and completely hollow.

He didn't move toward the food. Not yet. He just kept staring at me with those wild, broken eyes.

I wondered if he remembered what it felt like to be the one with power. To be the older brother, the heir, the one everyone respected and feared. Did he still dream about it? Did those memories torture him more than the hunger?

I hoped so.

"It really is your favorite," I said, turning toward the door. "You should eat before it gets cold. You know how butter-based sauces congeal."

My hand was on the door handle when he finally spoke again.

"You can't keep me down here forever."

I paused and looked back over my shoulder at him kneeling in his cage, ribs showing through his shirt, beard matted with who knew what.

"Can't I?"

The question hung in the air, rhetorical and heavy. We both knew the answer.

I left him there in his pristine white room with his gourmet meal and his desperation. The lock clicked into place behind me. The sound echoed down the empty hallway, swallowed by darkness and flickering lights.

The walk back up felt lighter somehow. Easier. There was something deeply satisfying about having complete control over someone's existence. About being the god of someone's tiny, terrible world.

I whistled as I climbed the stairs, some half-remembered tune from childhood. The sound bounced off the concrete walls and followed me up toward the light.