

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 241: Drag Path 2 - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 241: Drag Path 2

Chapter 241: Drag Path 2

ALDRIC

I returned to the basement within the hour.

The tray needed collecting. I couldn't leave it down there. Gabriel could be dangerous if given an inch.

I reached the steel door and pulled out the key from beneath my shirt. The lock turned with its usual smooth click and I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The white room greeted me with its sterile brightness. The cage sat in the center, exactly where it always was. And inside the cage, Gabriel hunched over the empty tray.

He'd eaten everything. Licked the plate clean from the looks of it. The glasses were drained. Even the garnish was gone.

But something was off.

I counted the items on the tray without moving closer. Plate. Two glasses. Napkin. Spoon.

No fork.

I walked forward slowly. My footsteps echoed against the pristine white floor. Gabriel's head lifted. He watched me approach with those wild eyes, trying to look innocent. Trying to look harmless.

He was neither.

"Return the damn cutlery." I stopped just a few feet away from the cage. "You cannot use it to escape here, big brother."

Gabriel's hands tightened around the bars. His knuckles went white. "This is madness." His voice cracked on the last word. "It has been years. So many years. What could you possibly get from this?"

I tilted my head slightly and studied him the way one might study an interesting specimen under glass.

"All this," he continued, "because I decided I was wrong and that the Alpha seat rightfully belonged to our nephew?"

The words hung in the air between us. He actually believed that. He actually thought this was about a simple change of heart. About choosing to support Cian instead of continuing to contest for the seat himself.

Poor, stupid Gabriel.

"You have never had purpose," I said. My voice came out calm and measured. "But you did have use. I put the thought in your head. I nurtured it."

I moved closer to the bars. Close enough to see the grime in his beard, the desperation in his bloodshot eyes.

"But somehow your supposed good nature took over and you deviated from the path I laid for you." The disappointment in my tone was genuine. I'd worked so hard on him. Years of careful manipulation. Years of planting seeds and watering them with just the right combination of encouragement and doubt. "You were going to give away what wasn't yours to give away?"

Gabriel stared at me for a long moment. Then he laughed.

It started as a chuckle. Then it grew into something bigger and wilder. His whole body shook with it. The sound bounced off the white walls and came back at us from every direction.

"If you wanted the seat so bad," he said when he could breathe again, "you could have gotten it. You could have contested for it too."

I smiled. "That wasn't in the plan though."

"What plan?"

"I took a bow." I held his gaze. Let him see the truth in my eyes. "I took a bow first, knowing I had laid the groundwork for you. You were meant to be the one who rose against it, contested, and won."

Gabriel's laughter died. His face went slack with understanding. With horror.

"What even is this obsession?" His voice dropped to something quieter. Something almost pitying. "You have been plotting for years and years now. You have me here, your prisoner." He gestured around the cage, at the white room, at everything. "Is Morrigan even dead yet? Is our nephew not still the Alpha of Skollrend? Really, what have you achieved?"

Valid questions. All of them.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the ring. The red stone caught the overhead lights and threw crimson reflections across the white walls. I slipped it onto my middle finger. The metal was warm from being against my body. The stone pulsed with power I could feel thrumming through my hand.

I walked closer to the cage. Right up to the bars.

"I have made you the enemy in his forefront," I said. "He believes all his problems are because of you. He even wants you dead."

Gabriel's breath hitched.

"If there was even a chance you escaped here, I don't have to even do much. Cian will be the first to put a bullet in your head or perhaps behead you."

"You are a monster." Gabriel's words came out thick, as if they were choked. "How did we even come out from the same womb?"

I shrugged. "Beats me. You have no fire in your soul. You are a disappointment to me."

Gabriel leaned closer to the cage edge. His fingers wrapped around the bars so tight like he somehow thought they might leave permanent indents in his skin.

"But Cian is our nephew," he said. "He is our blood. Do you just want to be heralding it all that badly?"

The question was so naive it almost made me laugh.

"He is a half blood," I said. "Part us. Plenty his mother. And now..." I paused, savored the next words. "And now he is married to an Omega. Their child, when they have one and they will because they have been fucking like rabbits, will have greater claim to Skollrend than me. Than you. Than my daughter. Than my son."

Gabriel's eyes went wide. "Son? What son?"

I smiled. "There is a lot you don't know about me, brother."

I reached down, picked up the tray and lifted it slightly. The empty plate slid toward the edge.

"Give what you took."

Gabriel looked at me. His hand moved toward his torn shirt. The move was slow as it was deliberate. He pulled out the fork from where he'd hidden it against his body.

He extended his arm through the bars. The fork glinted in the overhead lights. He held it out to me, handle first.

When I reached for it, that was when Gabriel's hand moved.

It was faster than I expected from someone who'd been starving for days. He flipped the fork and drove it toward my throat. The tines aimed straight for my jugular. A killing blow if it landed and he could make it work.

It never landed.

The fork fell from his hand before it got within six inches of my skin. Gabriel dropped to the ground like someone had cut his strings. His body convulsed and shook. His back arched and his mouth opened in a silent scream.

The runes burned into his flesh were doing their job.

I bent down and picked up the fork. It was expensive so I examined it for damage. The tines were still sharp and the whole thing was still perfectly aligned. Good.

"You never learn," I said.

Gabriel writhed on the floor of his cage. His breathing came in sharp gasps. Sweat poured down his face and soaked through his filthy shirt.

"As long as I have this ring," I held up my hand so the red stone caught the light, "and you have those runes burned into your flesh, you cannot hurt me."

The convulsions slowed. Gabriel's body went limp. He lay there on the floor, chest heaving, staring up at the ceiling.

"Please." His voice was barely a whisper. "Release me. I won't say a word. I'll disappear. Wipe my memories with the witches under your payroll if you must. I just want to live a life."

I set the fork on the tray and straightened before looking down at him through the bars.

"You will live, brother," I said. "Once I ascend that throne."

Gabriel dragged himself to his knees, grabbed the bars again and used it to pull himself up until he was kneeling upright.

"You haven't made a move strong enough since you hatched this idea," he said. "Cian is still Alpha."

True enough.

"Well, after your mess, I had to make do." I shifted the tray to my other hand. "The first plan was use love to make him step down. But he chose the seat."

Gabriel's face twisted.

"The next plan was kill Morrigan, reveal it was you who poisoned her, and send my dear nephew to psychosis." I kept my tone conversational, while he stared at me horrified. The weakling that he was. "I could then put him in a conservatorship and take over Skollrend. But even that didn't come to fruition. The Omega bride fucked that up."

I moved toward the door with the tray balanced perfectly in my hands.

"So I have a new plot," I said over my shoulder. "You'll just have to see how it goes."

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out with my free hand. Ronan's name flashed across the screen.

Odd. He never called unless it was important.

I looked back at Gabriel one last time. He knelt there in his cage, broken and desperate, exactly where I needed him to be.

"See you in two days, brother," I said. "Rest. You'll need it."

I walked toward the door. The lock was already turning in my hand when Gabriel's voice came from behind me.

"Wait. Wait. Wait."

I didn't wait.

I stepped through the door and pulled it shut behind me. The lock clicked into place with that satisfying finality. The sound echoed down the hallway and faded into the darkness.

I answered the phone as I walked toward the stairs.

"Ronan," I said. "Talk to me."

The tray didn't shake. My hands were steady. My voice was calm.

Everything was exactly as it should be. I hoped it stayed that way.

Chapter 242: Drag Path 3

ALDRIC

I climbed the stairs with the tray balanced in one hand and my phone pressed to my ear with the other.

"Speak to me," I said.

There was a pause on the other end. Just long enough to make my jaw tighten.

"Something happened," Ronan said.

I reached the top of the stairs and turned down the hallway. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. My footsteps were silent on the carpet runner.

"What?" I kept my voice level and calm. There was no point in getting worked up before I knew what I was dealing with.

"There was a collision." Ronan's voice carried that careful neutrality he used when delivering news he thought I wouldn't like. "Cian's mate was involved."

I clicked my tongue against my teeth. Three sharp sounds that echoed in the empty hallway.

"So she is dead?" I turned into the kitchen and set the tray on the counter. The plate clattered slightly against the metal surface. "Well that is disappointing. I expected our little game to go on for a little while." I leaned against the counter and looked out the window at the beautiful luminous midnight blue sky. "How is he holding up? Is he already running mad with grief?"

"She is not dead."

My hand stilled on the edge of the tray.

"In fact, she is perfectly fine," Ronan continued. "She had no injuries at all and that was an accident that killed two sentinels."

I straightened, pushed off from the counter and walked toward the window. My reflection stared back at me in the glass. Behind it, the trees swayed in the wind.

"Ronan," I said slowly. Carefully. "Are you telling me an Omega walked away from an accident that killed two trained sentinels without a scratch?"

"Yes." He paused. "I found it strange that an Omega with no strong healing factor survived that. Not to mention the sentinel with her did as well. That cannot be chance."

I smiled at my reflection. The expression was cold and sharp.

"I agree with you," I said. "That is indeed odd."

The pieces were starting to move in ways I hadn't anticipated. That happened sometimes. The board shifted. The players made unexpected moves. It was why the game stayed interesting.

"The issue at hand is however that he wants to employ a delicate."

I blinked, before turning away from the window and walking back to the counter. My free hand drummed once against the marble surface.

"Oh." I picked up the fork from the tray and examined it again. The tines caught the overhead light. "That is crazy expensive. What for? Did something else happen?"

"No." Ronan's voice dropped lower. "The thing is... The accident... It was off. The sentinel with her sort of implied magic was involved. Considering where she was leaving from, it wouldn't be a stretch to consider that maybe Luna Pauline was involved in this. You know how she is."

I set the fork down carefully. My fingers lingered on the handle for just a moment before I pulled my hand away.

Pauline....

Of course it was Pauline.

I sighed and the sound came out heavy and tired. Like I was dealing with a particularly troublesome child who kept coloring on the walls no matter how many times they were told not to.

"I truly hate it when my pieces decide they have autonomy." I walked toward the sink and turned on the water. The sound of it hitting the basin filled the kitchen. "There was something off about her when we talked on the phone. I should have guessed." I watched the water swirl down the drain. "I wouldn't even hate it if she had even succeeded."

"How should I proceed?"

I turned off the water and dried my hands on a towel that hung from the oven handle. The fabric was soft to the touch.

"Go through with it," I said. "Obey your cousin."

There was a beat of silence. I could practically hear Ronan processing that. Working through the implications.

"Since she used a witch," I continued, "I'll instruct her to cut her loose ends or suffer the consequences."

"Of course, father."

The word sent a warm feeling through my chest. Ronan was a good boy. A useful dog. He knew his place and he played his part perfectly.

It even made me chuckle.

"I love it when you call me that."

The line went dead.

I pulled the phone away from my ear and looked at the screen. The call had lasted one minutes and forty-two seconds. Somehow long enough to complicate things.

I scrolled through my contacts. My thumb moved over the names in alphabetical order. There were hundreds of them. People who owed me favors. People who worked for me. People who thought they were using me while I used them right back.

I switched to recently called instead. It was faster that way.

Pauline's number sat there near the top. Right between "Ronan" and another labeled "Supplier 3."

I pressed on her name. The phone rang.

It rang once.

Then twice.

Even a third time.

On the fourth ring, she picked up.

"Aldric." Her voice was tired. "This better be fucking good because I do not have time for your shenanigans right now."

I walked back toward the window. The sky had gone from deep midnight blue to something brighter.

"Pauline," I said. "We need to talk."

"About what now?" The rude streak didn't waver. She was good at this. I'd give her that.

I watched a night bird land on one of the tree branches outside. It hopped along the wood, tilted its head and then flew away.

"About the collision your orchestrated," I said.

The silence on the other end stretched out for just a beat too long. Just enough to confirm what I already knew.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Her voice, still rude had however lost some of that smoothness. Just a fraction. Just enough.

I smiled.

"Don't insult my intelligence," I said. The words came out soft but they carried weight. "I thought I should let you know that the Omega and her sentinel walked away without injuries while two others died. A waste of power and risk taking if you ask me because magic leaves traces, Pauline. Especially magic done hastily."

I heard her breath catch. Just for a second.

"Even if that were true," she said slowly, "why would that concern you?"

I turned away from the window and walked back through the kitchen. My footsteps echoed on the tile.

"It concerns me," I said, "because you are my piece. You move when I say move. You act when I say act." I reached the doorway and stopped. "You don't get to make plays on your own."

"Maybe I was helping you." Her voice had an edge to it now. Defense mixed with defiance. "You want Cian destabilized. You want him weak. But you have been too pussy to do any of that and then you somehow make it out problem. Getting rid of his mate would have accomplished that, would it not?"

"Would it though?" I leaned against the doorframe. "Don't pretend you did this because you were tired of being cornered. You are smarter than that when your emotions aren't at the forefront. That girl pissed you off and that was it."

There was a at the end of the line.

"You didn't think it through," I said. "You saw an opportunity and you took it without considering the consequences. Without considering how it fits into the larger plan."

"I'm sorry." The words came out tight as it was forced. She wasn't sorry. She was angry that she'd been caught. "It won't happen again."

"No," I said. "It won't."

I pushed off from the doorframe and walked down the hallway. The carpet muffled my footsteps again. The buzzing fluorescent lights followed me like mechanical insects.

"What does Cian know?"

"Nothing yet. I have the full picture. But he doesn't. Not yet at least. But he intends to get a delicate. He will find out if the delicate is good. You used a witch," I said. "That witch is now a loose end. Loose ends get people caught, Pauline. Loose ends unravel carefully woven plans."

"What exactly are you saying?"

"I'm saying you need to cut your loose ends." I reached another window. "Or I will cut them for you. And when I cut loose ends, I'm not particularly careful about where the scissors land."

"You're threatening me."

"I'm educating you." I watched my reflection in the glass. The red stone on my ring glowed faintly in the dim light. "There is a difference."

She didn't respond. I could hear her breathing on the other end of the line.

"Handle it," I said. "And Pauline?"

"What?"

"Don't ever move without my permission again." I let the words hang in the air between us. "I don't care how good your intentions are. I don't care how perfect the opportunity seems. You wait for my word. Always. Are we clear?"

There was another pause. It was longer this time.

"Crystal," she said.

"Good."

"But can I say something now?" She added.

"Sure. Speak."

"There will be no problem and your nephew will find nothing no matter what power he uses. It's fine."

"What makes you so sure?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Well, that is my business. Good fucking night!"

She then ended the call.

Fucking bitch!

But what made her so sure nothing would be found out? Why was she so sure?

Chapter 243: Ignorance is Bliss

FIA

I nodded. "It's true."

Cian waited, his hand still warm in mine. The water lapped gently at our feet.

"I don't understand it myself." I pulled my knees up to my chest, wrapping my free arm around them. "She didn't feel like an apparition. She felt real. Very real."

The memory played behind my eyes. That woman on the road, and how strange she looked.

"It was like..." I searched for the right words. "Like seeing her appealed to my sense of justice? I wanted to save her."

Cian's thumb traced circles on the back of my hand. He didn't interrupt.

"That was when the accident happened." My voice came out flat. The words felt too simple for what had occurred, but I didn't know how else to say it.

"That's powerful magic." Cian's jaw tightened. "Who do you think did it?"

I stared at the moon's reflection in the water. The ripples from our feet distorted it, breaking the perfect circle into fragments.

"I couldn't be sure. I seem to have a lot of enemies now." I let out a breath. "It wouldn't be past Hazel or my stepmother to try."

"Garrett also says you wanted your sister dead." Cian's voice stayed even, but I felt it through the bond. A slight pang of jealousy. It was sharp as it was quick. "Did your sense of justice also want that because of Milo?"

I turned to look at him. His face was carefully neutral, but his eyes gave him away.

"I wish I was that noble." I shook my head. "I did it for you. So you shouldn't be jealous."

His expression shifted slightly.

"I did it because..." I paused. My heart picked up speed. "I'm about to say something that will bother your spirit now. But I hope you hear me out without flaring hot."

"I don't do that." He defended.

"You do."

"I really don't."

"You're doing it right now."

"Okay. Okay. Of course." He said it immediately once I had him cornered. "I won't flare hot."

"I mean it."

"I do as well." His grip on my hand tightened just a fraction.

I took a breath. "One of the emissaries that came for me was Milo's brother."

Cian went very still.

"Hazel wanted to escape justice because if Milo's murder could somehow be proven by his family, it would mean death for her. So his brother, as well as his grandmother, were being hunted." The words came faster now. "He asked for my help. And he gave me a reason to help him."

"What reason?" Cian's voice was quiet.

"Alpha Gabriel had reached out to her." I watched his face carefully. "I had his business card but it probably got lost in the wreckage."

His jaw clenched.

"I don't know what your enemy would want from my sister. But it couldn't be good and when I got to the elders circle, it started to feel like a power was set out to protect Hazel."

"The arrival of house Strati." It wasn't a question.

I nodded. "That wasn't all though."

The water was cold against my feet now but I didn't pull them out. The discomfort kept me grounded.

"My stepmother's mother somehow managed to get the heir to the Lily of the Valley pack to save Hazel." I swallowed hard. "I tried. I wanted my sister dead. I was scared of what was to come. But I had to settle for what I could. Something that would still haunt her mind so badly, she wouldn't have time for me or you or Gabriel."

My throat felt tight.

"But it still haunts me that an enemy of yours took interest in her." I looked at Cian. "And also... when did she even meet Gabriel?"

He frowned.

"Milo's brother infiltrated her so deep. He knew plenty about her. But it was clear..." I paused, remembering the timeline. "It seemed clear that the time frame she got that card was at Alpha Julius' wedding."

Cian's eyes widened.

"And what I am about to say might be a fucking stretch to you," I held his gaze. "But you have to trust me."

"You think Gabriel has more people working in here, don't you?" His voice was barely above a whisper.

I sighed and nodded.

Cian looked back at the pool. The moonlight turned his face into sharp angles and deep shadows.

"Garrett insinuated that..." He stopped. Started again. "Ronan was one."

The name hung between us.

"But I know Ronan." Cian's voice cracked slightly. "He couldn't. He's like a brother to me."

"There it is again." I shifted to face him fully. "The cognitive dissonance."

He looked at me.

"You're terrified that the reality and truth you hold might break." I reached for his other hand, holding both now. "Trust me, I've been there. I was raised with love as little as a mustard seed and I made excuses. I wore those rose colored glasses because I couldn't bring myself to face it. How could I?"

My voice dropped lower.

"That my father... the one person that should love me... didn't truly love me and he tolerated me because I was palatable at the time." The words tasted bitter. "But I know that's not a life, Cian."

He was looking at me now, really looking.

"I know Ronan is more than a friend for you. He is practically your brother." I squeezed his hands. "But are you his?"

Cian went rigid. His head turned sharply to the left.

"Who's that?" His voice cut through the quiet.

I followed his gaze. A figure stood in the shadows just beyond the moonlight's reach.

Garrett stepped forward into the light. Bandages wrapped around his ribs and his left arm hung in a sling. He bowed his head.

"I apologize for being in the shadow but I wanted to see if other ears and eyes were watching."

My heart hammered against my ribs.

"Luna Fia is right." Garrett's voice was steady despite his injuries. "And... Beta Ronan is not the only enemy from within. There is another."

He walked toward us. Each step was careful, measured. When he reached us, he extended his good hand to Cian.

A business card lay in his palm. The white surface was now painted red with dried blood. But the black indented lettering could still be seen. Gabriel Donlon.

"Luna Fia put it on me to watch Beta Ronan and I found out things." Garrett's jaw tightened. "He is super close to Alpha Aldric. Unnaturally so."

Cian took the card. His hands trembled slightly.

"No..." His voice was hollow. "He can't be."

But I felt it through the bond. The way his heart was breaking. The way the foundation he'd built his trust on was crumbling beneath him. The devastation of betrayal cut deeper than any physical wound ever could.

He stared at the card. The moonlight caught on the bloodstains, making them look almost black. His breathing had gone shallow.

"All this time." The words came out broken. "He was right there. All this time. Why would he? Why would they? It doesn't make sense. Does it—"

I moved closer, pressing my shoulder against his. I didn't say anything. What could I say? That I was sorry? That I understood? Words felt useless against this kind of pain.

Garrett stood silent, giving Cian space to process.

Cian's fingers tightened on the card. For a moment I thought he might tear it in half. Instead, he just held it, staring at Gabriel's name like it held all the answers to questions he'd been too afraid to ask.

"I have to know this myself. I have to know for sure."

I drew a slow breath, the words pressing at the back of my throat before I could stop them.

"Do you want to confront him?" I asked.

Cian stilled.

The bond tightened, sharp and sudden, like I had touched a bruise he did not know was still raw. His gaze dropped back to the card, to the darkened smear of blood.

"I don't think letting him catch a whiff that we suspect him is—"

"No," he cut in before I could finish. He shook his head once, decisively. "Not yet."

I waited.

"I knows what will happen if we mess this up somehow, they'll prepare," Cian continued. His voice was steadier now, colder. "I don't want that. What I want... I want to see what he does. It is the only way I can believe this to be true. It is the only way it can somehow make some twisted sense."

He turned and held the card out to Garrett.

"Take this to Ronan," Cian said. "Tell him it's something you forgot in the chaos. Say you only remembered it after. Say you think Gabriel could somehow be connected to what happened. To you. To Fia."

Garrett accepted it, eyes narrowing. "And if Ronan asks questions?"

"Don't give him any answers," Cian replied. "Just the card."

Garrett inclined his head. "Understood."

When he stepped away, the night felt heavier, like it was listening.

I looked back at Cian. "You're testing him."

"Yes," he said quietly.

His fingers curled, empty now without the card.

"I want to know what he does," Cian said, "when he thinks he can cover something up."

Chapter 244: F.I.F

FIA

I sat there. The water was still cold against my feet, but I'd stopped noticing it the way I'd stopped noticing a lot of things that didn't matter right now.

Cian's breathing had evened out some, but the tremor in his hands hadn't quite settled. He was staring at nothing in particular. Or maybe he was staring at everything. At the years of blind trust he'd placed in people who might not have deserved it.

The silence stretched between us. It was not uncomfortable, but it was weighted. It was heavy with plenty of things neither of us wanted to say out loud because speaking them would make them a bit too real.

Then he broke it.

"I heard you screaming when I came to the infirmary." His voice was quiet and careful. "Did you have a bad dream?"

I pulled my legs out of the water. The night air hit my wet skin and I wrapped my arms around them, resting my head on my knees. I turned to look at him.

"Are you trying to change the topic?"

He met my gaze. There was something fragile in his eyes that hadn't been there before tonight.

"I need this."

I nodded. I understood that. The need to focus on something else. Anything else. Even if that something else was my nightmare.

"It felt so real." The words came easier than I expected. "Like I was living it."

Cian shifted closer. He didn't touch me, but he was close enough that I could feel the warmth radiating from him.

"I was trapped in what looked like this sick experimental chamber." My throat tightened at the memory. "And some man wanted to cut me open."

The water lapped at the edge of the pool. The sound was too serene for what I was describing.

"But it felt so real." I pressed my forehead harder against my knees. "And there was that name..."

I stopped. The name sat on my tongue like something that didn't belong to me.

"What name?"

I lifted my head slightly and looked at him again.

"When I was in Silver Creek for the trial, I bumped into both Pauline Strati and her husband."

"Alpha Dimitri." Cian's jaw tightened at the name.

"There was a way they looked at me." I could still see it. The shock in Pauline's eyes. The way her husband had gone completely still. "Especially Pauline. Like they saw a ghost and she called me a strange name. She called me Athena."

Cian frowned. "They thought you looked like this Athena?"

"I wouldn't really care much about it." I shook my head. "But this strange dream I had. It was like I was some Omega named Athena as well."

I paused, letting the words settle between us.

"It cannot be a coincidence, right? The Stratis rule a pack called Nocturne too. And the man in my strange dream. He mentioned that pack."

Cian was quiet for a moment. He was thinking.

"You think it is some kind of prophetic dream?"

"Maybe they were a lingering thought." I turned my gaze back to the water. "I wouldn't know why. But perhaps they were. It still felt so real though."

Too real... The kind of real that left marks even after you woke up.

"You can check Skollrend's library for genealogy records." Cian's tone had shifted into something more practical and akin to problem solving. "But given it is an Omega, I doubt anything extensive will come out of it."

"It's probably nothing." I said it but I didn't quite believe it.

"Is it though?"

I looked at him.

His eyes held mine. There was something there.

"If the goddess brought you back to me, then hell..." He paused and swallowed. "Anything is possible."

The bond hummed between us. A warm and constant thing.

"If she does exist, you will find something in the genealogy records. Even if it is just a footnote." His hand found mine again and he squeezed gently. "But at least, it will put your mind at ease."

I thought about it. About the library and records and names that didn't belong to me but somehow still felt like it did. I even thought about the idea of a demented experimental chambers being real with men who wanted to cut people open and the word that kept appearing in my nightmares.

Fleshcraft.

I hadn't mentioned a peep of it to Cian. The word felt too dangerous. Too heavy. It was a great sin after all and if he heard it, I wasn't sure how he would react to it.

It was a forbidden topic among plenty supernaturals.

So I kept it to myself and buried it deep where the bond couldn't reach.

"Fia."

The voice came from behind us. Female as it was familiar.

I turned.

Grand Luna Morrigan stood there. The moonlight caught in her silver hair and made it glow. Her kind eyes found mine and something in my chest loosened.

"Oh, thank the goddess." The words tumbled out and I was moving before I could think about it.

Despite her age, she half walked and ran toward me. I met her halfway, my feet still wet and cold against the stone.

"You are fine, right?" Her hands were on me. Checking my arms, my face, my shoulders. Looking for injuries that weren't there.

"I am fine." I nodded and I tried my best to smile but it felt wobbly.

She searched my face for a long moment. Then her expression crumbled just slightly and she pulled me into a hug.

I hadn't expected it. The warmth. The gentleness. The way she held me like I was something precious and fragile and worth protecting.

My arms came up slowly. Because I wasn't exactly sure how to take this in. But I came around, and I wrapped my hands around her.

Something inside me that had been holding on too tight since we left Silver Creek, since I told my father off, finally let go at that moment.

With the artificial rot gone completely, she smelled like lavender and old books. Safety didn't have a smell. But if it did, this would be it. Something I hadn't had enough of in my life after my mother's death. Something I'd forgotten I still needed in great deal.

"I was so worried." Her voice was muffled against my hair. "When I heard what happened. I'm glad you are alright, daughter."

My eyes widened when she said the words daughter. I felt something close around my throat and it made it hard to speak for a long minute.

"I'm okay." My voice finally came out, smaller than I intended. "I promise."

She pulled back just enough to look at me. Her hands came up to cup my face. Her thumbs brushed away tears I hadn't realized were falling.

"You shouldn't have to promise that." Her voice was firm but kind. "Some things are just supposed to be."

I didn't know what to say to that. Because she was right. And the truth of it hurt more than anything physical ever could.

Behind us, I heard Cian stand. The water sloshed quietly as he pulled his feet out.

"Mom." His voice was warm.

Morrigan's hands dropped from my face but she kept one arm around my shoulders. She turned to look at him.

"Cian." She inclined her head. "Are you taking good care of her?"

"I'm trying." He moved closer and stopped just beside us. "She makes it difficult sometimes."

I made a sound that might have been a laugh.

Morrigan's arm tightened around me. "Good. She should make your life hell. You should have been with her."

"Oh," I managed. "I actually was fine going alone and it was pack law that Cian not be present to intimidate—"

"That is no damn excuse," Mother-in-law maintained.

She then sighed as she looked between us. At the way Cian stood close enough that the bond pulled taut. At the way I leaned slightly toward him without meaning to.

"You both look exhausted." Her voice softened. "When was the last time either of you even slept properly?"

I opened my mouth and closed it. I couldn't actually remember having a good long sleep.

Cian didn't answer either.

Morrigan sighed again. It was the kind of sigh that said she'd expected as much.

"Come." She started guiding me back toward the main part of the estate. "You need rest. Real rest. Not whatever half sleep you've been managing between catastrophes."

I didn't argue. I couldn't. Because she was right and my body was starting to remember how tired it actually was.

Cian fell into step beside us. His hand found mine in the dark and threaded our fingers together.

The night air was cool against my skin. The wet footprints I left behind dried quickly on the warm stone.

Morrigan was talking. Something about making sure Thorne and Maren checked me over one more time and also about getting some food in me.

I listened but the words felt distant. Like they were coming from a place very far away.

My mind kept circling back. To Athena. To Nocturne. I couldn't even put a finger to it. But something about it just felt like it was on me to find out whether I was just having the worst kind of dream or perhaps it was something prophetic.

The one thing that didn't leave my mind however was....what Lady Selene had said. About me being loved by her. What exactly did that mean? What even was I now? A healer from the age of legends?

Cian's thumb traced circles on the back of my hand. The same gentle rhythm from before. It grounded me and kept me tethered to the present.

It helped keep my thoughts from spiralling.

And for now... that was enough.

Chapter 245: The Fool 1

HAZEL

I woke to cold sweat drenching my sheets. The room spun, and for a moment I couldn't remember where I was. Then it all came rushing back.

Baruch.

The syringe.

His words, cutting deeper than any blade.

"Who could ever love you?"

I pressed my palms against my eyes, trying to block out the memory. My body felt wrong. Disconnected. Like someone had replaced my bones with something hollow and unstable.

I had to find him.

I threw the sheets off and tried to stand. My legs buckled immediately. I grabbed the bedpost, fingers digging into the wood as the room tilted. Everything felt loose, like my joints had forgotten how to hold together properly.

The drug... Whatever he'd given me was still working through my system.

I stumbled toward the door, using the wall for support. My hand found the doorknob and I wrenched it open.

"Where are you?" The scream tore out of my throat, raw and jagged. "You monster! Show yourself!"

I lurched forward, aiming for the sentinel quarters. He'd be there. He had to be there.

"Baruch!"

My voice echoed down the hallway. I pushed forward, one hand on the wall, my vision blurring at the edges. The corridor seemed to stretch impossibly long.

There was movement ahead. Though my sight still spun. I could make out people. Sentinels and Omegas stopped what they were doing and turned toward me.

Their faces changed. Eyes went wide and mouths fell open.

Someone even gasped.

The whispering started. Urgent, shocked murmurs that grew louder with each passing second.

"You idiots," I managed. "Where is that bastard? Where is Baruch!!!"

Someone then pointed and something about it caused me to look down.

Oh goddess.

I was naked. Completely naked.

Heat flooded my face, burning from my chest up to my hairline. I tried to cover myself with my hands, but there was too much skin, too much exposure.

"Don't look," I choked out. "Don't fucking look at me."

I turned to run back to my room. And that was when my foot caught on nothing. The floor came up fast and I slammed into it, the impact knocking the air from my lungs.

Pain bloomed across my knees and palms.

Something inside me snapped.

I started hitting the floor. My fists connected with the hard surface again and again. The pain felt good. It was at least something real. Better than the hollowness eating away at my insides.

"Hazel!" A familiar voice screamed.

I heard footsteps running. It came in multiple pairs.

I kept punching the ground. My knuckles split. Blood smeared across the floor but I didn't stop. I couldn't stop.

Hands grabbed my shoulders and someone threw something over me. A soft and warm blanket against my skin.

"Don't look at her." Delta's voice, came sharp with authority. "All of you, turn away. Now."

I heard the shuffle of feet. The guilty silence of people obeying.

"Get up, darling." My mother's voice, quieter than Delta's but no less commanding told me.

I didn't want to move. I didn't want to do anything but keep hitting something until my hands stopped working.

"Hazel." Mother's hands were on my arms now, pulling me upright. "Come with me."

She guided me down the hall, Delta on my other side. They half-carried me to mother's chambers. The door shut behind us with a soft click that sounded too final.

Mother sat me on her bed. Her hands were gentle as they examined my fingers.

"You have to remember you are not a Luna anymore." She turned my hand over, looking at the split knuckles. "Your wolf and better healing factor is gone now. You have to take care of yourself."

The words hit me like a second blow.

"You were right." My voice came out strangled. "I did throw away a fucking diamond."

Mother said nothing. She just kept examining my hands.

"Why didn't I just accept the arranged marriage then?" The question burst out of me. I couldn't hold it back anymore.

Mother gestured to Delta, who disappeared into the adjoining bathroom.

"I don't even know why now." The words kept coming, faster now, tripping over themselves. "Was it what was said about him? Because they turned out to be just stupid rumors at the end of the day. Did I just hate Fia that much? Did I just hate the fact that it was me that was supposed to given away like fucking properly while she has a mate she got to be small and happy and content with?"

Delta returned with the first aid kit and handed it to my mother.

"I catapulted her to greatness, Mum. Can you even believe that? Why would I do that?" My throat felt tight. "I thought I was making her suffer but everything at the end of the day has bounced back to me. I have her the power she used to fucking ruin me."

Mother opened the kit and pulled out antiseptic.

"You are my mom." I grabbed her wrist with my good hand. "Why didn't you see how myopic I was? Why didn't you stop my bad decision?"

She looked at me then. Really looked at me. Her expression was unreadable.

"You have never listened to me anyway." She pulled her wrist free and dabbed antiseptic on my knuckles. The sting made me hiss. "Would you have heard me out if I had refused you?"

I didn't answer. We both knew the truth.

"If I am frank, the only reason I accepted then was because you are my daughter." She wrapped gauze around my hand with practiced efficiency. "What mother wouldn't stand beside her daughter?"

The tears came again. I hated them. Hated how weak they made me feel.

But I needed someone to blame. Heck, it wasn't like she was innocent in all of this. Your children were a reflection of you and mother made me this. She did. So I went off regardless.

"What sort of mother are you?" The accusation felt good leaving my mouth. "Children make bad choices all the time. I did and it was you that was supposed to put me back in line. You made me like this, Mom. You ruined my life."

Chapter 246: The Fool 2

HAZEL

Her hands stilled on the bandage. When she spoke, her voice was ice.

"It was you who senselessly murdered and egged people on. Don't put that on me."

I flinched.

"It worked out in the end, did it not?" She resumed wrapping. "You are going to become part of the Lily of the Valley. You don't need any ball anymore. Even though you lost things, you gained more."

But I couldn't tell her what really hurt. I couldn't say his name without feeling like my chest was caving in. It was the sole reason I was crashing out and Goddess was it killing me.

I thought I could hold my tongue. Not give her any ammunition. Because she would probably find a way to turn this over my head. When it was her... It was her that didn't look deep enough to know the enemy was within. It was all her fault.

"He was here, you know." The words came out quieter now. I felt defeated saying it. "But our pack is so incompetent that we didn't even realize. Not until he fucking drugged me... and... he is probably long gone now."

Mother's hands paused again. "What are you talking about?"

"Milo's brother." I laughed, but it came out broken. "He was right under our nose. He played us like a fiddle. He helped Fia. He is the reason I am now like this. A useless Omega."

"What?"

"And do you know what the worst part is?" I looked at her. Really looked at her. "He might get away with all of it. Playing a whole pack. Playing me. You. Even father. Because this pack is just that weak."

My voice cracked.

"And I will still have nothing. I have no wolf. No more power I was born with. The only good thing I had being born in this hellscape of a pack, being a Luna, it is gone and now I have to marry some green eyed freak that is obsessed with Fia."

The tears were flowing freely now. I couldn't stop them.

"Oh, when does it end? When do I get my happily ever after? Why? Why? Why does life have to suck? Why didn't you aim higher? Why did you settle for father?"

The slap came out of nowhere.

My head snapped to the side. My cheek burned. I stared at the wall, too shocked to move.

When I looked back, Mother's hand was still raised. Something flickered across her face. Regret, maybe. But she didn't apologize. She simply lowered her hand and straightened her shoulders.

Like she had accepted that this had to be done.

"This woe is me narrative, it has got to end." Her voice was hard. "Not a lot of people have it better than you. And you have gotten away with plenty. Maybe because I did allow you to. But it has got to end now."

She leaned closer.

"That boy. You were sleeping with him, were you not?"

I couldn't answer. I just held my stinging cheek and looked away.

"I told you... I told you that after Milo, you needed to be careful. But you knew better. Didn't you? You had life all figured out." She stood, towering over me. "He got in because of you and he got away because of you. I will find him. Because he is the reason I got on my knees for your sake in front of Fia."

The shame of that image made me want to disappear.

"But you have to start pulling yourself by your fucking bootstraps." Mother's voice rose. "You have no power in this house anymore. And you have humiliated yourself again and again. Walking naked in front of Omegas and Sentinels? Fuck! Where is the swan I raised?"

She paced to the window and back.

"So now. You will no longer be coddled. Lily of the Valley is all you have now and boots you will lick. You are the only child I have and I will be damned if Fia somehow ends up the well adjusted one between you two. Heck. She lost her mother young and grew up here. She should be fucked in the head. Why are you?"

"It will not matter when she is six feet under." The words slipped out before I could stop them. "Unlike you, grandmother will get it done."

Mother whirled on me.

"Fia is not the model you should be moulding your life after. She does not do it with you. Why do you do it with her? What is this obsession?"

"You made me like this, Mother." I stood, the blanket falling around my shoulders. "You do not get to be disgusted now."

She grabbed my hurt hand and started wrapping it with more force than necessary.

"In two days time, you will be shipped to the Lily of the Valley. You need a break from here. A change of fucking perspective. Because you will be salvaged whether you like it or not."

I pulled my hand back once she was done.

"I'll be your teacup dog. Just bring me Baruch's head. Along with his grandmother."

Mother scoffed. Actually scoffed.

"You want it done? Do it yourself by securing power in Lily of the Valley."

She turned to Delta, who had been standing silently by the door this whole time.

"Take her to her room. Lock her in too. I'll be with her in the morning."

"What?" I stepped forward. "I am no prisoner!"

Mother didn't even look at me.

"If she proves to be too much trouble, get strong sentinels to bundle her. My orders."

Delta moved toward me. "Lluuuunaaa Hazel, we should go."

I stared at my mother. She just stood there, first aid kit in hand, her face completely blank.

The fear of being bundled, carried through the halls like cargo, was enough. I pulled the blanket tighter around my body and walked toward the door.

But I kept my eyes on Mother the entire time. Waiting for her to change her mind. To show some softness.

She never did. And I realized then and there. Shit had hit the fan!

Chapter 247: The simple things 1

FIA

The second Morrigan led us into the now empty kitchen, it started to smell like rosemary and butter.

The Grand Luna was moving around the space with the kind of efficiency that spoke of decades spent in this room. She pulled out a pan before retrieving ingredients from the refrigerator. Her movements were practiced and sure.

"Sit," she said without turning around.

I glanced at Cian. He guided me to one of the chairs at the small table tucked into the corner of the kitchen. The wood was worn smooth from years of use. I sank into it and the exhaustion I was sure I didn't feel, hit me all at once.

Cian took the seat beside me. His hand stayed in mine.

I did appreciate that the kitchen was warm. Warmer than the rest of the estate. Maybe it was the stove that Morrigan had just turned on. Maybe it was something else entirely.

I watched her work. She diced vegetables with quick movements, threw them into the pan with a sizzle that made my stomach remind me I hadn't eaten real or solid in hours. She added chicken that had been sitting in some kind of marinade. The smell hit me and my mouth watered.

"How are you feeling, Fia?" She didn't look up from the pan.

"Tired," I admitted. "But okay."

"Just okay?"

I thought about it. I really thought about it. My body felt strange. But the feeling was not particularly a bad feeling. I felt...different. Like something fundamental had shifted and settled into a new configuration.

"Better than okay, actually." The words surprised me as much as they probably surprised her. "I feel great. More than great if that even makes sense."

Morrigan glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes found mine and held them.

"I haven't felt this way in a long while," I continued. "But I did feel a bit tired."

She turned back to the stove, stirred the vegetables and added some kind of sauce that smelled like garlic.

"You must heal fast." Her tone was matter of fact. "Surprising."

Was it though? Lady Selene had called me something. A healer from the age of legends. Whatever that meant. Whatever I was now.

I didn't say any of that out loud. I could feel a slight worry through the mate bond. Cian was definitely worried about his mom. About what she would think and whether she would be able to sleep at night if I remotely even mentioned that I had technically died and being here with her in this room was nothing less of a fucking miracle.

Cian stood and moved to the refrigerator. He pulled out a pitcher of what looked like orange juice and he found three glasses in the large as life cabinet. I watched him pour them with the same careful attention he gave everything tonight.

He set them on the table. One in front of me. One in front of his empty seat. One where his mother would sit.

Morrigan turned from the stove with the pan in hand. She looked at the glasses and frowned.

"Water would have been better."

"She needs the vitamins." Cian's voice was calm.

"Water is what the body needs after trauma."

"Juice has water in it."

"That is not the same thing and you know it."

I watched them go back and forth. The easy rhythm of it. The way they fell into this pattern like they'd done it a thousand times before. Probably had.

Something warm bloomed in my chest. It spread through me like the first rays of sun after a long cold night.

This was what family looked like. Not the cold formality of pack I was used to. Or the careful distance my father had always maintained. This was real. It was messy and apparently full of small disagreements about juice versus water.

Home was here.

The thought arrived fully formed and I didn't question it. I didn't even second guess it. I just let it settle.

A smile tugged at my lips. Small at first, Then it grew wider.

Morrigan noticed. She looked at my face and something in her expression softened. She didn't comment on it though. She simply turned back to plate the food.

She set a dish in front of me a minute later. Roasted chicken with vegetables that glistened with herbs my nose caught as garlic, black pepper and butter. A small portion of rice was on the side. It was simple, as it was perfect.

"Eat up," she said.

I picked up my fork. The first bite was heaven. The chicken was tender. The vegetables had just enough bite left in them. The seasoning was exactly right.

I hadn't realized how hungry I was until I started eating. My body remembered what food was supposed to be and demanded more.

Morrigan sat across from me. Cian returned to his seat. They both had smaller portions. They ate slowly. Watching me more than their own plates.

"This is delicious," I said between bites.

"My mother makes the best roasted chicken in all of Skollrend." Cian's voice held pride.

"Flattery will get you nowhere." But Morrigan's lips twitched into an almost smile.

I finished my plate faster than I probably should have. The food sat warm and heavy in my stomach.

Morrigan stood and took my empty plate before I could offer to help. She moved to the sink and ran water over it.

"The Omegas shouldn't have much work to do tomorrow," I heard her mutter.

"Cian." She didn't turn around. "Take Fia to bed and make sure she sleeps."

"Of course."

"And you better not have any funny ideas."

Heat crept up my neck. Cian coughed slightly.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said.

I stood on legs that felt steadier than they had any right to agree what happened to me. I then moved toward Morrigan at the sink.

"Thank you." My voice came out quieter than I meant it to. "For the food. For spending time with me."

She turned. Her hands were still wet from the dishes. She dried them on a towel and then reached out to touch my cheek.

"That is rubbish." Her tone was firm but her eyes were soft. "We are family. Who else would I spend time with?"

Family. The word hit different when she said it. When she meant it.

"I am just glad you are alive and well." Her hand dropped. "We will do a lot of talking tomorrow. About everything. Got it?"

I nodded.

"So rest well tonight." She reached up and fixed a strand of my hair that had fallen across my face and tucked it behind my ear with the kind of gentle care that made my throat tight. "Goodnight, Fia."

"Goodnight," I managed.

She smiled. Then she turned back to finish the dishes.

Cian was beside me a moment later. His hand found the small of my back and that gentle pressure guided me toward the door.

We walked through the quiet halls of the estate. My feet left faint damp marks on the marble that faded almost immediately.

When we reached the Luna suite, I stopped and looked down at myself. The thin hospital gown and even the small spots of blood that had dried brown against some of my skin.

"I'll definitely need a bath," I said.

"Need help?"

I turned to look at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Your mother said you shouldn't have any funny ideas."

Chapter 248: The simple things 2

FIA

The corner of his mouth lifted. "What is funny about helping out my mate?"

"Cian."

"Fia. Are you having dirty thoughts?"

We stood there as the bond hummed between us. He didn't hide a thing and neither did I. It felt like he genuinely wanted to help out.

I sighed. "Fine. But you keep your hands to yourself."

"I make no promises."

"Cian."

"I'm joking." He held up his hands in surrender. But his eyes were dancing with something that looked suspiciously like mischief. "Mostly."

I shook my head and pushed open the door to my room.

The space was nothing like I'd left it. The bed already made. And my clothes which draped over the chair in the corner were gone, probably washed, dried and folded somewhere already.

I moved toward the bathroom and Cian followed.

I turned on the water and let it run until steam started rising. I also added some chamomile oil.

Cian leaned against the doorframe, watching me.

"You going to stand there the whole time?" I asked.

"Would you not like me to?"

"I'd like you to be helpful without being distracting."

"Well, I can do that."

He moved to the cabinet and pulled out a towel, setting it on the counter within easy reach. He also found the soap and shampoo. They had been stored by the cleaning staff, I was guessing, and he arranged them by the tub.

I started to pull at the hospital gown. The fabric stuck slightly where the blood had dried, refusing to come apart with ease.

Cian was there in an instant. His hands covered mine.

"Let me."

His fingers were careful, as they were gentle. He worked the fabric free without pulling and the gown fell away.

I was left standing there in just my underwear.

I should have felt exposed and vulnerable. But the bond wrapped around us both and all I felt was safe.

"In you go," he said softly.

I stepped into the tub. The water was hot. Almost too hot. But it felt perfect against my skin.

I sank down slowly. Letting the water rise around me until it covered my shoulders. The heat seeped into my muscles and they started to unknot one by one.

Cian knelt beside the tub. He picked up the shampoo. Poured some into his palm.

"Lean back."

I did. His fingers worked through my hair. Massaging my scalp. Working the shampoo into a lather.

It felt good. Better than good. The kind of good that made my eyes want to close and my body want to go completely boneless.

"You're going to put me to sleep," I murmured.

"That's the idea."

He rinsed my hair with water from the tub. His movements were careful. Making sure none of it got in my eyes.

Then he reached for the soap and worked it into a lather on a washcloth.

"Arm," he said.

I lifted it out of the water. He washed it slowly. From shoulder to fingertips. Then the other arm. My shoulders. My back.

Nothing about it was sexual. It was just care. It was that pure and simple.

When he finished, he set the washcloth aside and just stayed there, kneeling beside the tub with his hand trailing in the water.

"Better?" he asked.

"Much better."

We stayed like that for a while. The water grew cooler and soon the steam dissipated.

Finally I stood. Water sluiced off me and back into the tub. Cian handed me the towel without looking and kept his eyes carefully averted even though I knew he wanted to look.

I dried off quickly and wrapped the towel around myself.

"I'll find you something to sleep in," he said.

He disappeared into the bedroom and returned a moment later with one of my night dresses.

I took it. "Thank you."

"I'll be right outside."

He left and pulled the door closed behind him.

I dried off the rest of the way and pulled on the shirt. It fell to mid thigh.

Once that was on, I opened the door.

He was sitting on the edge of my bed. Looking at his hands.

"Better?" he asked again.

"Yes."

He stood and moved toward me. His hands came up to cup my face the same way his mother's had.

"You scared me tonight." His voice was rough. "When I felt what happened... When I thought I had lost you..."

"You didn't."

"I know." His thumb brushed across my cheekbone. "But I could have. Don't do that again."

The bond pulsed between us. Heavy with things neither of us were saying.

"Get some sleep," he said finally. "Real sleep. I'll be a sentinel away if you need anything."

"You're not staying?"

Something flickered across his face. Want... Need... The same things I was feeling.

"My mother will have both our heads if I stay."

"She doesn't have to know."

"She always knows."

Fair point.

He pressed a kiss to my forehead and let it linger longer than necessary.

"Sleep well, Fia."

"You too."

He pulled back, reluctant as his hand dropped from my face.

I watched him walk to the door. I watched him pause with his hand on the handle.

"Cian?"

He turned.

"Thank you. For everything."

His expression softened. "Always."

Then he was gone. The door clicked shut behind him.

I stood there for a moment. In the room that was starting to feel like mine. In the estate that was becoming home.

Then I moved to the bed, pulled back the covers and slipped between sheets that smelled clean and fresh.

My head hit the pillow and my body remembered how exhausted it was. How much it had been through. How much it needed rest.

But my mind kept turning. Athena... Nocturne... Fleshcraft... The Stratis... Lady Selene's words about being loved by her.

The genealogy records in Skollrend's library. Would they have answers? Or would they just raise more questions?

Tomorrow, I decided. Tomorrow I would look. Tomorrow I would start putting the pieces together.

Tonight I would just rest.

The bond hummed gently. A quiet reminder that Cian was not too far and was in fact close enough to reach if I needed him.

My eyes grew heavy. The darkness pulled at me.

And this time, when sleep came, I let it take me without a fight.