

To ruin an Omega

Chapter 279: Quit me

MADELINE

I stood up.

The chair scraped against the floor behind me and I felt Aldric's gaze follow my movement. I didn't look back at him. I couldn't afford to right now.

My feet carried me toward Cian and I stopped a few paces away from where he stood in the doorway. Close enough to see the sweat beading at his temples. Close enough to smell the earth and exertion clinging to his skin.

"For what?" I asked.

The words came out more neutral than I felt. More controlled. Because part of me wanted to help him. That traitorous part that still remembered what it felt like to be his. To have him look at me like I mattered.

I did want to help. Goddess help me, I did.

Cian's eyes shifted past me. A quick glance that took in Aldric and Elara sitting at the table behind us. His jaw tightened and something flickered across his face. Hesitation maybe. Or awareness that we had an audience.

"Can we talk privately?" he asked.

His voice dropped lower on the last word. Almost like a plea.

"Of course."

I moved past him and into the hallway. I heard his footsteps fall into step beside me and we walked in silence for a moment. My heart hammered against my ribs but I kept my breathing even. I kept my expression calm.

"I know I have no right to ask," Cian started.

We turned down another corridor and the sound of our footsteps echoed off the walls. His longer strides meant he had to slow down to match my pace.

"But I need your healing abilities," he continued. "To help someone."

My stomach tightened. I kept walking and kept my eyes forward.

"What happened to them?" I asked, my mind immediately going to Fia.

Cian ran a hand through his damp hair. The gesture made it stick up at odd angles and I caught myself tracking the movement before forcing my attention back to the hallway ahead.

"It's the delicate Skollrend hired," he said. "She looked at something with her abilities and the most insane thing happened. Her eyes literally burned."

The words hit me like cold water.

My steps slowed without my permission. My mind started working through what he'd just said and connecting dots I desperately wished would stay separate.

Delicates? Aldric has mentioned them. But the thought of one needing my help.... Especially knowing what their scary ability was... Could I?

Because for my spells to work remotely, I needed to touch them. I needed physical contact to weave the magic through the object or person itself.

Which meant...

Which meant the delicate would have access to my memories. Every single one the second I attempted to touch them. Every moment I'd been trying so hard to hide. Every secret I'd buried deep where no one could find them.

She would see me as a traitor to Cian. She would see what I'd done. What I was still doing.

Revealing Aldric would be a nice touch.

But Cian would never forgive me for everything else that I was certain she would see. For the choices I'd made. For the people I'd protected at his expense.

My feet stopped moving.

I stood there in the middle of the hallway and my pulse thundered in my ears. Cian kept walking for a few more steps before he seemed to notice I wasn't beside him anymore.

He turned and looked back at me. His brow furrowed in confusion.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

I looked at him. Really looked at him. At those blue eyes that had once looked at me with nothing but warmth and trust. At the strong line of his jaw and the way concern etched itself across his features.

"I almost forgot," I said.

My voice came out quieter than I intended. Softer.

Cian took a step toward me. "Almost forgot what?"

The concern in his expression deepened. He probably thought something was mentally wrong. That I was having some kind of episode or reaction.

If only it were that simple.

"I had forgotten you have such an effect on me still," I said.

I let the words hang there for a moment. Let him process them. Let him remember what we used to be to each other.

"That I almost forgot what you said to me just yesterday."

His face changed. The transformation happened in stages. First confusion. Then recognition. Then something that looked like guilt mixed with regret as he realized exactly what I was talking about.

"I know," Cian said quickly. He held up his hands in a placating gesture. "I apologize for that. I do. And I know you owe me nothing."

He took another step closer and his voice dropped to something that sounded almost desperate.

"But this delicate doesn't deserve this."

It hurt. Goddess, it hurt to hear the earnestness in his voice. To see him standing there asking for my help when he'd practically called me an enemy just yesterday. When he'd looked at me like I was something dangerous and foreign instead of the girl who'd loved him for a very long time.

But I had to protect my interests. I had to protect my family first. Before my heart. Before my feelings. Before the stupid part of me that still wanted to give him anything he asked for.

"I'm sorry," I said.

The words tasted bitter on my tongue but I forced them out anyway.

"But I have to stand my ground when it is with you. I cannot help this person."

Cian's expression shifted to something like shock. His hands dropped to his sides and he stared at me like I'd just slapped him.

"She has nothing to do with us," he said. His voice rose slightly with emotion. "Nothing to do with what I did or said. She's innocent in all this."

"So I owe you my labor now?"

The question came out sharper than I'd intended. Harder. But I couldn't take it back and I wasn't sure I wanted to. I needed to cut the bridge so he didn't think he could convince me to cross over.

Cian opened his mouth and closed it again. He looked at me like he didn't recognize the person standing in front of him.

"Do you know what it takes from me?" I continued.

My hands curled into fists at my sides. Not from anger. From the effort it took to keep myself together. To not break down and give in like I wanted to.

"Do you know what healing takes from me? It destabilizes my mana. It leaves me vulnerable and weak for hours afterward. Sometimes days depending on how bad the injury is."

Cian took another step forward. His hand reached out like he might touch my arm but he stopped himself halfway.

"Mads, please," he said. "I wouldn't ask if it wasn't serious. Her eyes are burning. She's in so much pain and I don't know how to help her."

"And I cannot trust you enough like I once did."

The words felt like swallowing glass. Each syllable cut at something soft and vital inside me. But I kept going because I had to. Because there was no other choice that wouldn't destroy everything.

"I know this will hurt," I said. Quieter now. Almost gentle because I did still care about him even if I couldn't show it the way I wanted to. "But I cannot help you. I have to put me first."

Cian's face crumpled. Just for a second. Just long enough for me to see the hurt bloom across his features before he schooled his expression back into something more controlled.

"You're serious," he said. It was not a question. This was more a statement of disbelief.

I nodded. I didn't trust my voice anymore. I didn't trust that it wouldn't break and give away how much this was costing me.

"After everything," Cian said. He shook his head and let out a bitter laugh that held no humor. "After everything we've been through together. All those years. And you're going to let an innocent woman suffer because I hurt your feelings?"

"You called me your enemy."

My voice came out flat. Empty of the emotion churning beneath the surface.

"You looked me in the eyes and practically asked me if I was a threat. That you couldn't trust me. That I was working against you somehow."

I took a breath. Steadied myself.

"So yes. After everything. I'm choosing to protect myself instead of rushing to help you the moment you ask. Because you made it very clear where we stand."

Cian ran both hands through his hair this time. The movement was frustrated and helpless and I recognized it from a hundred other moments when he'd been overwhelmed or angry or scared.

"This isn't about me though," he said. "This is about someone who is hurt and in pain and needs help that I know only you can provide at the moment."

"Then find another witch. One that isn't suspicious like me."

The words came out clipped and final.

"You know there isn't time," Cian shot back. "You know that by the time I find someone else and bring them here and explain the situation, it might be too late. Using magic to heal is only effective when it is quickly used. Her eyes, Madeline. They're literally burning."

I flinched at the use of my full name. He almost never called me that. It was always Mads. Always the nickname he'd given me when we were kids and he couldn't quite pronounce Madeline correctly.

But I couldn't let that sway me. Couldn't let the familiarity and the history between us override what I knew I had to do.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

And I was. I was so deeply sorry that it felt like drowning. Like being pulled under dark water with no hope of surfacing.

"But my answer is no."

Cian stared at me for a long moment. His chest rose and fell with quick breaths and his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides like he didn't know what to do with them.

"I don't know you anymore," he said finally.

His voice was quiet. Almost wondering. Like he was making a discovery he'd been trying to avoid.

"The Madeline I knew would never turn her back on someone who needed help. Never. No matter what I'd said or done to her."

Each word landed like a blow. Each one confirmed what I already knew. That this was breaking something between us that might never be fixed. That I was choosing survival over love and he would never understand why.

"Maybe you're right," I said.

My throat felt tight. My eyes burned but I refused to let the tears fall. Not here. Not now. Not in front of him.

"Maybe you don't know me anymore. Maybe that Madeline died when you decided to call me your enemy."

I turned away before he could respond. Before I could see whatever expression crossed his face at those words. I started walking back toward the dining room and my footsteps echoed in the empty corridor.

"Madeline," Cian called after me.

I didn't stop. I didn't look back. Just kept putting one foot in front of the other, even though everything in me screamed to turn around. To run to him. To say yes and help him and damn the consequences.

But I couldn't. I couldn't let that delicate touch me and see what I'd hidden there. I couldn't risk exposing everything when so many lives depended on my secrets staying buried.

So I walked away from him. Away from the desperate plea in his voice. Away from the chance to be the person he thought I used to be.

And I hated myself for it with every single step.

