

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 291: Elicit - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 291: Elicit

Chapter 291: Elicit

FIA

The lie landed in front of me like a gift. I took it.

"I know it is a bit hypocritical to be angry."

My voice came out quieter than I meant it to. I forced myself to meet his eyes, to hold his gaze even though guilt was already crawling up my throat.

"I feel guilty for being angry."

I let the shield drop. Just enough. Just a crack in the wall I had built around my side of the bond so he could feel what I needed him to feel. The guilt poured through, real and sharp, and I watched his expression shift as it hit him.

"But I am still mad at you. Mad at you for somehow blinding that girl."

The words felt wrong in my mouth, but I kept going.

"I'm mad because I know it is technically my fault."

Cian opened his mouth to argue, but I raised my hand.

"Everyone knows how magical healing works. Time has ticked and is still ticking. That girl might never see again."

"I didn't want you to know."

His voice dropped low. The regret in it twisted something in my chest.

"Well I do now."

I wrapped my arms around myself, squeezing tight like I could hold all the pieces together.

"And I know... I know it is not your fault. You just wanted to do right by me."

My throat tightened. I had to force the next words out.

"But I cannot help but feel that I had a hand in that girl... In that girl not seeing ever again."

The guilt surging through the bond was not entirely manufactured. Part of me did feel terrible. Not for the reason I was pretending, but for lying to him like this. For using our connection to sell a story that was not true.

But he bought it. I could see it in the way his shoulders dropped, in the way his whole body seemed to cave inward.

Ronan was watching from near the door. He looked uncomfortable, like he wanted to be anywhere else.

Cian closed the distance between us and pulled me against his chest. His arms came around me, solid and warm.

"I'm sorry."

The words rumbled through his chest into mine.

"It is not your fault."

His hand found the back of my head, fingers threading through my hair.

"I'll carry your guilt for you. Just let it go."

I hugged him back. Over his shoulder, I caught Ronan's eyes first, then Morrigan's. Both of them looked strained. Ronan's jaw was tight. Morrigan gave the smallest nod.

I pressed my face into Cian's chest and focused on slowing my breathing. In and out. Steady. His hand stroked down my hair in a rhythm that should have been soothing.

The seconds stretched. I counted them in my head while I broke the shield back down, piece by piece, until the bond felt normal again. Enough at least.

When I finally stepped back, Cian kept one hand on my shoulder.

"Was anything wrong with you?" His brow furrowed slightly. "You came here for a checkup."

"It was nothing."

Maren's voice came from behind us. I had almost forgotten she was still there.

"It was just ghost pain. She is fine."

Cian looked into my eyes. Really looked, like he could see through skin and bone straight into whatever truth I was hiding. I made myself hold his gaze. Made myself breathe normally.

"We should go."

I nodded.

We left the infirmary together. The hallway somehow felt cooler than the room had been. Or maybe that was just the guilt sitting on my skin like a second layer.

"I cannot hold you for being mad."

Cian's voice was quiet as we walked.

"Because I am also mad at myself."

I glanced at him. His profile was all hard lines and tension.

"I pushed the girl to the edge and that is what happened to her."

He shook his head slowly.

"Even her handler says it has never happened in the history of ever."

There was a pause. When he spoke again, his voice had dropped even lower.

"And that even scares me more now because what could she have seen..."

"...The girl made it clear whoever came for you wasn't a witch."

"Oh," The words came out automatically. I was not even sure why I said them. Maybe it was just to sell the idea that I was in the dark.

"She was certain it was a wolf even but that doesn't even make sense." He added. Then Cian stopped walking.

I stopped too.

"How locked up could a memory be that it burned someone's eyes off?"

The question hung in the air between us. His confusion was genuine. His guilt was genuine. And here I was, letting him carry both when I knew the truth.

My stomach turned over.

"It's not your fault."

"You are just saying that because I sound pathetic now."

"No."

I reached for his hand and squeezed.

"I would have done the same thing if I was in your shoes. Even more."

He looked at me for a long moment. Then he started walking again, pulling me gently along with him.

"The problem is at the end of the day, I didn't have results. My push was useless and for nothing." His jaw worked. "And I would have. If I wasn't so impulsive."

We turned the corner, heading toward the main entrance.

"We literally have a witch. Madeline."

The name made my spine straighten.

"But I have sort of burned the bridge I have with her. It's why she didn't help me."

He let out a breath that sounded too close to a sigh.

"And as much as it makes me angry. I cannot blame her."

My ears perked. I had sort of forgotten Madeline was a gifted witch in this equation. The mention of her refusing to help Cian because of 'burned bridges' made something cold slide down my spine.

Because knowing what I knew about Madeline's father; Valentine, it would make sense why she would want to refuse touching a supernatural who could peek into your memories.

"That sounds cruel."

I kept my voice even, curious but not too interested.

"Why would she hold back on helping someone that needed her. What bridge could have been burned between the two of you to elicit that kind of reaction?"

We reached the main doors. Cian pushed one open and held it for me. The mid afternoon air hit my face, hotter but cleaner than inside.

"I did accuse her of being an enemy."

Chapter 292: The pool

FIA

"Why would you do that?" I tried to make it sound light. Almost teasing. "I know you tend to be myopic but geez."

I chuckled. He chuckled too, the sound rough but real.

"But you wouldn't just say that out of nowhere."

"Well..."

He paused, like he was choosing his words carefully.

"It was starting to feel like everything that led up to her presence here lined up perfectly."

We walked down the stone steps together.

"And also... when the witch Ophelia was murdered, I was certain I smelled Madeline's magic."

My heart kicked hard against my ribs.

"But it was just... my cognitive dissonance."

He stopped mid-step. Through the bond, I felt something shift. A spark of realization, sudden and sharp.

"What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing important."

"Cian."

"It's just that I was wrong. And I should have handled it better."

His hand tightened around mine.

"I am rash. I blow hot. Even the Ronan and Aldric situation now... It's messing with my head even now. And it's taking everything not to just let it out."

His voice cracked slightly on the last word.

"I don't know if I can take anymore."

The words hit me like a punch. This confirmed it. I had to keep the Valentine situation tight. I had to protect him from one more thing that would break him open.

But Madeline was now high up on my radar herself. This was proving to me that she was no saint.

"So I assume he hasn't mentioned the card."

"I believe Garrett would have handed it to him by now. So yeah."

I nodded. We had reached the path that led toward the estate grounds. The sun was starting to paint everything in shades of gold and orange.

I looked at Cian. Really looked at him. The tension in his shoulders. The tight line of his mouth. The way his eyes seemed darker than usual.

"You look like shit."

He barked out a laugh that sounded more surprised than amused.

"Well, I feel like shit."

I chuckled lightly. An idea formed in my head. Reckless maybe. But he needed it. We both did.

"It is hot. We can go swimming."

"I'm sure there is a lot on both our plates right now than swimming."

"I'm sure living life will clear up those creases on your forehead."

I reached up and pressed my thumb between his brows, smoothing the tension there.

"We might have enemies within and without. But we only live once. Wolo."

"It's Yolo."

I stepped back and grinned at him.

"Well...last to reach the pool is a sore loser."

Then I ran.

My feet hit the grass and I pushed off hard, heading toward the direction of the pool. The wind caught my hair and pulled it back from my face.

Behind me, Cian's voice rang out.

"I'm not doing this."

I ran faster. The distance between us stretched. I could hear my own breathing, feel my heart pounding, and for just a second everything else fell away.

Then I heard him mutter something that sounded like "fuck" and his footsteps started pounding behind me.

I laughed and picked up speed. But he was faster. Of course he was faster. His legs were longer and he was built for this in a way I was not.

He passed me easily and turned to run backward, laughing in my face.

The sound made something warm bloom in my chest. His smile was real and genuine. The stress lines around his eyes had softened.

I picked up speed anyway and pushed harder even though I knew I would not win. The pool came into view ahead of us, the water reflecting the sunset in ripples of gold and pink.

Cian reached it first. He turned and caught me as I stumbled to a stop, both of us breathing hard.

"I win."

"You cheated."

"How did I cheat?"

"You have longer legs."

He was still grinning and he was still holding my waist. And in that moment, standing there with him in the fading light, the weight of everything we were carrying felt a little bit lighter.

His grin lingered as his eyes moved slowly over my face, then down my neck, like he was noticing things he had not let himself notice all day.

"You're hot," he said, voice low and rough from the run. "You should cool down."

Before I could even process the warning, his hands shifted on my waist and he bent slightly like he meant to lift me.

My eyes widened. "Cian, don't you da—"

He tightened his grip and started to hoist me up.

A squeal tore out of me before I could stop it. "Wait! Wait!"

He paused mid motion, smirking like he had already won.

"Yes?"

I wrapped my arms around his neck quickly, pressing close. "Hold me tighter first."

The request slipped out softer than I intended. It was not part of the playful game anymore. For a second the air between us changed, heavier, quieter. His expression shifted. The teasing faded and something warmer replaced it.

His arms tightened immediately, pulling me flush against him like he never wanted to let go.

"Like this?" he murmured.

"Mm-hm."

I let the moment stretch. Felt the steady beat of his heart under my cheek. Let myself breathe him in. Pine and sun and something that was just him. For a second I allowed myself to pretend the world was not cracking open around us.

Then I moved.

My arms locked around his neck and I shifted my weight hard to the side.

His eyes widened in shocked realization. "Fia—"

Too late.

We tipped together.

The world flipped in a blur of sunset colors and laughter and startled curses. Then the cold water swallowed us whole.

The splash echoed across the estate.

I came up first, gasping and laughing as wet hair clung to my face. Water streamed down my shoulders and soaked my clothes until they stuck to my skin.

Cian surfaced a second later, sputtering, his hair plastered to his forehead. He stared at me in stunned disbelief.

"You dragged me in."

"You tried to throw me in!"

"You asked me to hold you tighter!"

"Ha! And you fell for it."

He blinked once, then twice. Then a slow grin spread across his face, equal parts exasperated and impressed.

"I cannot believe I fell for that."

I laughed, treading water in front of him while the last light of the sun shimmered across the pool's surface. The tension in his shoulders was gone now. The hard lines around his mouth had softened. For the first time all day, he looked lighter.

Worth it.

Completely worth it.

Chapter 293: WOLO 1 (M)

FIA

He pushed his wet hair back from his face, water streaming down his jaw and neck. His shirt clung to every line of his chest and shoulders in a way that made my mouth go dry.

"Our clothes are completely ruined now," he said, voice low and accusing, but his eyes were bright with something that wasn't anger. "Because of you."

I grinned, pushing my own soaked hair out of my face. "I can see towels over there." I gestured vaguely toward the pool house. "So we'll be fine."

He moved closer through the water, slow and deliberate. "You know what they say about getting clothes wet."

"What do they say?"

"They're much easier to take off."

I rolled my eyes even as heat bloomed low in my belly. "That was terrible."

"Was it?" He was still moving toward me, cutting through the water with lazy confidence.

"Absolutely corny."

"And yet you're blushing."

"I'm not—" I splashed water at him. "We're in public, Cian. Anyone could walk up on us."

He caught my wrist mid-splash, pulling me closer with an easy tug. Water lapped between us as the space disappeared.

"Well, you are my wife." His thumb traced slow circles on the inside of my wrist. "I don't think that should bother us." His other hand found my waist under the water. "I'm sure they can always just turn the other way."

My breath hitched. I tried to swim backward, create distance, but he followed. One smooth stroke forward for every one of mine back until my shoulders hit the pool's edge.

I was cornered.

His arms came up on either side of me, caging me in. Water droplets clung to his eyelashes. The sun caught in his eyes and turned them molten.

"You were the one who said we only live once." His voice dropped to something darker, rougher. His mouth hovered near my ear, so close I felt his breath against my wet skin. "I've never done it in a pool before."

The words sent electricity straight down my spine.

I scoffed, trying to maintain some composure even as my heart hammered. "What does that mean?"

"It could be an adventure." His lips barely brushed the shell of my ear. "Something to make us forget everything else for a while."

"Cian—"

"Would it feel less embarrassing," he murmured, nose trailing along my jaw, "if I said I could feel eyes on us right now?" His hand slid higher on my waist, thumb brushing just under my ribs. "And I think we should do naughty things to make them less interested in watching us."

My eyes widened. "Are you for real?"

I tried to turn, to look and see if someone was actually there, but his hand came up and cupped my jaw, keeping my face forward. Keeping my eyes locked on his.

"Don't distract yourself," he whispered.

Then he kissed me.

It wasn't soft or tentative. It was all consuming. His mouth moved against mine like he was drowning and I was air. One hand threaded into my wet hair, angling my head exactly how he wanted it. The other pressed flat against the small of my back, pulling me flush against him until there was nothing between us but soaked fabric and heated skin.

I gasped against his mouth and he took advantage, deepening the kiss until my knees went weak. Good thing we were in water. Good thing his body was pinning me to the pool's edge because I was fairly certain I would have melted into nothing.

His teeth caught my bottom lip and tugged. A sound escaped me that I didn't recognize—needy, desperate and completely shameless.

"That's it," he breathed against my mouth. "Let them hear."

His hand slid down from my back, fingers trailing along my hip, then lower, skimming the outside of my thigh under the water. Every nerve ending I had came alive.

The world narrowed to just this—his mouth on mine, his hands on my body, the cool water and the burning heat between us. Nothing else existed. Not the threats. Not the danger. Not the weight we'd been carrying.

Just him. Just this.

His hands moved to the hem of my soaked sweater. The fabric clung to my skin, heavy with water. He tugged it upward slowly, his knuckles grazing my stomach, my ribs and my breasts. The wet material fought him but he was patient, peeling it away inch by torturous inch.

"Lift your arms," he commanded softly.

I obeyed. The sweater came off over my head and he tossed it onto the pool deck behind me. It landed with a wet slap against the concrete.

His eyes dropped to the shirt I wore underneath. It was thin, nearly transparent now that it was soaked through. My bra was visible beneath it. So was the outline of my nipples pressing against the fabric.

"This too," he said.

His fingers found the buttons. He worked them open one by one, never breaking eye contact. The anticipation was killing me. Every brush of his fingers against my skin sent sparks racing through my nervous system.

The shirt finally came undone and he pushed it off my shoulders. It joined the sweater on the deck.

Now I was left in just my bra and pants. The now cool air kissed my exposed skin. I shivered but not from cold.

"Your turn," I said.

My hands went to his shirt. The buttons were harder to work through when wet but I managed. I pushed the fabric aside, revealing the hard planes of his chest. Water droplets clung to his skin, trailing down the grooves of his abs.

I helped him shrug out of it and threw it somewhere behind him. I didn't care where it landed.

"Better?" I asked.

"Not even close."

His hands went to my bra clasp. He unhooked it with practiced ease and pulled it away. My breasts were bare to him now, nipples hard from the water and his attention.

He stared at me like I was something precious. Something he wanted to worship and devour all at once.

"Beautiful," he breathed.

Then his mouth was on me. He ducked his head and took one nipple between his lips. The sensation made me gasp. His tongue swirled around the peak before he sucked hard enough to make my back arch off the pool wall.

His hand came up to cup my other breast, thumb brushing over the nipple in teasing circles. The dual sensation was overwhelming. I threaded my fingers through his hair and held him there, encouraging him to continue.

He switched sides and gave my other breast the same attention. Sucking, licking and biting gently until I was panting. Until I was making sounds I'd never made before.

"Cian," I moaned. "Please."

He pulled back, his lips swollen and wet. "Please what?"

"Touch me."

"I am touching you."

"You know what I mean."

He smiled. That devastating smile that made my knees weak. "Tell me exactly what you want, Fia. I want to hear you say it."

Heat flooded my cheeks but I met his eyes. "I want you to touch me. Between my legs. I want to feel your fingers inside me."

"Good girl."

His hand slid down my stomach, over my hip, then between my thighs. Even through the fabric of my pants, I could feel the pressure of his touch. He rubbed me through the material and I nearly came undone right there.

"These need to come off," he said.

My fingers fumbled with the button of my pants. The wet fabric made everything harder but I finally got it undone. Pushed the zipper down. Cian hooked his fingers into the waistband and tugged them down my legs.

The movement was awkward in the water but we managed. I kicked the pants off and they sank to the bottom of the pool. I'd worry about fishing them out later.

Now I was down to just my underwear. The thin lace did nothing to hide how wet I was. And I wasn't talking about pool water.

"These too," Cian said, his fingers toying with the edge of my panties.

I nodded, beyond words.

He slid them down my legs and added them to the growing pile of clothes at the bottom of the pool. Now I was completely bare to him.

"Your turn," I managed to say. "Fair is fair."

He made quick work of his belt and pants. Pushed them down his hips along with his briefs. His cock sprang free. It was hard, thick and ready.

Chapter 294: WOLO 2 (M)

FIA

My mouth went dry. He was bigger than last time. And last time had been a mouthful.

He kicked his clothes away and they joined mine at the bottom. Now we were both naked in the pool, the water lapping around us, and the sun painting everything gold and orange.

"Come here," he said.

He pulled me against him. Skin to skin with nothing between us. The contact was electric. Every nerve ending in my body lit up like fireworks.

He kissed me again. This kiss was different. Hungrier. More desperate. His tongue invaded my mouth and I met him stroke for stroke. Our teeth clashed. Our breaths mingled. It was messy and perfect.

His hand slid down my back, over the curve of my ass, then between my legs from behind. His fingers found my entrance and he pushed one inside.

I gasped into his mouth. The intrusion was sudden but not unwelcome. He added a second finger, stretching me like he was preparing me.

"So wet," he murmured against my lips. "I hope it's not the pool."

I wanted to snap back with something witty but his fingers curled inside me and hit a spot that made my vision white out. All I could do was moan and grip his shoulders for support.

He pumped his fingers in and out, his thumb finding my clit and circling it in maddening strokes. The pleasure built fast. Too fast. I could feel myself climbing toward something enormous.

"That's it," he encouraged. "Let go, Fia. Come on my fingers."

His words pushed me over the edge. The orgasm crashed through me in waves. My inner walls clenched around his fingers. My whole body shook with the force of it.

He worked me through it, his fingers never stopping until I was boneless against him.

When I finally came down from the high, I opened my eyes and found him watching me. His eyes were dark, hungry and full of promises.

"I need to be inside you," he said. It wasn't a request.

"Yes," I breathed. "Please."

He lifted me slightly in the water. The buoyancy made it easier. He positioned me at the edge of the pool, my back against the wall, my legs wrapping around his waist.

"Hold on to the edge," he instructed.

I reached back and gripped the pool's edge behind me. The position arched my back and thrust my breasts forward. Cian's eyes darkened even more at the sight.

He positioned himself at my entrance. I felt the head of his cock pressing against me, seeking entry.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

He pushed inside in one smooth thrust.

We both groaned. The stretch was intense. He was indeed much bigger than last time and he did more than fill me completely. The water provided some resistance but also some help, making everything feel different and heightened.

He stayed still for a moment, letting me adjust. His forehead rested against mine. Our breaths came in short gasps.

"Move," I finally said. "Please move."

He pulled out slowly then thrust back in. The angle was perfect. With me balanced on the edge and him standing in the water, he hit spots inside me I didn't know existed.

He set a rhythm. Slow at first. Rolling his hips in a way that made me see stars. Each thrust drove me higher up against the pool wall. Each retreat made me whimper at the loss.

"Faster," I begged.

He obliged. His hips snapped forward harder. The water splashed around us with each movement. The sound was obscene and fucking perfect.

My grip on the pool edge tightened. I needed the leverage to meet his thrusts. To take him as deep as possible.

One of his hands came up to cup my breast. He rolled my nipple between his fingers, pinching it just hard enough to send a curious mix of pleasure and pain racing through me.

"Look at you," he growled. "Taking my cock so well. You were made for this, weren't you?"

His dirty words made me clench around him. He groaned at the sensation.

"Answer me, Fia."

"Yes," I gasped. "Yes, I was made for this. Made for you."

"That's right. You're mine. All mine."

He thrust harder and he hit the strokes faster. The angle shifted slightly and suddenly he was hitting that perfect spot inside me with every stroke.

I cried out. I couldn't help it. The pleasure was too much. Too intense.

"Let them hear," Cian said. "Let everyone know who makes you feel this good."

His words stripped away the last of my inhibitions. I stopped trying to be quiet. Stopped trying to maintain control. I just let myself feel.

Every thrust sent me higher. The pleasure built in my core like a coiling spring. Tighter and tighter until I thought I might break from the tension.

"Cian," I moaned. "I'm close. So close."

"I can feel it. You're squeezing me so tight." His hand left my breast and slid down between our bodies. His thumb found my clit and pressed down.

That was it. The thing that undid me. I shattered.

The orgasm ripped through me like lightning. My whole body convulsed. My inner walls clamped down around him so hard he cursed. I screamed his name. I didn't even care who heard. I didn't care about anything but the pleasure consuming me.

He kept thrusting through my orgasm. Drawing it out until I was sobbing. Until tears leaked from the corners of my eyes from the intensity.

"One more," he demanded. "Give me one more, Fia."

"I can't," I gasped. "It's too much."

"You can. And you will."

His thumb never stopped moving on my clit. His cock never stopped hitting that perfect spot. The pleasure never let up.

And somehow, impossibly, I felt another orgasm building. This one came from somewhere deeper. Somewhere primal.

"That's it," he encouraged. "I can feel it. Let go for me again."

His hips moved faster. Harder. The water churned around us. The pool deck was getting soaked from the splashing but neither of us cared.

The second orgasm hit me like a freight train. Bigger and more intense than the first. My vision went white. My hearing cut out. All I could do was feel as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me.

I felt myself gush. I felt wetness flood out of me that had nothing to do with the pool water. I was squirting. Actually squirting on his cock.

Cian groaned long and low. "Fuck, Fia. You're perfect. So fucking perfect."

His thrusts became erratic and less controlled and that was when I knew he was close.

"Come inside me," I managed to gasp. "Fill me up, Cian."

My words pushed him over the edge. He thrust deep one last time and held himself there. I felt his pulse inside me. I felt the warmth of his release filling me up.

He groaned my name like a prayer. His fingers dug into my hips hard enough to bruise.

We stayed like that for a long moment. Both of us trembling. Both of us trying to catch our breath. The water lapped gently around us, suddenly calm after all the turbulence.

Finally, he pulled out. The loss made me whimper. He gathered me in his arms and held me close, my legs still wrapped around his waist.

"You okay?" he asked softly.

I nodded against his shoulder. I was more than okay. I was floating. Completely boneless and satisfied in a way I'd never been before.

"That was..." I couldn't find words.

"Yeah," he agreed. "It was."

We stayed in the water a while longer. Just holding each other. Letting our bodies cool down. Letting reality slowly seep back in.

Eventually, Cian pulled back enough to look at me. His hand came up to cup my face, thumb brushing across my cheekbone.

"I love you," he told me.

"I love you too," I confirmed.

He smiled then and kissed me. This kiss was soft and sweet. It felt like a promise of more to come.

When we finally pulled apart, I looked around at the disaster we'd made. Our clothes were scattered at the bottom of the pool. The deck was soaked. We were both thoroughly debauched.

"We need to get those clothes," I said.

"Later," Cian said. "First, I want to hold you a little longer."

So I let him. I rested my head against his chest and listened to his heartbeat slow, feeling his arms wrap securely around me.

I hated that eventually we'd have to get back to reality. Brutal as it was.

I hated it so much.

Chapter 295: Stranger in stranger places

HAZEL

The car rolled to a stop in front of the estate and my breath caught in my throat.

Lily of the Valley's main house sprawled before us like something out of a fever dream. It was perfectly cut stone, stained glass and full of architectural ambition. It made SilverCreek look like a cottage. The sheer size of it pressed down on me. This was where I would live now. This massive monument to wealth and power that belonged to people who mostly probably didn't want me here.

The door opened. A sentinel stood there, his hand extended to help me out. I took it because that was what fucking proper Lunas did. My heels hit the gravel drive and I straightened my spine.

Delta climbed out from the front. Her eyes were huge as she stared up at the building. I didn't blame her.

Movement drew my attention to the entrance. The front doors opened and someone walked out.

Lysander.

My stomach did this stupid flip thing that I hated. He looked good. Too good in his dark trousers and white shirt that fit him perfectly. His hair was neat. His posture was relaxed but somehow still commanding.

And his face was completely blank when he looked at me.

I smiled anyway. It was the brightest and warmest I could handle. Everything a bride-to-be should be when seeing her future husband. "Hello."

He didn't return the smile. His gaze slid past me to the car behind me. To my grandparents.

"Alpha Dimitri. Luna Pauline. Welcome to Lily of the Valley."

Grandmother stepped out of the car with Grandfather following. She gave Lysander a pleasant nod. "Thank you for having us, Alpha Lysander."

"Please, come inside. My father isn't around. But we have refreshments prepared and rooms ready if you'd like to stay the night."

"That won't be necessary." Grandfather spoke for the first time since we'd gotten in the car. His voice was gruff and as dismissive. "We're just here to drop her off."

Her. Not Hazel. Not my granddaughter. Just 'her'.

Lysander nodded like that was perfectly reasonable. "Of course. I understand you must be busy."

Grandmother smiled at him. The kind of smile she never gave me. It was warm and almost affectionate. "You're very gracious. We appreciate you taking Hazel in like this."

Taking me in. Like I was some stray being offered shelter instead of the bride entering her future home.

"It's no trouble at all," Lysander said. His tone was polite. Perfectly courteous. He still hadn't looked at me.

The sentinels were already unloading my luggage from the boot. Bag after bag appeared. There was still something jarring about seeing my entire life packed into leather cases and designer bags.

"Well then." Grandmother Pauline turned to me. She placed a hand on my shoulder. It was brief and it felt impersonal. "Behave yourself, Hazel. Make us, and if not us, make yourself proud. You have lost enough."

"I will."

Grandfather grunted something that might have been goodbye. But he was already heading back to the car before I could even decipher it.

Grandmother followed. Neither of them hugged me. Neither of them said they'd miss me or that they'd visit soon or anything that resembled actual family affection.

They just left.

Lysander stood beside me and watched them go. He even waved. This small gesture of farewell that looked so genuine it made my chest tight.

The car pulled away. Down the long drive. Through the gates. And just like that they were gone.

I was alone. Well, not alone. Delta stood behind me like a shadow. But alone in every way that mattered.

"Omegas."

Lysander's voice cut through my thoughts. Several Omegas appeared from the house. They moved quickly and efficiently towards my luggage.

"Take these to the guest wing. The blue room."

The blue room? What the heck was that? Because the guest room or the fuck-ass blue room didn't sound like his room. It probably wasn't even anywhere near his room. What he saw me as was a guest.

The Omegas bowed and started gathering my bags. They struggled a bit with the weight but none of them deemed it smart to carry it two at a time. It was pathetic to watch.

I turned to Delta. "Help them. And use this time to get familiar with the layout. Find out where the kitchens are, where the servant quarters are, all of it."

Delta nodded and hurried over to grab a bag.

That left me standing there in the drive with Lysander. It was just the two of us. The silence stretched out between us like a living thing.

He turned to me finally. His eyes met mine and there was nothing in them. No warmth. No curiosity. Nothing.

"Would you like a tour of the estate?" He finally broke the silence and that thawed something in me.

E for effort at least.

I smiled. "Yes. That would be lovely."

He nodded and gestured to someone behind me. I turned to see a sentinel approaching. He was young and eager looking. His face was open and friendly too.

"This is a sentinel. He knows every corner of this estate. Every room, every hallway, every piece of artwork and the stories behind them. He'll show you around."

I stared at Lysander. Then at the sentinel. Then back at Lysander.

"I... I... thought you would give me the tour."

"I have business to attend to." His tone was flat. Matter of fact.

Something hot flared in my chest. Anger maybe. Or humiliation. I couldn't tell the difference anymore.

"Do you not want him?"

"That is not what I said." I kept my voice light and peasant. "I'm sure this Sentinel will be wonderful."

"You don't have to pretend here. You can tell him you're not interested if you'd prefer." Lysander nodded toward the sentinel. "He was excited to help though. It would break his heart a bit."

The Sentinel shifted on his feet. His face went slightly red.

"No, no. Like I said. It's not a problem at all." I forced another smile. This one hurt my face. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Good." Lysander started to turn away.

"But maybe we could talk after? When I'm done with the tour?"

He paused and looked back at me. Something flickered across his face. Amusement maybe.

"We can talk now if you want."

Now? In front of the sentinel? In front of any servant who might be watching from the windows? That wasn't private. Neither was it intimate. It resembled nothing an engaged couple should be.

My throat felt tight. I could feel him doing this on purpose. Making me small. Making me uncomfortable. Establishing exactly where I stood in this hierarchy.

Nowhere.

"I know you feel cornered." The words came out before I could stop them. "This marriage. Me being here already when you still have a month left to deal with the ending of your bachelor life. I'm invading your space."

"It's not like I didn't agree to this." He shrugged with one shoulder in a casual manner. "It's fine. It's just an arranged marriage. Not the end of the world."

"The look on your face sort of tells me it feels like the end of the world."

His jaw tightened. Just slightly. "Forgive me for not looking like I'm madly in love with you. Because I'm not."

The words hit like a slap.

I nodded, keeping my face composed. "You made that very clear. I know where your heart lies."

Fia.

"It doesn't bother me one bit."

He actually laughed. This low chuckle that made my skin prickle. "Really? Because I see how hard you're squeezing your hands."

I looked down. My hands were clenched so tight my knuckles had gone white. I hadn't even noticed.