

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

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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."