

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 31: The Hearing 2 - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 31: The Hearing 2

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HAZEL

I walked forward slowly. Let my steps be small and hesitant. Like I was afraid. Like being in this room with Milo terrified me.

"Of course," I said softly.

"Please." Elder Moira gestured to an empty chair. "Sit. This must be difficult for you."

I sat. Folded my hands in my lap exactly like my mother. Kept my eyes down.

"We have heard accounts from multiple witnesses," Elder Cormac continued. "They say they found you in Sentinel Milo's quarters. Half dressed. Covered in..." He paused delicately. "Evidence of assault. Is this true?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"And you were there against your will?"

I looked up. Let tears gather in my eyes. "I don't want to talk about this."

"You must, child." Elder Moira's voice was gentle. "We need to understand what happened."

I took a shuddering breath. "He invited me to talk. He said he needed to discuss. I thought it would be safe. He's a sentinel. I trusted him. I also wanted to thank him for saving me and protecting me from Fia."

"And then?"

"He..." I let my voice break. "He forced himself on me. I tried to fight him. Tried to get away. But he was too strong."

Milo made a sound. A broken, desperate noise. "That's not true! Hazel, tell them the truth!"

"Silence!" Elder Cormac's voice cracked through the room like a whip. "You will speak when spoken to."

"But she's lying!" Milo struggled against his bonds. Blood dripped down his chin. "We were together! She came to me! This is all because I was going to tell Alpha Cian the truth about Fia and..."

The guard hit him again. This time in the face. Milo's head snapped back and he went down hard.

"The truth?" Elder Cormac looked at me. "What is he talking about?"

I shook my head. Let more tears fall. "I don't know. He keeps saying strange things. I did not realize it because of the good deed he performed when he saved me from Fia's attempt on my life while she stole my place as Alpha Cian's Luna, but, he's been obsessed with me for months. Following me. Watching me. I thought it was just simple admiration, I thought it was innocent. But then tonight..."

"She's manipulating you!" Milo shouted from the floor. His words were slurred. Hard to understand through his swollen mouth. "She and I planned everything with Fia! We tricked her into taking Hazel's place at the wedding! We're both guilty! Even Luna Isobel!"

The elders looked at each other. Then at my father and then my mother.

My father's expression didn't change. "My daughter and my wife would never do such a thing."

"Exactly what I was thinking," Elder Moira said. "The boy is clearly desperate. Making wild accusations to deflect from his crime."

"No!" Milo tried to get to his feet but the guards held him down. "I have proof! I have messages! Check my phone!"

"We did check your phone," Elder Cormac said coldly. "There are messages between you and Miss Hazel. But they appear to be her politely declining your advances. Asking you to stop contacting her."

I watched Milo's face crumble. He didn't understand. Couldn't understand. I'd been so careful. Every message I'd sent had been worded perfectly. Every conversation had been crafted to look like he was pursuing me and I was trying to be kind about rejecting him.

"That's not..." Milo's voice was barely a whisper now. "Those aren't real. She must have deleted the others. Changed them somehow."

"Are you accusing Luna Hazel of falsifying evidence?" Elder Cormac's voice was ice.

"Yes! No! I mean..." Milo was falling apart. I could see it happening. "Please. Please just listen to me. I was going to tell Alpha Cian the truth. That's why she did this. She's trying to silence me."

"Enough." My father's voice cut through everything else. "This hearing is to address one matter. Did Sentinel Milo assault my daughter? The evidence is clear. The witnesses are clear. His own admission that he was involved with her in some capacity confirms he violated his position of trust."

"But I didn't rape her!" Milo screamed. "I swear on the Moon Goddess, I didn't rape her!"

Elder Moira looked at me. Her eyes were sharp despite her age. "Luna Hazel. Look at me."

I raised my eyes to meet hers.

"Did Sentinel Milo force himself on you without your consent?"

I let one more tear slide down my cheek. "Yes."

Milo made a sound like something dying.

Elder Cormac stood. The other elders followed his lead. "Then the verdict is clear. Sentinel Milo is guilty of assaulting a member of the Alpha's family. The punishment for such a crime is death."

"No," Milo whispered. "No, please. Please don't do this."

"The sentence will be carried out at dawn," Elder Cormac continued. "So that all may witness what happens to those who betray their pack and their Alpha."

The guards dragged Milo to his feet. He was still trying to talk. Still trying to explain. But his words were lost in the sound of his own sobbing.

As they pulled him toward the door, he looked back at me one last time.

"I loved you," he said. The words were clear despite everything. "I really loved you. But at the end of the day, you are just a fucking bitch!"

I said nothing. I just watched him go.

The doors slammed shut.

The chamber fell silent.

My mother stood and came to me. She put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed gently. "You did well," she murmured so quietly only I could hear.

I stood. Let her guide me from the room. Let my father and the elders watch me leave looking broken and traumatized and every inch the victim they wanted me to be.

And inside my chest, where no one could see, I felt nothing but cold satisfaction.

Milo would be dead by morning.

And his truth, whatever the fuck that meant, would die with him.

Chapter 32: The Itch

FIA

I woke up itching.

Not the normal kind of itch you could scratch once and forget about. This was the persistent kind. The kind that crawled under your skin and spread like fire ants marching across your body.

I sat up in bed and scratched at my arm. Then my neck. Then my other arm. The more I scratched, the worse it got.

The room looked worse in the morning light. The mold in the corner was blacker than I remembered. More spread out. Like it had grown overnight while I slept. The walls had water stains I hadn't noticed before. Dark patches that suggested years of neglect.

I threw off the blanket and stood. My skin was burning now. I looked down at my arms and saw red welts forming. Not from the fight yesterday. These were new. Fresh. The kind of rash that came from sleeping in a room that was actively trying to poison you.

Great. Perfect. Just what I needed on top of everything else.

I walked to the window and tried to open it. The frame was warped and stuck. I pushed harder. Put my shoulder into it. Finally it gave way with a groan and cracked open about six inches. Fresh air rushed in. Cold and clean and blessedly free of mold spores.

I stood there breathing it in for a minute. Tried to clear my lungs of whatever I'd been inhaling all night.

Then I looked around the room again. Really looked at it.

This was unacceptable. I couldn't live like this. I didn't care if this was punishment or oversight or just plain neglect. I wasn't going to sleep another night in a room that was making me sick.

I started searching for cleaning supplies.

There was nothing under the sink in the bathroom. Nothing in the crooked dresser drawer. Nothing in the tiny closet that smelled like mothballs and disappointment.

I went to the door and peeked out into the hallway. It was empty. Quiet. I stepped out and started looking around.

The first room I tried was locked. So was the second. But the third door opened into what looked like a supply closet. And there, sitting in the corner like a gift from the goddess herself, was a broom and a mop bucket.

I grabbed them both. Carried them back to my room and got to work.

The floor was first. I swept up the dust and debris that had accumulated in the corners. There was more than there should have been. Like this room hadn't been cleaned in months. Maybe years.

The dust made me cough. Made my eyes water. But I kept going.

When the floor was clear, I filled the bucket with water from the bathroom sink. There was no soap but water was better than nothing. I mopped in long strokes, working my way from the far corner toward the door.

The water turned gray almost immediately. Then brown. I had to dump it and refill it three times before the floor finally looked clean.

Next was the bathroom. I used the hem of my wedding dress to wipe down the sink and the toilet and the shower. Everything was covered in a thin film of grime that came off easily once I actually tried.

The walls were harder. The water stains weren't going anywhere without proper cleaning supplies. And the mold... I stared at that black growth in the corner and felt my stomach turn.

I couldn't just wipe that away. Mold like that needed special treatment. Bleach probably. Or something stronger. But I didn't have anything like that.

I scratched at my arm again. The rash was spreading. I could feel it moving up toward my shoulder now.

What was I supposed to do about the mold? Just ignore it? Sleep in here anyway and hope I didn't get sick?

I thought about asking someone for help. But who? The omegas who'd tried to humiliate me yesterday? The one I'd beaten bloody? Yeah, that seemed like a great plan.

Maybe there was a washing machine somewhere in this estate. Most packs had them even if they made the omegas hand wash everything as some kind of archaic punishment. If I could find it, I could at least wash the blankets and sheets. Get rid of whatever was making my skin react like this.

But would they even let me use it? Cian struck me as the type who subscribed to that old fashioned notion that omegas shouldn't know comfort. That we were meant to suffer and serve and be grateful for whatever scraps we were given.

And I was fairly certain he hated me more than he hated anyone.

I was about to go searching for it anyway when someone knocked on the door.

I froze. Looked at the broom still in my hand. At the bucket of dirty water. At the mess I'd made trying to clean up.

The knock came again. Louder this time.

I set the broom down and walked to the door. Opened it slowly.

The omega from yesterday stood there. The one I'd punched. Her face was swollen. Purple bruises bloomed across her cheeks and around her eyes. Her nose was bandaged but I could still see the swelling underneath.

She looked at me and something in her expression was different. Not hatred this time. Something closer to fear.

"Breakfast is ready." The words came out stiff. Formal. "Llluuuna Fia."

The title caught in her throat. I heard it. That little choke on the word Luna. Like it hurt her to say it. Like calling me that was physically painful.

I knew the term was honorary. I was not born into it and I knew I hadn't earned it. I knew that to her and probably everyone else in this pack, I was just the omega who'd trapped their Alpha into a mate bond he didn't want.

But hearing it out loud still felt wrong. Too big for me. Too heavy.

"Okay," I said. "Thank you."

She didn't leave though. She just stood there staring past me into the room. Then her eyes widened.

"What are you doing?"

I glanced back at the broom and bucket. At the wet floor. "Cleaning."

"Why?" She actually stepped forward. Her voice pitched higher. "That's our job. Why are you working?"

"I had a bad sleep." I shrugged. Tried to make it sound casual. "Probably because of the mold. Which you must have known about. But no worries. I can fix it myself."

As if on cue, my hand started itching again. I reached up and scratched at my arm without thinking.

The omega's face went pale. Went from purple and bruised to white in half a second.

"What's wrong with your skin?" She was staring at my hand now. At the red welts covering my arm.

"Nothing. Just a rash."

"That's not nothing." She moved closer. Faster than I expected. Before I could step back she grabbed my wrist and pushed up the sleeve of my nightgown.

The rash went all the way up my arm. Red and angry and spreading. It looked worse than it felt. Or maybe it felt worse and I'd just gotten used to the burning.

The omega made a sound, something between a gasp and a whimper.

"This is bad," she whispered, her voice trembling now. "This is really bad."

I frowned, tugging at the corner of the sheet. "It's fine. I just need to wash these and—"

"The Alpha is going to kill us." Her hands flew to her mouth, eyes wide as if she was only now realizing the weight of what they had done. "He's going to kill all of us."

I froze. "What are you talking about?"

"You're his mate," she blurted, voice cracking. "His Luna. You can't have rashes, you can't look sick. If he finds out what we did, if he sees what happened to your skin..."

Her words died off, but the guilt in her eyes said everything.

They hadn't put me in this room out of ignorance. They had done it on purpose. The damp sheets, the harsh soap, the mold in the corner of the wall— they were little punishments wrapped in the disguise of servitude. They wanted me to suffer, to remind me that I didn't belong here.

But now my skin's reaction had gone too far.

And it was clear that the fear in her voice wasn't for me. It was for herself.

Because Cian wouldn't see this as an accident. He'd see damage to what they believed he owned.

Me.

Chapter 33: Spores and Consequences

FIA

I was still staring at the red welts crawling up my arm when the omega spun around and bolted from my doorway.

"Wait!" I called after her, but she was already gone. Her footsteps echoed down the hallway, fast and frantic.

I stood there for a moment, confused. Then I heard her voice from somewhere deeper in the house, shrill and panicked.

"Get Doctor Maren! Now! The Luna is sick!"

Luna. That word again. But this time it wasn't said with contempt. This time it sounded like fear.

I heard more footsteps. Multiple sets of them, running. I backed into my room just as three more omegas appeared in my doorway. They all looked at me with the same expression the first omega had worn. Wide eyes. Pale faces. Pure terror.

"Let me see," one of them said, moving forward without asking permission.

She grabbed my arm and examined the rash. Her breath caught.

"Goddess," she whispered. "How long have you been itching?"

"Since I woke up." I pulled my arm back. "It's not that bad."

"Not that bad?" She looked at me like I was insane. "This is a full allergic reaction. You've been breathing in mold spores all night."

The other omegas were already moving through the room. One stripped the bed, yanking off the damp sheets and blanket with jerky movements. Another rushed to the window and forced it open wider. The third stood in the middle of the floor wringing her hands.

"We need to get rid of all of this," the first omega said. "Everything. The bedding, the curtains, all of it."

They worked fast. Too fast. Like they were trying to erase evidence of a crime. Which I guess they were. The sheets went into a pile by the door. The curtains came down. Someone found a towel and started scrubbing at the mold in the corner even though it was clearly a lost cause.

I just stood there watching them panic.

A new voice came from the hallway. Calm. Professional. "Move aside."

The omegas scattered like startled birds.

A woman stepped into the room carrying a leather medical bag. I recognized her immediately. She was the doctor from before. But she looked older this morning. Probably because she was woken up and still hadn't had time to do her morning routine. Still her dark hair was pulled back in a neat bun. Her eyes were sharp and assessing as they swept over me, then the room, then back to me.

"Hello again Luna Fia," she said. "Please show me your arms."

I held them out. She took my wrists gently and examined the rash. Her expression didn't change but I saw her jaw tighten.

"How do you feel? Any difficulty breathing? Chest tightness?"

"No. Just itchy."

"Nausea? Dizziness?"

"No."

She released my arms and turned to look at the room. Really look at it. The water stains on the walls. The black mold in the corner. The general state of decay.

"Who put her in here?" Her voice was quiet. Deadly quiet.

The omegas all looked at each other. Nobody answered.

Doctor Maren's gaze hardened. "I asked a question."

"We did," the omega with the bruised face finally whispered. "We thought... we didn't think..."

"You didn't think." Doctor Maren's words were clipped. "You put an omega in a room with active mold growth and damp bedding. Do you have any idea how dangerous that is? Omegas have weaker immune systems than alphas or betas. This could have really hurt her."

The room went silent. The kind of silence that felt heavy. Suffocating.

Doctor Maren opened her bag and pulled out a bottle of pills. "Take two of these now. They're antihistamines. They'll help with the itching and reduce the inflammation."

She handed me the bottle and a small tube of cream. "Apply this to the rash three times a day. It should clear up in a few days if we get you out of this environment immediately."

"I can just move rooms," I said.

"You'll move to proper quarters." Doctor Maren's tone left no room for argument. "The Luna quarters, as you should have been given from the start."

There it was again. Luna. Like it was a real title I'd earned instead of a cosmic joke played by my foolishness and Hazel's cruel games.

Doctor Maren turned back to the omegas. "Where is the head omega? Someone needs to answer for this."

Before anyone could respond, I felt it.

A pull. Not physical, but something deeper. Something that started in my chest and spread outward. The mate bond. I'd felt it many times now. That strange awareness of Cian's presence. But this was different. This was... intense.

And then he was there.

Cian filled the doorway like a storm about to break. His eyes swept the room, taking in everything. The stripped bed. The pile of moldy sheets. The omegas frozen in place. Doctor Maren standing with her medical bag. And me, covered in red welts, wearing a nightgown in a room that looked like it should be condemned.

The temperature seemed to drop.

"Explain." It was one word. Spoken so quietly it was almost worse than if he'd shouted.

Nobody moved. Nobody breathed.

Then I felt it through the bond. His rage. Not at me. At them. At this situation. At seeing his mate standing in a room that was actively poisoning her. If that was even possible.

It hit me like a freight train. His anger was clean and sharp and absolutely terrifying. I'd expected his fury to be cold, controlled. But this was something else. This was protective instinct twisted into wrath.

"I asked for an explanation." His voice was still quiet. Still deadly.

The bruised omega stepped forward. She was shaking. "Alpha, we... we assigned her this room because..."

"Because what?"

"Because she's not really Luna." The words tumbled out in a rush. "Because she tricked you into the bond. Because she doesn't deserve—"

"Stop talking."

She stopped.

Cian stepped fully into the room. He didn't look at me. His eyes were fixed on the omegas with an intensity that made me want to step back even though none of that fury was directed at me.

Chapter 34: No Quiet Corner

FIA

"You decided," he said slowly, "that you knew better than the mate bond itself. Better than the Moon Goddess. You decided that this omega, my mate, deserved to be put in a room with black mold. A room that could have killed her."

"We didn't know it was black—" one of them started.

"You didn't know that mold...especially black mold was dangerous?" Cian's voice rose slightly. "You didn't know that damp sheets and poor ventilation could make someone sick? Or did you know exactly what you were doing and simply didn't care?"

There was silence. The thick kind you could almost cut with a knife.

Doctor Maren cleared her throat. "Alpha, omegas are particularly susceptible to respiratory issues. Prolonged exposure to these conditions could have caused serious illness. Possibly death if left undiscovered or untreated."

Cian's jaw clenched. Through the bond I felt his rage spike higher.

"You will pack your things," he said to the omegas. "All of you involved in this decision. You're being reassigned to the lowest duties in this pack. Latrines. Waste disposal. The kennels. For the next six months."

The omegas went even paler.

"And you." He pointed at the one with the bruised face. The ringleader. "You're banned from the main house entirely. You'll work in the outer fields. If I see you near these grounds again, you'll be shamed and banished from the pack."

"Alpha, please—"

"Get out."

They ran. All of them. Stumbling over each other to escape his presence.

Doctor Maren stayed. She gave Cian a small nod. "I'll make sure she's moved to appropriate quarters. The Luna suite should be prepared."

"See that it is." Cian finally looked at me. His eyes swept over my arms, the rash, my face. Something flickered in his expression. Something that might have been concern if I didn't know better.

"You should have told someone," he said.

I blinked. "Who would I tell?"

"Anyone. A servant. A guard. *Me.*"

"You?" I couldn't help the disbelief in my voice. "You hate me."

"I don't..." He stopped. Seemingly wrestling with something. "I don't want you harmed, regardless. We have an arrangement after all."

The mate bond pulsed between us. For a moment I felt what he felt. Confusion. Anger at the situation. Anger at himself for caring. And underneath it all, that pull. That instinct to protect what was his, even if he didn't want me to be his.

It was disorienting. Even for me.

"Come on," Doctor Maren said gently, breaking the moment. "Let's get you settled in proper rooms."

Cian turned and left without another word. But I felt him through the bond, moving through the house, his anger slowly cooling into something colder. More controlled.

Doctor Maren led me through hallways I hadn't seen before. These were cleaner. Brighter. The kind of spaces meant for people who mattered.

We stopped in front of a large door. Doctor Maren pushed it open.

The room beyond was beautiful. Huge. There was a massive bed with clean gold sheets. Windows that actually opened properly. A sitting area with comfortable furniture. A bathroom that sparkled. Everything was pristine. Luxurious. Clearly meant for someone important.

"This was the Luna suite," Doctor Maren said quietly. "Prepared for... well. It doesn't matter now. It's yours."

For Hazel. She didn't say it but I heard it anyway. These rooms were meant for Hazel.

And now I was being moved into them like some kind of replacement. A stand-in for the real Luna. A spot I allegedly stole.

The thought made my stomach turn.

Doctor Maren showed me where everything was. The bathroom. The closet. The small sitting room attached to the bedroom. She left more antihistamine pills on the nightstand and reminded me to apply the cream.

Then she was gone, and I was alone.

I sat on the edge of the enormous bed and looked around. The walls were a soft cream color. The furniture was dark wood, expensive looking. Everything smelled clean and fresh. No mold. No damp. No decay.

It was perfect.

And I hated it.

I pulled out my phone and stared at it. Milo was supposed to come today. He'd promised to set everything right with Cian and I was still hopeful. I hated that I was.

I called him. It rang. And rang. And rang.

There was no answer.

I tried again. Same result.

A cold feeling started spreading through my chest. Something was wrong. Milo should have answered his phone. *Right?*

I sent a text: *Where are you?*

The message showed as delivered but not read.

I waited. Five minutes. Ten. Twenty.

Nothing.

I got up and paced the room. Maybe he'd overslept. Maybe his phone died. Maybe he got held up at doing sentinel work. There were a dozen reasonable explanations.

But none of them felt right.

I left the Luna suite and wandered the halls. Found a servant and asked if anyone had come to visit me. She looked at me with barely concealed distrust but answered. "No visitors, Luna Fia."

I asked another servant. It was the same answer.

The hours crawled by. I checked my phone obsessively. Called Milo three more times. Nothing.

And I knew.

Deep in my gut, in that place where instinct lived, I knew something had gone terribly, horribly wrong.

My phone buzzed.

For a second, my heart leaped. Milo. Maybe he'd changed his mind. Maybe he was outside right now, demanding to see Cian, ready to burn everything down with the truth.

But it wasn't Milo.

The number on the screen was unfamiliar, unrecognizable. Not saved. No name attached.

Still, I opened the message.

Hello sister. Guess who is coming to see you.

My breath caught.

Hazel.

I stared at the text for a long moment, waiting for it to change, for it to disappear, for it to reveal itself as a hallucination born from stress and exhaustion. But it didn't. It sat there. Blinking. Real.

Hazel was coming to Skollrend.

My thumb hovered over the screen. I reread the message. Once. Twice. Again. My heart was beating too fast, thudding painfully behind my ribs.

Sister. She called me sister.

It was meant to sound sweet. Familiar. Like family. But coming from her, it was venom laced in sugar. Hazel never said anything without purpose. There was no coincidence here. No random act of communication. If she had reached out, it was because she wanted me to know. She wanted me to panic.

And I was panicking.

I locked the phone and tossed it onto the bed, then immediately regretted it. Picked it back up. Opened the message again, like maybe I'd read it wrong the first five times. But no. Same words. Same tone. Same quiet horror spreading through my chest.

Why now?

Why would Hazel come here? To Skollrend?

Unless... unless she knew what Milo was planning.

That thought hit me like a slap. My stomach turned. Hazel always had eyes everywhere. Servants, spies, loyal omegas, and people too scared to say no. Of course she knew. Of course she had been watching him.

And if she was coming here, it meant she wasn't going to let him tell the truth.

Maybe she planned to intercept him before he reached the gates.

Maybe she already had.

Chapter 35: Do you care yet?

CIAN

I sat behind my desk and stared at the papers in front of me without really seeing them.

The words blurred together. Numbers became meaningless. My mind kept circling back to that room. That goddamned moldy room with the damp sheets and the rash crawling up her arms.

Why had I interfered?

The question sat in my chest like a stone. Heavy. Uncomfortable. I should have left it alone. Let the pack hierarchy sort itself out. Let the omegas handle their own petty jealousies and punishments. It wasn't my job to micromanage every slight between servants.

But I hadn't left it alone.

I'd walked into that room and felt something snap inside me. Seeing her there, covered in welts, standing in a space that was actively poisoning her. The rage had come so fast I barely had time to control it. And that rage wasn't logical. It wasn't calculated. It was pure instinct screaming at me that something was wrong. That my mate was being harmed.

My mate.

I hated that phrase. Hated what it implied. That bond tied me to someone I didn't choose. Someone who'd lied and schemed her way into my life. Someone who'd taken the place meant for another.

But the bond didn't care about logic. It didn't care that I wanted nothing to do with Fia. It only knew that she was mine, and she was hurt, and that was unacceptable.

I rubbed my temples and tried to focus on the work in front of me. Trade agreements. Border disputes. Pack business that actually mattered.

A knock interrupted my thoughts.

"Come in."

The door opened and Ronan walked in. My Beta. My closest friend. He looked concerned. That wasn't unusual. Ronan always looked concerned when pack drama was involved. It was part of what made him good at his job.

"I heard what happened," he said without preamble.

"Word travels fast."

"When the Alpha tears into pack members and demotes them to latrine duty, yes. Word travels." Ronan closed the door behind him and walked closer to my desk. "The omegas are saying you defended her."

"I didn't defend her." The words came out sharper than I intended. "I defended pack law. She's my Luna whether I like it or not. They can't just decide to put her in a room with black mold because they don't approve of her."

Ronan crossed his arms. "That evil omega deceived this pack. She stole her sister's place. She tricked you into a bond you didn't want. Honestly, Cian, I think she deserves the worst."

I looked up at him then. Really looked at him. Saw the anger in his eyes. The righteous fury that had no place in a Beta's reasoning.

"This," I said quietly, "is exactly what I'm talking about."

"What?"

"You. You've fallen for it too."

Ronan frowned. "Fallen for what?"

I stood up and walked to the window. The grounds of Skollrend stretched out before me. Beautiful. Orderly. Mine.

"I've been punishing her," I said. "Since the moment she arrived. Cold shoulders. Sharp words. Making it clear I want nothing to do with her. And the pack has noticed. They've taken their cue from me. If their Alpha hates her, then they're meant to hate her too."

"She deserves it."

"Maybe." I turned back to face him. "But there's a difference between punishment and endangerment. Between showing disapproval and allowing harm. Those omegas put her in a room that could have killed her if left long enough. And they felt justified doing it because I've been broadcasting my contempt for her since day one."

Ronan was quiet for a moment. I could see him thinking. Processing. His jaw worked.

"I hadn't thought of it like that," he admitted finally.

"Neither had I. Until this morning."

"So what are you saying? We're supposed to just accept her now? Pretend she didn't lie and deceive this pack?"

"No." I shook my head. "I'm saying I need to find a way to punish her without putting her authority as Luna in question. There's a balance here. She deceived us, yes. But she's still Luna of Skollrend. That position comes with certain protections. Certain standards."

Ronan nodded slowly. "The bare minimum then."

"What?"

"Give her the bare minimum." Ronan uncrossed his arms and stepped closer. "In times of old, there were puppet Alphas. They enjoyed every privilege that came with royalty. The best rooms. The best food. All the outward trappings of power. But everyone knew they held no real authority. They were figureheads. Symbols. Nothing more."

I considered that. Turned it over in my mind.

"You're saying treat her like a puppet Luna."

"Exactly. She gets the title. The respect that comes with the position. But no actual power. No real involvement in pack decisions. She exists as Luna in name only." Ronan's expression brightened like he'd just solved a complex puzzle. "That way the pack knows she's protected by her position, but they also know she hasn't really won anything with her deception."

It wasn't a bad idea. It was actually clever. Give Fia the outward appearance of acceptance while making it clear she'd never have real influence. Let her live in luxury while knowing she'd never be more than a pretty ornament.

"Thank you, Ronan."

He smiled. "That's what I'm here for."

Then he pulled something from his jacket pocket. An envelope. Cream colored with elegant script on the front.

"This came this morning." He set it on my desk. "A wedding invitation. From Alpha Julius."

I stared at it. "Why would Julius invite me to anything?"

"Could be about peace." Ronan shrugged. "He must recognize that a business battle with Skollrend won't work. Maybe he wants to extend an olive branch."

I picked up the envelope. The paper was thick. Expensive. The kind used for important occasions. And it was perfumed. That sweet cloying scent that some packs favored for formal events.

"Let's hope your hypothesis is right," I said.

"You'll go then?"

"I'll go."

Ronan gave a satisfied nod. He started to turn toward the door, then paused. "Should I have them bring you breakfast? You've been working since dawn."

My stomach chose that moment to growl. Loud enough that we both heard it.

Ronan smirked.

"No," I said. "My mother will probably meet with Fia today. I need to start getting comfortable eating with her."

The words felt strange coming out of my mouth. Getting comfortable. Like that was something that could happen. Like I could just sit across from the omega who'd stolen my intended mate's place and make small talk over eggs and toast.

But Ronan was right about the puppet Luna strategy. And part of that meant maintaining appearances. Acting like everything was normal even when it wasn't.

"Alright." Ronan gave a short bow. "I'll see you later then."

He left. The door clicked shut behind him.

I looked down at the perfumed invitation again. Lifted it to my nose. The scent was familiar. Light and floral. Nothing offensive but unnecessary for a wedding invitation.

I opened my desk drawer and dropped it inside. I'd deal with Julius and whatever political games he was playing later.

Right now I had to go eat breakfast with my unwanted mate.

The walk to the dining room felt longer than usual. My boots echoed in the empty hallways. Most of the pack was already up and about their duties. The house was quiet in that way it only got during morning meals when everyone gathered in their respective spaces.

The dining room doors were already open. I walked through and stopped.

The table was set. Elaborate as always. Crystal glasses. Silver utensils. Plates that cost more than most people earned in a month. The food was lush. Grand. Platters of eggs and bacon and fresh bread. Bowls of fruit. Pitchers of juice and coffee.

But Fia wasn't there.

I'd expected her to be there before me. Early even. Trying too hard to make a good impression or prove she belonged. That's what someone in her position would do, wasn't it? Show up early. Be perfect. Try to earn approval.

An omega stood near the wall. Waiting. Ready to serve. I recognized her. One of the senior house staff.

"Did the Luna not know it was time for breakfast?" I kept my voice neutral.

The omega bowed her head slightly. "She knows, Alpha. I sent the Omega you demoted to tell her this morning. But I don't know why she hasn't come down yet."

I frowned. Looked at the empty chair across from mine. The place setting waiting. Unused.

"Should I go get her?" the omega asked.

"No." I waved a hand. "Don't worry about it."

I sat down. Pulled my plate closer. Started loading it with food even though my appetite had diminished somewhat.

Maybe she was still upset about this morning. Still dealing with the rash. Still adjusting to the new room. There were plenty of reasonable explanations for why she wasn't here.

But that didn't stop the small spike of irritation I felt. Or was it concern? I couldn't tell anymore. The bond made everything complicated. Every emotion was tangled up with that connection. My feelings. Her feelings. The instincts that said she was mine and should be here.

I cut into a piece of bacon. Put it in my mouth. Chewed.

It tasted like nothing.

The omega stood against the wall. Silent. Waiting in case I needed anything. The room was too quiet. Too empty. I'd eaten alone plenty of times. Preferred it actually. But this felt different.

Because she was supposed to be here.

I ate mechanically. Toast. Eggs. More bacon. I wasn't tasting any of it. Just going through the motions because I'd told Ronan I needed to get comfortable with this. With eating across from Fia. With acting like this was normal.

But she wasn't even here to make it uncomfortable.

I glanced at the empty chair again. Through the bond I could feel her. Somewhere in the house. Alive. Not in distress. Just... absent.

Where was she?

The thought came unbidden. I pushed it away. I didn't care where she was. This was better actually. Easier. I could eat in peace without having to look at her across the table. Without having to make conversation or pretend this situation was anything other than what it was.

A disaster.

A trap.

A bond I never wanted.

But the irritation didn't fade. If anything it grew stronger. Because she should be here. Not because I wanted her company. But because this was part of the arrangement now. Part of the puppet Luna strategy. She had duties. Appearances to maintain. And showing up to breakfast was one of them.

I finished eating faster than normal and stood up. The omega moved forward to clear the plates but I waved her off.

"Goddess, let me get out first."

I walked out of the dining room and through the halls back toward my study. My mind was already churning. Planning. There was work to do. Pack business to attend to. I couldn't spend all day wondering why my unwanted mate had skipped breakfast.

But as I walked, I felt it through the bond. That pull. That awareness of her somewhere in this house.

And underneath the irritation, buried so deep I almost didn't recognize it, was something else.

Worry.

Chapter 36: A Family Affair 1

CIAN

The afternoon sun slanted through the windows of my study. I'd been working for hours. Trade reports. Border patrols. The usual business of running a pack. My mind had finally stopped circling back to breakfast. To the empty chair. To Fia's absence.

I was almost calm.

Then a knock shattered that calm.

"Enter."

One of the gate guards stepped inside. Young. Nervous. The kind of nervous that came from bearing news he knew I wouldn't like.

"Alpha." He bowed quickly. "There are visitors at the gates."

I set down my pen. "Who?"

"Luna Isobel of Silver Creek. And her daughter Hazel."

The words hit me like cold water.

I stood slowly. Carefully. Keeping my expression neutral even though my mind was racing. "They're here? At Skollrend?"

"Yes, Alpha. They're requesting entry. Luna Isobel says she comes in peace. That she wishes to pay her respects and..." He hesitated. "And her daughter wishes to see her sister."

Of course she did.

I walked to the window and looked out over the grounds. From here I couldn't see the gates but I could picture them. Isobel in her formal traveling clothes. Hazel beside her. Both wearing expressions of concern and grief. Both playing their parts perfectly.

This was too soon. Too convenient. The wedding had been a day ago. Barely enough time for them to miss Fia. And with what had transpired, why would they even miss her?

Through the bond I felt something shift. A spike of emotion that wasn't mine. Fear. Sharp and sudden. Fia knew. Somehow she knew they were here.

The feeling was strong enough that I actually pressed a hand to my chest. Like I could physically push it away. But the bond didn't work like that. It just kept pulsing. Kept feeding me her terror.

"Alpha?" The guard was still waiting.

I turned back to him. "Show them to the formal receiving room. I'll be there shortly."

He bowed and left.

I stood alone in my study and tried to think clearly. Tried to separate what I felt through the bond from what I actually thought.

Hazel was Fia's sister. Luna Isobel was her mother. There was no reason to deny them entry. No reason to suspect anything sinister. If Hazel wanted to see her sister, that was natural. Expected even. Family checking on family after a traumatic situation.

But Fia's fear suggested something else entirely. I wonder if it stemmed from guilt. Facing what she had did to Hazel again. Or was it genuine terror because she had not actually been lying?

I checked my watch. Nearly two in the afternoon. I'd been working through lunch without noticing. My stomach was empty but I barely felt it. Too much else was competing for my attention.

I left my study and walked through the halls toward the receiving room. My boots echoed on the stone floors. I passed servants who bowed and stepped aside. Everything looked normal. Everything felt wrong.

The receiving room was one of the formal spaces we kept for important guests. High ceilings. Expensive furniture. Windows that overlooked the gardens. It was meant to impress without being intimate. Perfect for political visits.

I pushed open the doors.

Luna Isobel stood near the windows. She was elegant as always. Dark hair pinned up. Clothes that screamed desperate to cling to wealth and status. She turned when I entered and gave me a warm smile.

"Alpha Cian. Thank you for seeing us on such short notice."

Hazel was beside her. And goddess help me, she looked devastated. Her eyes were red. Her face was pale. Her whole posture screamed grief and worry. She looked like someone who'd been crying. Like someone genuinely torn apart by what had happened.

I almost believed it.

Almost. Fia's feelings wouldn't stop singing in my head.

"Luna Isobel. Hazel." I nodded to each of them. "This is unexpected."

"I know." Isobel stepped forward. Her expression was apologetic. "We should have sent word ahead. But Hazel has been beside herself since the wedding. She insisted we come immediately."

Hazel moved then. Rushed toward me with her hands clasped together. The tears in her eyes looked real. Felt real. "Alpha Cian, please. I know this is improper. I know I have no right to ask anything of you after what my sister did. We are lucky you even spared Silver Creek. But I need to see her. I need to know she's safe."

The words were perfect. The delivery flawless. Concerned sister worried about her sibling despite the terrible choices that sibling had made. It was exactly what anyone would expect in this situation.

But I'd spent years reading people. Years learning to spot lies and manipulation. And something about Hazel's performance now felt rehearsed. Like she'd practiced this speech on the journey here. Like she knew exactly which words would have the most impact.

Was this me finally seeing things as they were, without the rage of my burst ego or was this Fia's words and her emotions making me see through rose colored glasses?

"Fia is safe," I said carefully. "I'm not a monster. Despite what happened, despite the circumstances behind our bond, she's my Luna. She's treated with the respect that position demands."

Relief flooded Hazel's face. Or at least the appearance of relief. "Thank you. Goddess, thank you. I've been so worried. Fia can be impulsive and foolish but she's still my sister. I still love her."

There. That small emphasis on still. Like loving Fia was difficult. Like it required effort. Like Hazel was being generous by maintaining any affection at all.

My jaw tightened.

Isobel moved to stand beside her daughter. Put a comforting hand on Hazel's shoulder. "We understand this is a difficult situation for everyone involved. Fia's actions have caused pain to many people. But family is family. We couldn't rest without knowing she was being cared for properly."

"She has her own quarters," I said. "The Luna suite. She's been given everything she needs."

Chapter 37: A Family Affair 2

CIAN

"Oh!" That came from the depths of Isobel's soul.

Genuine shock, not polite surprise. It was as if she couldn't believe Fia had been treated with any respect at all. Hazel stepped in quickly, trying to soften the moment with effort

that almost sounded like pleading. "What my mom meant was... may we see her?" Her voice broke, trembling in a way that suggested she had rehearsed the question a hundred times but still wasn't ready for the answer. "Please. Just for a few minutes. I need to look my sister in the eye and know she's truly alright."

It was a reasonable request. More than reasonable. Any Alpha with a beating heart would understand that. What kind of leader denied a sister the simple dignity of seeing her own blood?

But through the bond, Fia's fear kept growing. Kept pulsing. It was getting stronger. More desperate. Like she was actively panicking somewhere in this house.

My wolf stirred. Uncomfortable. Confused. *Protect mate*, it said. *Mate in danger*.

But from what? Her own sister? Her mother? That didn't make sense. Unless...

Unless Fia had been telling the truth.

The thought came unbidden. Unwanted. I'd dismissed her claims about Hazel so easily. Written them off as excuses. As attempts to shift blame. Of course someone caught in deception would try to paint themselves as the victim.

But what if she wasn't lying?

What if Hazel really had orchestrated everything? What if the sweet concerned sister act was exactly that? An act?

I looked at Hazel again. Really looked at her. Past the tears and the trembling hands and the perfectly crafted expression of worry. And I saw it. Just for a second. Something cold in her eyes. Something calculating. It was gone in an instant, replaced by more tears and more concern. But I'd seen it.

The mate bond pulsed again. Fia's terror was almost overwhelming now. She definitely knew they were here.

"Of course you can see her," I said slowly. Watching their reactions. "But it will be in the gardens. Not private quarters."

Isobel's smile tightened slightly. Just slightly. "The gardens?"

"Yes. It's a beautiful afternoon. The gardens are lovely this time of year. And more appropriate for a supervised visit."

"Supervised?" Hazel's voice pitched higher. "You don't trust us... me with my own sister?"

"Well, I don't really know you," I said simply. "Considering our marriage did not quite happen. And given recent events, I think some caution is warranted."

Isobel stepped forward. Her expression had shifted. Less warm now. More calculating. "Alpha Cian, surely there's no need for such measures. We're family. Hazel has traveled all this way just to ensure her sister is well. To deny them privacy seems sus..."

"Reasonable," I finished. "Given that Fia Hughes can be rather creative with her manipulations. I am looking for you guys."

The room went quiet.

Isobel studied me. I could see her mind working. See her trying to figure me out.

Then she smiled. Smoothed it over like the politician she was. "Of course. We understand. The gardens will be perfect."

Hazel nodded quickly. Wiped at her eyes. "Yes. Yes, that's fine. I just want to see her. That's all."

But I caught it again. That flash in Hazel's eyes. Not relief. Not gratitude. Something closer to frustration. Like this wasn't going according to plan.

My wolf was pacing now. Agitated. Something was wrong here. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on but could feel in my bones.

"There's one more thing," Isobel said. Her tone was casual. Too casual. "I've been curious about the mate bond. How strong is it? I know these things can vary. Some bonds are powerful. Others are... more manageable."

There it was. The real reason for this visit.

"Strong enough," I said carefully.

"And you plan to keep it? Keep Fia as your Luna?" Isobel tilted her head slightly. "I only ask because there are options. Ways to dissolve unwanted bonds if both parties agree. It's rare but not unheard of. You merely give it a few months. So it does not hurt or become as jarring."

She was fishing. Testing the waters to see if I'd be receptive to breaking the bond with Fia. And if I did that, what then? Would she suggest I bond with Hazel instead? Try to salvage the original arrangement?

The mate bond flared. Hot and possessive. *Mine*, my wolf snarled. The reaction was purely instinctual. Purely territorial. It had nothing to do with wanting Fia and everything to do with the bond's refusal to let go of what it claimed.

"The bond stands," I said flatly. "Whatever else happens, Fia is my mate. That won't change."

Disappointment flickered across Isobel's face. Quick. Barely there. But I saw it.

"I see." She smoothed her skirts. "Well. Perhaps we should go see Fia then? The poor girl must be wondering what's taking so long."

Or she was hiding somewhere in the house trying not to have a breakdown. Through the bond I felt her anxiety like a physical weight. It made my chest tight. Made it hard to think clearly.

I hated that. Hated that I couldn't separate my thoughts from her emotions. Couldn't tell where my own feelings ended and hers began. The bond was making me paranoid. Making me protective of someone I had no reason to protect.

But I couldn't ignore it either.

"I'll have someone fetch her," I said. "Meet you both in the garden in ten minutes."

Isobel nodded. Hazel gave me a grateful smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

They left the receiving room and I stood alone.

My study had a view of the gardens. The large window faced directly onto the main paths and seating areas. I could watch from there without being obvious about it. Could observe this reunion without interfering.

Because something told me this reunion was going to be very educational.

I walked back to my study. Sat in my chair. Looked out at the gardens below.

And I waited.

Chapter 38: The great guide to being a wicked half sister 1

HAZEL

The car wheels rattled against the road. I watched the landscape blur past my window and fought to keep the smile off my face.

Milo was dead. Actually dead. I'd watched his execution myself just this morning. Watched the life drain from his eyes as the elders of Silver Creek passed judgment. The memory was delicious. Sweet. I kept replaying it in my mind like a favorite song.

"You're smiling." My mother's voice cut through my thoughts.

I turned to look at her. Mother sat across from me with her hands folded neatly in her lap. She was dressed in her best traveling clothes. Dark blue silk that made her look regal. Sympathetic. Like a concerned mother making a difficult journey to check on her wayward daughter.

The performance had already begun.

"I'm just thinking about Fia," I said. Let some sadness creep into my voice. "Wondering how she's doing. If she's still alive."

My mother's lips curved slightly. "Of course you are."

She knew better. She always knew better. But that was fine. We didn't need to pretend with each other. Not here. Not when we were alone.

"But Skollrend does look divine. Don't you think?"

It did. If Cian had been any other man, I might not have minded being tied to this place. But he was a beast. The stories and the facts were there. They didn't lie.

"So?"

"Hmmm. I believe," she said slowly, "we might have made a mistake. This should have been your life."

I blinked. That was new. Honest. A hint of something she almost never let slip—regret.

"Cian is a beast," I maintained.

"What if we were wrong?"

"What if we were wrong? What then?"

"Hazel—"

"Do you think he'll break the bond?" I asked. There was no need for the sad sister act now. "Cian. Do you think he'll get rid of her?"

My mother considered the question. She was good at this. At reading situations. At knowing which political moves would pay off and which would backfire. That's why Silver Creek hadn't completely collapsed despite our financial troubles. She'd kept us afloat through sheer cunning and of course her father's politics and position.

"Possibly," she said finally. "I will ask for sure. Fuck. Look at this place. But we need to be careful. If we push too hard, he'll dig in his heels. Alphas are territorial. Even about things they don't want."

I knew that. Had seen it before. Men were simple that way. They didn't like being told what to do. Didn't like feeling manipulated even when they were actively being manipulated.

"So we play concerned family," I said. "We act like we just want to make sure Fia is okay and you can ask your stupid question if you are so obsessed with how grand Skollrend looks."

"I will." My mother leaned forward slightly. "And I will gauge his commitment to the bond. See how deep it runs. If it's shallow, if he barely tolerates her, then we have options. But if it's stronger than we think..."

"Oh I doubt that," I finished.

"Right?"

"Exactly. He hates her."

My mother smiled. "He probably does. I am in over my head."

The truth however was I didn't care that much about the bond. Not really. I mean yes, it would be convenient if Cian broke it. It would be nice if he decided Fia wasn't worth the trouble and sent her back to Silver Creek in even more disgrace. That would be perfect. Beautiful even.

But my real goal was simpler.

I wanted Fia to suffer.

I wanted her to know that I'd won again. That Milo was dead because of her. That she was trapped in a loveless bond with an Alpha who despised her. That everything she'd tried to do had failed spectacularly.

I wanted to see the look in her eyes when she realized how completely I'd destroyed her.

The car began to slow. I looked out the window and saw Skollrend's gates ahead. Massive iron things that probably cost more than my family's entire estate. Guards stood at attention. The whole place screamed power and wealth.

My chest tightened.

Skollrend was bigger than Silver Creek. Everyone knew that. But seeing it up close was different. The main house was enormous. Three stories of stone and glass that sprawled across manicured grounds. The gardens were immaculate. The walls were thick and high. Everything about this place spoke to strength and stability.

Everything my own pack lacked.

I hated it. Despite hating the idea of being Skollrend's Luna and being a woman without choice. I hated that Fia was here. That she was somehow in luxury while I was stuck watching our humble family's estate crumble.

But I swallowed the bitterness. I put on my concerned sister face. Let my eyes fill with practiced tears.

The guards let us through. Our vehicle rolled up the main drive and stopped in front of the entrance. Servants appeared immediately. One opened the door. Another offered a hand to help my mother down.

I followed. I stepped out onto the gravel drive and looked up at the house.

A guard approached. He was young and nervous looking. "Luna Isobel. Luna Hazel. The Alpha is expecting you."

My mother thanked him graciously. I said nothing. Just kept my eyes downcast. Kept playing my part.

They led us inside. Through hallways that were bigger than entire rooms back home. Past artwork that probably cost a fortune. Everything was pristine. Perfect. My kind of gathering.

The receiving room was exactly what I expected. It had high ceilings, expensive furniture and windows overlooking gardens that looked like something from a painting. I moved to stand near those windows. Let my mother take the lead on the initial greeting.

The doors opened.

Alpha Cian walked in.

I'd seen him at the wedding of course while I was plotting to get out of his grip. But I hadn't taken the time to study him properly. Not really. Not when I was fuming with bitter rage at being practically sold.

Now I did.

He was tall. Broad shouldered. He had that presence that powerful Alphas carried like a second skin. His dark hair was slightly messy. Like he'd been running his hands through it. His expression was carefully neutral but I caught the tension in his jaw. The way his eyes scanned the room like he was looking for threats.

He was on edge.

I liked that.

My mother greeted him warmly. I hung back. Let her handle the pleasantries while I observed.

Cian was cold. Not openly hostile but definitely not welcoming either. He stood with his arms crossed. His posture was closed off. Defensive. Like he didn't want us here but couldn't find a good reason to throw us out.

Perfect.

When my mother introduced me properly I stepped forward. I let the tears that had been threatening finally fall; made my voice break when I spoke.

"Alpha Cian, please. I know this is improper. I know I have no right to ask anything of you after what my sister did. We are lucky you even spared Silver Creek. But I need to see her. I need to know she's safe."

I'd practiced those words. Said them over and over in the ride until they sounded natural. Spontaneous. Like they were coming from a place of genuine worry.

Cian studied me. His eyes were sharp. Calculating. For a second I wondered if he could see through the act. If he knew I was lying.

But then his expression softened. Just slightly.

"Fia is safe," he said. His voice was measured. Careful. "I'm not a monster. Despite what happened, despite the circumstances behind our bond, she's my Luna. She's treated with the respect that position demands."

Relief flooded through me. Not because Fia was safe. Goddess no. But because he'd just confirmed what I needed to know.

He didn't love her. Didn't even particularly like her. She was an obligation. A responsibility. Something he was stuck with because of the mate bond.

This was going to be easier than I thought.

"Thank you," I said.

I put as much gratitude into my voice as I could manage. "Goddess, thank you. I've been so worried. Fia can be impulsive and foolish but she's still my sister. I still love her."

That last part was particularly inspired considering it rolled off my tongue like bile.

My mother moved beside me. Put her hand on my shoulder in that comforting mother way she did so well. "We understand this is a difficult situation for everyone involved. Fia's actions have caused pain to many people. But family is family. We couldn't rest without knowing she was being cared for properly."

Cian's jaw tightened slightly. Interesting. That had struck a nerve.

"She has her own quarters," he said. His tone was clipped now. "The Luna suite. She's been given everything she needs."

The Luna suite?

The words hit me like a slap. Fia was in the Luna suite. The most prestigious rooms in the house. The quarters traditionally reserved for the Alpha's mate and equal.

My mother made a small sound. Actual shock. She hadn't been expecting that either.

I had to move quickly. Had to smooth this over before my mother's surprise became obvious. "What my mom meant was... may we see her?" I made my voice tremble. Like I was barely holding myself together. "Please. Just for a few minutes. I need to look my sister in the eye and know she's truly alright."

It was a reasonable request. Any Alpha would grant it. But I saw Cian hesitate.

I also saw something flicker across his face. Uncertainty maybe. Or suspicion.

Then he spoke and I knew we had a problem.

"Of course you can see her. But it will be in the gardens. Not private quarters."

He suspected something was off.

My mother's smile tightened. I felt my own mask slip for just a second before I caught myself.

"The gardens?" My mother's voice was pleasant but I heard the question underneath.

"Yes. It's a beautiful afternoon. The gardens are lovely this time of year. And more appropriate for a supervised visit."

Supervised....

He was going to watch us. He was going to make sure we didn't have privacy with Fia. That complicated things. Made my plans significantly harder to execute.

"Supervised?" I let hurt creep into my voice. "You don't trust us... me with my own sister?"

"Well, I don't really know you," Cian said. It was simple and direct. "Considering our marriage did not quite happen. And given recent events, I think some caution is warranted."

Damn him. He was smarter than I'd given him credit for. Not trusting. Not easily manipulated. I chuckled at that. It was not easy but it was not impossible.

My mother tried one more angle. Suggested privacy was necessary. That we were family. That surely there was no need for such measures.

Cian shut her down. Called Fia manipulative. Said he was looking out for us.

But it felt more like he was protecting her.

The room went silent.

I studied him. Tried to read what he was thinking. He was watching us both now. His expression was neutral but his eyes were too sharp. Too focused.

He suspected something. Maybe not the full truth but something.

My mother recovered first. She smiled like this was all perfectly reasonable. "Of course. We understand. The gardens will be perfect."

I nodded quickly. Wiped at my eyes like I was still emotional. "Yes. Yes, that's fine. I just want to see her. That's all."

But inside I was frustrated. Angry. This wasn't going according to plan. I'd wanted privacy with Fia. Wanted to whisper all the details about Milo's death into her ear where no one else could hear. Wanted to watch her face crumble as I described every moment of his execution.

Now I'd have to be more careful. More subtle.

Chapter 39: The great guide to being a wicked half sister 2

FIA

I'd been pacing for twenty minutes when the knock came.

It had only been what... Twenty minutes of staring at my phone. Gruelling seconds of calling Milo over and over while watching the screen light up with his name and then go

dark again when he didn't answer. Twenty minutes of that text from Hazel burning into my brain.

Hello sister. Guess who is coming to see you.

The knock was soft. Polite. The kind of knock that somehow made everything worse because it was so normal. Like the world... my world hadn't just tilted sideways.

"Luna Fia?" A voice came through the door. I recognized it as the Omega from before.

"Yes?" I managed.

"Your sister is here to see you."

My stomach dropped.

I stopped pacing. Instead I just stood frozen in the middle of the Luna suite with my phone clutched in my hand. The screen was still open to Milo's contact. Still showing all those unanswered calls.

"Luna?" The servant knocked again.

I couldn't move. Couldn't speak. My throat had closed up. My chest felt tight like someone was sitting on it.

Hazel was here.

And Milo still wasn't answering.

Those two facts connected in my mind like puzzle pieces snapping together. Hazel wouldn't come here unless she'd already won. Unless she'd already made sure there was no one left to expose her. Unless Milo was...

No.

I shook my head and forced myself to breathe. Maybe I was wrong. I had to be.

Maybe this was about something else. Maybe Hazel was here to gloat or threaten me or play some other twisted game. Maybe Milo was fine. Maybe his phone died or he got busy or he decided this wasn't worth the risk.

But I knew better.

I knew my sister. A bit too much now. There was nothing I could put past her at this point.

"The Alpha requests your presence in the gardens," the servant said through the door. Her voice was getting impatient now. "Your sister wishes to see you."

The gardens. Not my room. Not somewhere private. That was odd because it felt like Cian was being careful. That should have made me feel better. It didn't.

I looked down at the rash on my arms. The red welts had faded some since this morning but they were still visible. Still itchy. I rubbed at them without thinking and felt the sting.

"I'll be right there," I managed to say.

My voice sounded hollow. Distant. Like it was coming from someone else.

I put my phone in the pocket of my dress. Smoothed down the fabric even though my hands were shaking. Looked at myself in the mirror near the door.

I looked terrible. Pale. Exhausted. Like someone who hadn't slept in days even though it had only been one night in that moldy room. My hair was a mess. My eyes were too wide. Too frightened.

I looked exactly like what I was.

Prey.

The walk to the gardens felt endless. The servant led the way and I followed like I was walking to my execution. My feet moved but I couldn't feel them. Everything felt numb and too sharp at the same time.

We passed other servants in the halls. They all looked at me. Some with curiosity. Some with barely hidden contempt. One omega actually smirked when she saw me. Like she knew something I didn't. Like she was in on the joke.

But it was probably all in my head. I was that terrified and it disgusted even me how weak I was.

The gardens were beautiful. I noticed that even through my panic. Flowers everywhere. Neat paths. Stone benches under shaded trees. It was the kind of place meant for peaceful walks and quiet conversations.

But there was nothing peaceful about this.

Hazel stood near a fountain. She was wearing a soft blue dress that made her look delicate. Innocent. Her hair was down and loose. She looked like she'd been crying. Her eyes were red. Her face was blotchy. When she saw me she gasped and covered her mouth with both hands.

"Fia!"

She ran toward me. Actually ran. Her arms outstretched like she was going to embrace me.

I froze. Because I knew what this was. Another performance.

She crashed into me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. She even had the effrontery to pull me close. Her body was shaking. Or maybe she was making it shake. With Hazel it was impossible to tell.

"Oh goddess," she sobbed into my shoulder. "I've been so worried! When you left... The state you left in... I just couldn't sleep... Knowing what you had done... Skollrend and its people would punish you. I had to come. I had to see you."

Her voice was loud enough to carry. Loud enough for the guards stationed around the garden to hear. Loud enough for the servants hovering near the entrance. She was performing. Putting on a show.

And then she whispered.

So quiet only I could hear.

"Did you really think Milo would save you?"

My blood turned to ice.

Hazel pulled back slightly but kept her hands on my shoulders. Still crying. Still shaking. To anyone watching we looked like two sisters reuniting after a tragedy. But her eyes were cold. Sharp. Triumphant.

"He's dead," she whispered. Her lips barely moved. "Executed at dawn for assaulting me."

The world tilted.

I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Milo. Dead. Executed.

"You're lying," I whispered back.

"Am I?" Hazel's smile was small. Cruel. "He screamed your name, you know. At the end. When they slit his throat. He called for you. It was very romantic. Very tragic. I cried even."

My knees wanted to give out. I locked them. Forced myself to stay upright even though everything in me was screaming to collapse.

"How could you?" The words came out broken. Barely audible.

"How could I?" Hazel pulled me close again. Pressed her cheek against mine like we were sharing sisterly comfort. "You know how persuasive and believable I can be when I cry. I told them he attacked me. That he tried to force himself on me. They believed every word."

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FIA

I was going to be sick. Right here in the garden. Right in front of everyone.

"He loved you," Hazel continued. Still whispering. Still crying for the audience around us. "If he wasn't so blinded by power, he would have been smart enough to stay away from me. I cared about him too actually. Or rather, his penis. Such a waste. But did you, you know, ever have it? No? Such a shame. He just had to ruin everything by getting a morality half way through. Saving you?! Please. I couldn't let that happen."

She pulled back then. Her face was wet with tears. Her expression was devastated. Oscar worthy. She should get a medal for this performance.

I wanted to claw her eyes out.

"Are they treating you well?" Hazel asked. Loud again. Concerned. The worried sister checking on her poor misguided sibling.

I stared at her. At this monster wearing my sister's face. At this thing that had just told me she'd murdered the only person who could have saved me.

"Why?" I asked. My voice was flat. Dead. "Are you worried I am being treated well? Afraid you didn't quite get what you wanted?"

Hazel's eyes flickered. Just for a second. Then the concerned expression was back.

"I'm in the Luna suite," I continued. Still flat. Still dead inside. "Luna of one of the most powerful packs. That's what you wanted, wasn't it? But I got it instead."

"I gave you my trash. Saying I wanted I is kind of insane."

"This place is grand and your plan to completely destroy me did not quite work out. I believe it makes your blood boil."

Hazel actually chuckled at my response. It was soft and quiet. Then she noticed the rash on my arms. Her eyes widened. She reached for my hands.

"Fia, what happened? Are you hurt?"

She grabbed my wrists and turned my arms over. Examining the welts. Making a show of concern. The worried sister noticing her sibling is injured.

I snatched my hands back.

"Don't touch me."

The words came out louder than I intended. Sharp. One of the guards shifted. I felt his attention focus on us.

Hazel's eyes went cold for just a moment. Then she was crying again. Reaching for me again.

"I'm sorry," she said. Loud enough for others to hear. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I just worry."

Then quieter. Just between us, her cruel streak came back in full form.

"Omegas do not have strong genes. Sister, are you already falling apart? *Tsk. Tsk Tsk.* And it hasn't even started yet."

My hands were shaking. I crossed my arms to hide it. To keep from doing something stupid like hitting her. Like screaming like a mad woman where everyone could hear. It would only make things worse for me. Who would even believe me? Hazel had already proven she could lie better than I could tell the truth.

"He'll never love you, you know." Hazel's voice was soft. Gentle. Like she was imparting sisterly wisdom. "He'll never forgive you. Not with what you did. Not while you're living in rooms meant for me. Wearing my clothes."

She stepped closer and touched my arm again. It was light. Delicate almost. The perfect picture of a concerned sister.

"You should see the way he looked at me today," she whispered. "When we arrived. When I told him I was worried about you. He looked at me like I was everything he'd lost. Like I was the one he actually wanted." She paused. Let that sink in. "If I wanted this, I could have it, you know. I could have him. I could have everything. But I don't need to rush. You're doing such a good job of destroying yourself already."

The rash on my arms was burning. Or maybe that was just my rage. My helplessness. My complete and utter defeat.

Because she was right.

I had nothing. No proof. No ally. No way out. Milo was dead. The truth died with him. And Hazel was standing here in front of me, crying fake tears, playing the devoted sister, making sure I knew exactly how trapped I was.

I looked at her. Really looked at her. At this person I'd grown up with. This person who'd shared a home with me. Who'd called me sister. Who'd smiled and laughed and pretended to care.

"I just want to ask you one thing," I said quietly.

Hazel tilted her head. Waiting.

"What did I ever do to deserve this?"

For a moment, just a moment, the mask slipped. I saw the real Hazel underneath. The cold. The calculating. The absolute absence of anything resembling love or compassion.

Then she smiled.

It was soft and sad to look at. The heartbroken sister trying to understand her sibling's choices.

"You existed," she whispered. "You were always there. Always in the way. Always taking things that should have been mine. Father's attention. The sweet pride of the pack before I turned them against you. You never knew when to disappear."

She touched my cheek. Her hand was cold even when the gesture was soft and tender.

"But don't worry," she said. "I'll make sure everyone knows how much I love you. How worried I am about you. How I tried so hard to help you despite what you did." Her smile widened slightly. "And when you finally break completely, when you can't take it anymore and do something desperate, everyone will remember that I was the good sister. The one who tried."

She was going to drive me insane. Literally. She was going to push and push until I snapped. Until I did something that proved I was unstable. Unfit. Sick. Twisted. Everything she'd claimed I was.

And there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Hazel pulled back. Wiped at her eyes. She then turned toward the entrance to the gardens and I saw Luna Isobel. Stepmother had not been there before or maybe I hadn't even noticed Isobel was there. But of course she was. Of course she was part of this.

"I should go," Hazel said. Loud again. "Before I upset you more. I just needed to see you. To know you're safe."

She hugged me one more time in a quick performative manner.

Then she whispered one last thing.

"Sweet dreams, sister. You need it in the nightmare that is now your life."

She walked away. Back to our mother. Back to their perfect performance of concerned family members checking on their wayward daughter and sister.

I stood there in the garden. Surrounded by flowers and fountains and beautiful things. With guards watching me. Servants whispering. And my sister's poison spreading through my veins like the mold that had been in my lungs.

Milo was dead.

The truth was dead.

And I was completely, utterly alone.

As Hazel and Isobel vanished from sight, the garden seemed to shrink around me. The guards returned to their posts. The whispers resumed. I let out a shaky breath, trying to steady myself, when my phone vibrated in my pocket.

A new message. From Hazel.

It was just a view once image.

I tapped it open, already dreading whatever cruelty she'd sent.

And then I saw it.

Milo's head, severed and laid on a silver platter like some grotesque offering. His eyes were still open. Staring. Empty.

The phone slipped from my hand. My stomach lurched. I turned away and gagged, bile burning my throat as the world spun out beneath me.