

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 311: Slim Pickings

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FIA

The ceiling held my eyes for a long time after I woke.

Cian's heartbeat was steady under my ear. Slow and deep. Still here. Still alive. I pressed my palm flat against his chest and felt it move and tried to let that be enough.

It was not enough though.

Moira's note lived somewhere behind my eyes now, the way certain things do when you have read them too many times to pretend they are not

there. *Sometimes poison is mercy for the doomed.* I had turned that sentence over and over until the words lost their shape and became something else entirely. A door. A direction. A thing I could no longer look away from.

Aldric had told me himself. Told me with that awful patience he had, the kind that came from a man who had never once had to hurry because the world had always bent toward him eventually. He had told me what the game was. He had told me the rules. He had practically laid out the board and waited for me to make my move, certain I would stay inside whatever lines he had drawn because that was what people like me did. We survived. We endured. We waited and hoped and tried to do things cleanly.

Hazel had changed that. What I had done with Hazel had been ugly and necessary and it had worked. Evil men lived fine in the world. They breathed easy and slept well and outlasted everything decent sent against them because decent was slow and decent made rules for itself that evil never followed. If I wanted to win this, I had to go lower than he ever could. I had to go to the place he would not expect from me.

I understood that now. Just like I understood what needed to be done with Hazel.

I turned my head and looked at Cian.

He was asleep with his mouth slightly parted and one arm now thrown over my waist like even in sleep some part of him was checking that I had not gone anywhere. There was a small crease along his jaw from the pillow. His lashes were darker against his skin in the low light.

I raised my hand and pressed it to his cheek.

I'm sorry, I thought, because I could not say it aloud without waking him and I was not ready for him to be awake yet. I'm sorry for keeping this from you. I do hope you forgive me.

The apology sat in my chest, real and aching, but it did not change anything. He would be angry. He would be frightened. He would want to be the one to do it, or at least to stand beside me while I did, and I could not give him that. Not this time. Some protection worked precisely because the other person did not know they were being protected.

I didn't even realize when the words started to come out.

"I never got to protect my first family. I had been too young and too ignorant and by the time I understood what was happening it was already done. I had lived with the shape of that failure ever since, the particular grief of not knowing what you were losing until it was gone. I am not going to do it again. I am not going to stand at another grave and catalogue everything I could have done differently. Cian, you have to be fine."

I waved a hand over his face but he seemed deep in sleep. I couldn't peep through the bond because I was again actively shielding.

It didn't matter though. He didn't hear a thing.

What mattered was that I would protect him with everything I had. Every crooked, quiet, ugly thing available to me. Every resource and every risk and every part of myself willing to go somewhere dark he could not follow.

I pressed my lips to his forehead. He stirred slightly, not waking, just sighing and settling deeper. I held still until his breathing smoothed back out. Then I slipped out from under his arm, slow and careful, and sat on the edge of the bed for a moment with the cold air of the room settling onto my skin.

I pulled open his drawer and found a loose shirt, a pair of drawstring trousers. I pulled them on. They smelled like him. I stood in the middle of the room and breathed that in for one moment and then I left.

The infirmary was quiet at this hour. Most of the beds were empty. The lights had been turned low, casting everything in a warm amber that made the room feel smaller and older than it was. Thorne was at the far end of the room, making notes on something with the unhurried focus of a man who had learned to find peace in night shifts.

He looked up when he heard me come in.

"You look well," he said. "How was the tonic?"

"It helped."

He studied my face for a moment in the careful way he and Maren did, looking for the thing behind the thing. "Maren told me some of what happened. So you're a... miracle worker, then."

"I wish."

"I don't think you understand the gravity of what you are." His voice dropped, and he leaned in slightly like he was sharing something classified. "A healer from legend, Luna Fia. Those are extinct. You are proof that the age of legends has returned. I wonder what that means for werewolf society."

The memory came unbidden. My mother sitting against the wall. My grandmother standing up. The way she lifted her chin and walked out like she had finally been given permission. Suffering and endless pain. That was what it meant.

"I don't know about that," I said. "But I'm here to ask you for something."

He set his pen down. "Oh. What is that?"

"Can I get a Hazmat suit? And a ziplock bag."

The silence that followed had a particular texture to it. Thorne's eyebrows climbed his forehead slowly, like they were making the journey reluctantly.

"A Hazmat suit," he repeated. "For what?"

"Trust me, you do not want to know."

"As much as I would love to simply close my eyes and accommodate that," he said, and his voice was careful now, the careful of someone choosing their words with full awareness of what was at stake, "I cannot. The need for a Hazmat suit tells me you want to put yourself in some kind of danger. Luna Fia." He said my name like it was its own sentence. "Please tell me what you need it for."

I turned toward the door. "Forget it."

"You do know I will have to mention this to Alpha Cian."

I stopped.

I turned back.

"Please don't." I heard the edge in my own voice and did not bother to soften it. "Swear to me you won't."

He folded his hands on the table in front of him. "I'll consider it. If you tell me what you need the suit for. I'm just a little worried."

I stood there in the low amber light in Cian's oversized clothes and weighed my options against each other. They were not good options. They were the options available to me at two in the morning with a plan forming in my head that I had not fully finished yet.

"Fine," I said. "I want to go into the surrounding forest and get Mourning Moon."

The color changed in his face. Not dramatically, not the kind of thing you could point to exactly, but it changed. His eyes widened slowly, the way eyes do when the brain is processing something it did not expect to have to process.

"What the hell would you need Mourning Moon for." It was not really a question. It was what a person said when they already understood the implications and were hoping they were wrong.

"I told you what I need the suit for," I said. "That's all you're getting. Don't tell Cian."

I turned back to the door.

"Wait."

I stopped again.

Thorne was quiet for a moment. I could hear him thinking. It was the specific silence of someone doing rapid calculations they did not particularly enjoy.

"If I don't give you the suit," he said slowly, "you'll most likely find a way to get into the forest without it and put yourself in genuine danger. And Alpha Cian will most likely take that out on us." He exhaled through his nose. "I'll give you the Hazmat suit on one condition."

I already knew what he was going to say.

"You're going to follow me."

"I am."

"No."

"Yes."

I crossed my arms. "I can handle this myself. I've had a life-threatening accident and came out unscathed. I fixed someone. I think I have demonstrated some capacity for self-sufficiency."

Thorne laughed. It was a short, dry sound that showed how genuinely amused he was. "Very compelling argument. Unfortunately, even healers from the age of legends weren't invincible either. It's me and the Hazmat suit, or I tattle."

"Aren't you too old to use that word?"

"Very funny," he said, in a tone that meant he found it moderately funny and was not going to admit it. He stood up from his chair, unhurrying himself with the dignity of a man who had made his decision and was comfortable with it. "You're allowed to refuse to answer my questions. But I will ask them."

"Fine."

"Fine," he agreed. He moved toward the storage cabinet at the back of the room and pulled it open. "I'll go get the suits."

He said it the way a person said something they had already made peace with, but there was something underneath it. A tightness in his jaw. There was a pause before he reached for the cabinet door.

"Mourning Moon," he muttered, mostly to himself, as he pulled the door open.

"Scares you?" I asked.

"Terrifies me," he said plainly. "Absolutely terrifies me. You should know firsthand how scary it can be. But here we are."

He reached inside.

Here we were indeed.