

To ruin an Omega

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ALDRIC

The warmth of the wine I had drunk earlier still sat in my stomach, leaving behind the dull, floating buzz that usually softened my thoughts and slowed the world around me. That haze however disappeared the moment my eyes settled on Madeline. The fog cleared with sudden sharpness, leaving my mind unpleasantly alert.

Because she was staring straight at me.

And she was shaking.

At first I thought it might be the wind or nerves or something small, something that could be explained away with a few calm words, but the longer I looked the more obvious it became that the trembling was supposed to look real and far from subtle. Her shoulders jerked slightly with each breath. Her hands were pressed tight against her chest, fingers curled in the fabric of her dress like she was holding herself together.

Her face had gone pale. The sickly, drained color of someone who believed they were in real danger. Her eyes were wide and glassy, and even from a distance I could see the shine of tears gathering there.

She looked at me as though she had just seen something terrible.

Something unnatural.

Something she had not expected to face again.

I took a step toward them, confused more than anything else. My mind was already turning through possibilities of what could be pulled now.

Cian's hands was definitely in this. But how? How would he have sunk his canines in?

What move would Madeline also pull because there was no way she was going to endanger her father and his family.

Madeline screamed before I had the chance.

The sound ripped through the courtyard so suddenly and so violently that several heads turned at once. It was not the startled cry someone made when surprised. It came out rough and broken, like the sound had been dragged up from deep inside her chest.

She stumbled backward as she screamed, nearly losing her balance on the gravel.

Her arm lifted and she pointed directly at me.

"Let him stay where he is!"

The words carried across the open space with unpleasant clarity.

People who had been moving through the courtyard slowed their steps. A pair of sentinels near the outer wall stopped talking and turned to look. Two servants carrying a crate froze where they stood, uncertain whether to leave or stay.

Within seconds, attention had shifted.

Every face began turning toward the center of the courtyard.

Toward Madeline.

And more importantly toward me.

Madeline spun away from me then, rushing toward Valentine with the desperate speed of someone who believed they were running toward safety. She collided with him clumsily, her hands grabbing onto the front of his suit while loud, shaking sobs tore out of her.

The performance would have been impressive if I had not known her.

Even knowing her, it was difficult not to be struck by how convincing it looked.

Valentine reacted exactly the way a concerned father should react. His arms came around her shoulders, steady and protective, pulling her close while he lowered his head toward her in quiet reassurance. One hand moved gently through her hair as if he were trying to calm a frightened child.

Then he looked up.

His gaze settled on me with an expression that had lost every trace of warmth.

"What did you do to her?" he demanded. "It took a lot to find my daughter. And when I did, she was keen on taking her life because she believed it was what needed to be done to protect the people that she loved. Now she tells me you are responsible for

these vile ideas that she is having. So again, I ask, what did you say and do to my daughter?"

The question carried far more accusation than curiosity.

It was a bold thing for him to say too, given the power I had over him so I just had to wonder, what exactly was new that they had in their arsenal that made them feel they would be safe from me?

Was it Gabriel? Was that it?

I had to let that go for a hot second. I was being accused of something after all.

For a moment I considered answering calmly, dismissing the whole scene as some strange misunderstanding. My mouth had just begun to form the first word when Madeline spoke again from where she clung to her father.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed, the words breaking apart between breaths. "I'm so sorry. I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't."

Cian stepped forward at that point, moving just enough to enter the center of the growing circle without drawing attention to the movement itself. His face remained calm in the way he always preferred when speaking publicly, though there was a sharp awareness behind his eyes when they briefly flicked toward me.

"Madeline," he said, his voice patient and measured. "What are you talking about?" He turned to Valentine too. "What exactly is even happening?"

She turned toward him slowly, lifting her head from Valentine's shoulder with visible effort. Her cheeks were wet with tears now, the streaks catching the light as she struggled to steady her breathing.

"He made me do it," she said.

A quiet murmur rippled through the small crowd that had begun forming around us.

She swallowed, wiping her face with the back of her hand as if ashamed of her own emotions.

"He manipulated me. He forced me to spy on you. To sabotage the pack whenever he needed it. He told me I had to stay close to you and keep influence over you so that I could report everything you were doing. Everything you said."

Her voice trembled again.

"He threatened me."

The courtyard seemed to grow quieter with every word she spoke.

"He said if I refused, if I stopped helping him, he would..."

Her sentence broke apart there, dissolving into another wave of sobbing as she buried her face against Valentine again.

By then the courtyard had filled far more than I liked. Sentinels had moved closer without being ordered. Several pack members stood near the steps leading into the main hall, watching with the careful attention people showed when something important is unfolding in front of them.

Madeline lifted her head again after a moment.

"I tried," she continued weakly. "I tried to do what he asked because I was afraid. But every time I lied to you, every time I carried his messages or passed along information, it made me feel sick."

She shook her head slowly, like the memory itself disgusted her.

"So I ran away. I thought if I just disappeared, it would stop. I had no coven anymore after all. So I couldn't return home. I am not financially healthy either. But I just... I just thought if I left the pack and stayed somewhere quiet long enough, maybe everything would end."

She drew a shaky breath.

"But even then, his calls kept coming. Over and over again."

Her eyes shifted toward me.

"He wouldn't leave me alone."

She straightened slightly then, drawing new strength from the false fear she was displaying.

"I realized if I kept hiding, he would just keep hurting people and killing myself would be a waste of time."

Her arm lifted again.

Her finger pointed at me.

"Cian," she said, her voice trembling with dramatic conviction, "your uncle is the worst kind of monster."

The accusation settled into the air with heavy finality.

Conversations around the courtyard had stopped completely now. No one spoke, though I could hear small movements from the surrounding crowd as people adjusted their stance or leaned slightly closer to hear what would happen next.

Madeline continued speaking before anyone else could respond.

"It's not just him too," she said, her voice rising with urgency. "There are others involved too."

She looked directly at Cian.

"Your Beta, Ronan, has been helping him."

Chapter 352: He without sin 2

ALDRIC

A few heads turned immediately at the mention of that name.

"And there are more," she continued quickly. "So many more people working with him."

She began listing names then.

The first few tightened something in my chest because I recognized them immediately. People I had met privately. Individuals who had provided useful information or influence when the situation required it.

But the list did not stop there.

More names followed.

Some of them belonged to people I had never heard of.

Others sounded suspiciously convenient.

It took only a few seconds for the realization to settle into place.

Cian had prepared this.

He had mixed truth with fiction so carefully that any attempt to defend myself would risk exposing the parts that were actually real. If I denied everything, someone might eventually uncover the pieces that were true. If I tried to argue the details, I might accidentally confirm something worse.

The trap was elegant in its simplicity.

Madeline's voice grew louder as she spoke, her fear turning into something frantic.

"I was terrified," she cried. "I thought he would kill me."

She paused just long enough for the next words to sink in.

"Just like he killed Ophelia."

The courtyard fell completely silent.

Someone near the back gasped aloud, the sound sharp and involuntary. The name carried weight here, considering what that name had almost caused Skollrend, enough that people immediately understood what Madeline was implying. I heard fabric shift as several people turned to look at one another, whispers beginning to ripple through the gathering crowd.

Shock moved through them slowly at first.

Then faster.

Like a wave spreading outward from the center of the courtyard.

Someone moved behind me.

I didn't turn to look, but I knew who it was before she even spoke. Morrigan had a way of stepping into a room that carried its own kind of presence, like the air shifted to make space for her. Her voice cut through the murmuring crowd, sharp with confusion.

"What does that mean? That doesn't sound like Aldric at all."

A few heads turned toward her, though most people were still staring at me like I had suddenly grown horns. I kept my eyes forward. If I started looking around now, if I began searching faces for support or doubt, it would show too much.

Elara was there too.

I caught sight of her off to the side of the gathering crowd. She stood with her arms crossed tightly over her chest, shoulders stiff in a way that reminded me of when she was a child trying not to cry in front of strangers. Her expression had twisted into something hard to read. Anger, certainly. Disbelief too. The two emotions sat uneasily together on her face.

"Yeah," she said, her voice carrying clearly across the courtyard. "That doesn't sound like my father at all."

The words might have helped.

Under different circumstances they would have.

But the moment had already slipped too far out of my hands for simple loyalty to fix it.

Ronan forced his way through the crowd next. He pushed between two sentinels with the blunt determination of a man who had no patience for politeness. His face had gone red with anger, the veins along his neck standing out as he stepped forward.

"This is insane," he snapped. "This woman is insane."

His fists were clenched so tightly that the knuckles had gone pale.

Several people murmured agreement.

Others just watched.

And through all of it I said nothing.

Not a word.

It wasn't restraint. It wasn't some calculated silence meant to intimidate them or make them wonder what I was thinking. The truth was much simpler than that.

I couldn't speak.

If I opened my mouth right then, I would have to choose between denying everything or confirming it. Either option carried its own set of problems, and both of them led directly into the trap Cian had spent so much time building.

If I denied it immediately, loudly and defensively, I would look exactly like what they expected a guilty man to look like. Desperate. Cornered. Scrambling for excuses.

If I confirmed even a part of it, the entire structure would collapse on top of me.

So I stood there.

I let the noise grow around me while the courtyard filled with tension and whispers. The murmuring crowd felt like a living thing pressing in from every direction. I could feel their eyes on my back, on my face, on the slightest shift of my shoulders.

Through all of it, Cian watched me.

His gaze never left mine.

He didn't look furious the way I might have expected. There was no triumph in his expression either, no smug satisfaction at seeing me dragged into the open like this.

He simply looked calm.

Patient.

He probably saw himself as a hunter who had already laid the trap and now had nothing left to do but wait for the animal to realize it had stepped into it.

After a long moment he spoke.

"Uncle."

The word came out quietly, almost gently.

That alone made several people shift uncomfortably.

"Would you like to respond to these vile accusations?"

The way he said it was clever.

Soft enough that it sounded reasonable, respectful even, but the question itself carried the weight of a blade wrapped carefully in silk.

Because he knew what silence would look like.

If I stayed quiet much longer the crowd would start filling the gaps themselves. Silence becomes confession very quickly when people are already primed to believe the worst.

But speaking meant stepping onto ground he had prepared.

Ground I couldn't see clearly yet.

The corner of my mouth twitched.

Then I laughed.

The absurdity of the whole situation pressed down on me all at once, and the only response that felt honest was amusement.

It was brilliant.

Infuriating, but brilliant.

If I was the one who set this up, I would have enjoyed it.

He had maneuvered me into this position step by careful step, and I hadn't even realized how much the board was shifting under my feet.

I looked directly at him.

"Do you believe her?"

For the first time since this began, Cian hesitated.

He pretended to at least.

"She left here this morning," he said slowly, choosing each word. "On what seemed like her own volition."

His eyes flicked briefly toward Madeline before returning to me.

"And I saw how you reacted when she was gone."

He exhaled through his nose.

"I don't want to feel this way. I don't want to believe it. But..."

His voice trailed off just enough to make the hesitation sound real.

Just enough to convince the crowd he was struggling with the idea rather than embracing it.

I scoffed.

The sound came out sharper than I intended, loud enough to slice through the murmuring around us.

"Well," I said, "I'm not interested in this game."

I let the words sit there for a moment.

Let them breathe.

"So yeah," I added with a small shrug, "maybe she's not lying."

The courtyard erupted.

It wasn't an explosion in the literal sense, but the surge of noise that followed felt just as violent. People began shouting over each other immediately, the quiet tension breaking apart into overlapping waves of outrage and confusion.

Someone gasped loudly.

Ronan started yelling at me in shock.

Elara's voice rose in protest somewhere to my right, while Morrigan demanded to know what the hell was really going on.

The sound piled on top of itself until it became almost impossible to separate one voice from another.

I ignored it.

All of it.

Instead I turned slowly to face the crowd.

Faces stared back at me from every direction. Some looked furious. Others looked stunned, like they were still trying to decide whether they had heard me correctly.

"Is that what I'm supposed to say?" I asked calmly.

The noise around me faded slightly as people struggled to understand what I meant.

"My admission?"

My voice remained steady, almost conversational.

"These accusations are far from the truth. Anyone standing here should be able to speak about my character. I am not a traitor. I would never be a traitor."

I gestured broadly toward the estate behind us.

"I love Skollrend," I continued. "I have spent my entire life protecting it. I would never do anything to harm it."

Then I pointed directly at Madeline.

She stiffened under the weight of the gesture.

"This witch is a liar."

The words landed heavily.

I didn't rush to fill the silence that followed. Letting them settle was more effective than repeating them.

"And I demand a trial," I added after a moment, "in the elder's circle."

That stirred the crowd in a different way.

Whispers began spreading again, though this time the tone had shifted. The elders' circle carried weight. Tradition. Authority.

If I was the one bringing that up, it begged the question; was U actually lying?

Still though, people glanced toward one another uncertainly.

Cian still hadn't moved.

He stood exactly where he had been before, watching me with that same patient expression, as if he were waiting to see whether I would continue digging the hole deeper.

And maybe I was.

Because I could feel it now.

The pressure tightening around my chest.

The slow realization that the careful balance I had maintained for years was gone completely now.

Cian had learned.

At some point along the way he had stopped being the boy I thought I understood. He had watched, listened, studied every move I made until he finally understood how the game worked.

And now he was playing it.

Better than I had expected.

My eyes moved back to Madeline.

Her face was still wet with tears, her hands gripping her father's suit like she might collapse if she let go. Anyone who didn't know her would believe the fear written across her features.

Then I looked at Cian again.

He met my gaze without hesitation.

And for the first time in years, I felt something stir in my chest that I hadn't experienced in a long time.

Fear.

Not the paralyzing kind. All emotions had usefulness.

This turned out to be the useful kind. I had actually gotten cocky somewhere across the line. That wouldn't repeat itself with the second and third chance I intended to give myself.

I relished it when it came. It sharpened my senses and forced my mind to move faster. It was the kind of adrenaline I needed to remind me that the fight wasn't over yet.

I smiled.

If this truly was the moment everything came apart, then I intended to make it worth remembering.

Without another word I started walking toward them.

The crowd parted automatically as I moved forward. People stepped aside, giving me a clear path through the center of the courtyard, though many of them continued staring like they expected something violent to happen at any moment.

I stopped a few feet away from Cian, Valentine, and Madeline.

"Surely, I am not asking for too much."

"A trial then," Cian said quietly. "In the elder's circle."

My eyes remained on Cian.

"Let's see what they have to say about all of this."

For a moment, neither of us moved.

The air between us tightened, thick with the weight of what had just happened.

Then Cian spoke.

His voice was low, calm, and far too certain.

"Take them."

The sentinels moved at once. Steel boots struck the earth as they stepped forward, forming a tight circle around both Ronan and me before either of us could react. Hands closed on our arms, firm and unyielding.

Cian did not raise his voice again.

He did not need to.

We were already surrounded.

Chapter 353: Red wine Problems 1

FIA

I heard the noise first. Voices rising in waves from the courtyard below. The kind of sound that pulled people from their rooms and made them forget whatever they had been doing before. Sharp and urgent and impossible to ignore.

Thorne looked up from where he had been sitting near the window. Maren stopped mid-sentence. We all exchanged glances that said the same thing.

Something had happened.

I crossed the room quickly and pulled open the door. The hallway outside was already filling with people moving toward the stairs. Servants pressed themselves against the walls to let others pass. A guard rushed by without acknowledging anyone. The noise grew louder as I started down.

Thorne and Maren followed close behind me.

We reached the main floor and pushed through the gathering crowd. Bodies pressed in from every direction. People stood on their toes trying to see over shoulders. Others whispered questions no one seemed able to answer. I squeezed between two sentinels and finally broke through to the front.

Then I saw it.

Aldric stood in the center of the courtyard. Ronan was beside him. They were surrounded by sentinels who had formed a tight ring around both of them. You could catch the bullet proof vest under their suit as their hands rested on weapons. The air felt charged in a way that made my skin prickle.

Cian was there too.

He stood a few feet away from his uncle with his hands loose at his sides. His face was calm which told me everything that I needed to know about what was happening.

Madeline was apparently back too and was clinging to... My breath caught. It was him. The evil monster from my dreams. I looked away quickly because of how much the man unsettled me and looked back at Madeline. Her face was streaked with tears. Her shoulders shook with sobs that carried across the courtyard loud enough for everyone to hear.

The man... whose name I could now never forget; Valentine, had one arm around her. His expression was hard and he was just as angry.

I tried to piece it together. I tried to understand what the scene I was looking at was entirely about.

Then Cian spoke.

His voice was quiet, almost gentle.

"Take them."

The sentinels moved immediately.

Hands closed around Aldric's arms. More grabbed Ronan. Neither of them fought back. Ronan looked like he wanted to. His face had gone red and his jaw was tight. But he stayed still. Aldric just smiled.

It was the strangest thing.

He smiled like he had expected this. Like it amused him.

The crowd erupted into noise again. People shouted questions. Others demanded to know what was happening.

"Goddess, is Alpha Aldric really a traitor?"

"This doesn't make sense."

"I don't believe that witch. This is why they fucking burned their kind in Salem."

"The trial will reveal all, won't it? He was the one who brought it up too. So could he really be guilty?"

A woman near the back started crying. The sounds layered over themselves until it became impossible to pick out individual voices.

I stood frozen.

My brain was trying to catch up. Trying to make sense of what I was seeing.

Cian had done this.

Whatever this was, he had orchestrated it. The way he stood there watching his uncle get dragged away told me everything I needed to know. This had been planned. Carefully. Methodically.

And it had worked.

Aldric and Ronan were hauled toward the main hall and from there, they would be bundled to the dungeons.

The sentinels moved quickly and efficiently. Like they had been given orders ahead of time and knew exactly what to do.

I watched them disappear through the doors.

That made me remember the poison.

The one I had spent the night getting and the morning preparing. The one Morrigan was now supposed to slip into Aldric's food or drink.

It felt pointless now.

Cian had already cornered him. Already dragged him into the open in front of everyone. If Aldric was found guilty during the trial, it would be over. They would execute him. No poison was needed. No secret plan. Just justice carried out the way it was supposed to be.

To think I didn't have faith in this ever happening.

That was when I felt a hand on my arm.

I turned and found the grand Luna, Morrigan standing beside me. Her face was pale. Paler than it should have been. Her eyes looked glassy and unfocused. She swayed slightly on her feet.

Then she leaned in close.

Her voice was so quiet I almost missed it.

"I did it."

My stomach dropped.

"You did what?"

Morrigan's fingers tightened on my arm. She pulled me closer. Her breath was shallow.

"The problem now is that I ingested some of it."

My heart stopped.

"And I need you to save me."

I grabbed her by the shoulders. My hands shook. Everything around us seemed to blur at the edges. The noise from the crowd faded into something distant and unimportant.

"You poisoned him?"

She nodded weakly.

"When?"

"Earlier. We had wine."

I wanted to scream at her. I wanted to shake her and demand to know what she had been thinking. But there was no time for that. Not now.

I looked over my shoulder. Thorne and Maren were still standing where I had left them. Both of them were watching the sentinels drag Aldric away. Neither had noticed what was happening yet.

"Thorne. Maren."

They turned immediately.

"Help me get her to the infirmary."

Thorne moved first. He crossed the distance between us in three long strides and caught Morrigan's other arm before she could stumble. Maren followed close behind.

We half-carried her through the crowd. People stepped aside when they saw us coming. No one asked questions. They were too distracted by what had just happened in the courtyard.

The infirmary was empty when we arrived.

I pushed the door open with my shoulder and guided Morrigan inside. Thorne helped me lower her onto one of the beds. She sank into the mattress with a soft groan. Her head rolled to the side.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

My voice sounded steadier than I felt.

Morrigan blinked slowly. "I only have a light headache. But it could be in my mind."

"It's not."

I crossed the room quickly and pulled open the cabinet where Thorne and Maren kept supplies. My hands moved on instinct. Reaching for the moon water. The wolfsbane root. The purple kind which worked best for cases like this. Then nettle.

"That's a symptom," I added.

I set everything on the counter and grabbed the mortar and pestle from the shelf above. My fingers fumbled with the wolfsbane root as I tried to break it into smaller pieces. It took longer than it should have. My hands wouldn't stop shaking.

"Why would you risk your life like that?"

Morrigan didn't answer right away.

I glanced over my shoulder. She was watching me from the bed. Her eyes were clearer now. Focused.

"I didn't want him to suspect a thing."

I turned back to the counter. The wolfsbane root crumbled under the pestle. I added the nettle next. Ground them together until they formed a rough powder.

"It had to be as natural as I could try," she continued. Her voice was soft. "And I had a feeling my daughter in law was capable of fixing this."

Chapter 354: Red wine Problems 2

FIA

I poured a small measure of moon water into the mortar. The liquid turned the powder into a thin paste. I stirred it carefully. The mixture needed to be smooth and consistent. Any lumps could affect how quickly it worked.

My chest felt tight.

"It was dumb."

The words came out sharper than I intended. It was probably rude as hell but I couldn't mind that. I was genuinely worried.

"You didn't have to put your life on the line to take down that bastard."

Tears burned at the corners of my eyes. I blinked them back. Now was not the time to fall apart.

"Anything could have happened," I said. My voice cracked. "Anything. Your safety is paramount."

I heard the bed creak behind me.

Then Morrigan's hand touched mine.

I turned.

She had sat up slightly. Her fingers wrapped around my wrist in a warm and steady manner.

"You know why I did it."

Her eyes held mine.

"For your safety. For Cian. If I achieved that, then I was fine perishing."

The tears spilled over.

I wiped them away with the back of my free hand. Then I picked up the bowl with the paste and moved back to the bed. Morrigan settled against the pillows again. I sat beside her and brought the bowl to her lips.

"Please, open."

She obeyed.

I tilted the bowl carefully. The paste slid onto her tongue. She swallowed it in small amounts. Her face twisted at the taste. Wolfsbane was bitter and unpleasant. But necessary.

When the bowl was empty I set it aside.

"Well," I said quietly, "it seems what we did was an overkill."

Morrigan managed a weak smile.

"Cian was planning something and whatever he planned worked. Now Aldric could die in that cell or during the trial. It might raise a few questions."

She swallowed the last of the paste. Her throat worked slowly.

"A monster takes himself out to preserve his dignity," she said. "I don't know. It seems very likely. Who would question that?"

I reached for her hand. Her fingers closed around mine.

"It seems it might all work out in the end after all."

Morrigan's breathing had already started to even out. The paste was working. The wolfsbane would counteract the poison. The nettle would help her body process what remained. Moon water bound it all together and accelerated the healing.

She would be fine.

"Your vision will be old news," she said. "So stop worrying."

Her voice was getting quieter. Drowsier.

"If he does die in a cell... Or he somehow survives long enough to be charged by the elder's circle, this is a done deal either way."

I wanted to believe that.

I wanted to feel the relief that should have come with knowing Aldric had finally been caught. That justice was coming for him. That everything we had planned and risked had led to this moment.

But something gnawed at me.

"I don't know," I said. "I heard he brought up the elder's circle by himself. What if he's plotting something?"

Morrigan's eyes were half-closed now. The paste had started pulling her toward sleep. It was part of the healing process. Her body needed rest to recover.

"Nothing he could be plotting could save him."

I held her hand tighter.

"Yeah. I guess you're right."

Thorne cleared his throat behind me. I had almost forgotten he and Maren were still in the room. They had stayed near the door. Watching and waiting.

"Is she going to be okay?" Thorne asked.

I nodded. "She'll be fine. The paste will work."

Maren stepped closer. Her eyes moved between Morrigan and me.

"What happened to her?"

"She poisoned Aldric and to sell it, she has to take some too."

The words hung in the air.

Maren's expression shifted to surprise then understanding, before morphing to something that looked almost like respect.

"Did it work?" she asked. "Will that cruel bastard perish?"

"Probably. But I don't know yet."

Morrigan's breathing had deepened. She was asleep now. Her face had relaxed. The color was already starting to return to her cheeks.

I stood slowly and pulled the blanket up over her shoulders.

"We'll know soon enough," I said.

Thorne moved to the window. He looked out toward the courtyard. The noise had died down outside. I supposed most of the crowd had dispersed. Only a few people remained. I noticed guards still stood stationed at their posts. Servants whispering to each other near the fountain.

"Cian moved fast," Thorne said.

He wasn't wrong.

Whatever my husband had planned, he had executed it perfectly. Aldric had been cornered in front of everyone. Publicly accused. Arrested. There was no way for him to wriggle out of this quietly. No backroom deals. No manipulation.

This was out in the open now.

And that terrified me as much as it relieved me.

Because Aldric was probably going to be most dangerous when he was cornered.

The way he smiled when things went wrong. The way he seemingly adapted and shifted, while probably finding new angles to exploit.

He had called for the elder's circle himself.

That meant he had a plan.

Or at least he thought he did.

I walked over to the cabinet and started putting the supplies away. The remaining moon water went back on the top shelf. The wolfsbane root and nettle returned to their labeled containers. My hands moved through the familiar motions while my mind turned over possibilities.

What could Aldric possibly have planned?

The elder's circle was supposed to be impartial. They were supposed to follow the rigid law. But I knew better.

There was no avenue to pretend to not see it when I had been around Hazel's trial.

Though objectively, if the evidence was strong enough, they would find him guilty. And if they found him guilty, the punishment for treason was death.

Unless he had leverage.

Unless he knew something that would turn the trial in his favor.

I closed the cabinet door harder than I meant to. The sound echoed through the quiet infirmary.

Maren looked over at me. "You okay?"

"Fine."

I wasn't fine.

I was scared.

Not of Aldric himself. Not anymore. But of what might happen if this didn't work. If somehow he found a way to survive this. To twist the narrative. To walk away clean while everyone who had stood against him paid the price.

Thorne turned from the window.

"We should let her rest," he said.

I nodded.

He was right. Morrigan needed sleep. And I needed to find Cian. Needed to know what his next plan was. Needed to understand what happened next.

We left the infirmary quietly. The door clicked shut behind us.

The hallway outside was empty. Most people had returned to their rooms or their duties. The estate had settled back into something that almost resembled normal. But the tension remained. It hung in the air like smoke. Invisible but undeniable.

I could still see Aldric's face in my mind.

That smile.

The way he had looked at Cian.

Like this was all part of some game he was still playing.

And maybe it was.

Maybe we hadn't won yet.

Maybe this was just another move on a board that was far more complicated than any of us realized.

I pushed the thought away.

Morrigan was right.

Nothing Aldric could be plotting would save him now.

We had him.

Finally.

And soon this would all be over.