

# **To ruin an Omega #Chapter 361: Ain't it Delicate - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 361: Ain't it Delicate**

*Chapter 361: Ain't it Delicate*

## **FIA**

I stayed against the wall for what felt like an eternity but was probably only a few moments. My legs still trembled. The taste of bile clung to the back of my throat no matter how many times I swallowed.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway.

I looked up and saw Maren hurrying toward me. Her eyes went wide when she took in the scene. Me slumped against the stone. The mess on the floor.

"Goddess, are you alright?"

I tried to straighten. "I'm fine."

Maren's gaze dropped to the vomit pooling near my feet. "Clearly not."

She closed the distance between us and put a hand on my shoulder. Her touch was steady and grounding.

"Can you stand?"

I pushed off the wall. The hallway tilted immediately. My vision swam and I felt my knees buckle.

Maren caught me before I could fall. Her arm went around my waist and she pulled me against her side.

"I've got you," she said.

She turned her head and called out loudly. "Someone, please. I need help here."

Two Omegas appeared around the corner moments later. They stopped dead when they saw us. Their faces registered shock as they took in the state of me and the floor.

"Please take care of this," Maren said, gesturing at the mess.

Both Omegas nodded quickly and hurried off, presumably to fetch cleaning supplies.

Maren adjusted her grip on me. "We should head to the infirmary."

I wanted to argue. To insist I was fine. But another wave of dizziness swept through me and I swallowed the protest.

"Perhaps the mourning moon somehow affected you," Maren said as we started moving. Her voice was calm but there was an edge of concern beneath it.

I shook my head weakly. "It doesn't feel like it."

"Please do not be stubborn."

I let her lead me down the hall. Each step felt like wading through water. My body was heavy and uncooperative.

We turned another corner and nearly ran straight into that man; Valentine and Madeline.

Madeline's eyes went to me immediately. They widened. Her gaze swept over how I leaned heavily on Maren, how my face must have looked pale and clammy.

We exchanged looks. Hers was filled with something I couldn't quite read. Worry maybe. Or curiosity. She opened her mouth like she wanted to say something but then closed it again.

She then walked past without a word.

Her father, Valentine, however, didn't move.

He lingered in the hallway. His eyes fixed on me with that same unsettling intensity I had noticed earlier.

"You don't look so good," he said.

Maren's grip on me tightened. "Could you please excuse us."

Valentine raised his hands slightly. "I apologize." He paused. "It is just that you remind me a lot of someone."

My skin prickled. A shudder ran through me that had nothing to do with the nausea.

"I hope after all of this gets done we can truly get to know each other, Luna Fia."

The way he said my name made something cold settle in my chest.

Madeline walked back and grabbed her father by the arm. "Not the time."

She pulled him away. Valentine let himself be led but his eyes stayed on me until they turned the corner and disappeared from view.

I watched the empty space where they had been. That cold feeling didn't fade.

Maren slowly guided me forward again. "Come on. Let's get you checked."

The infirmary doors were already open when we arrived. Inside, the space was quiet. Thorne wasn't back yet. My mother-in-law, Luna Morrigan still slept in one of the cots on the far side of the room. Her breathing was soft and even now.

Maren helped me to a chair near the workspace. I sank into it gratefully.

"I'll concoct a cure for safety," she said, already moving toward the shelves of herbs and bottles.

"I was careful," I said. My voice came out weaker than I intended. "It wasn't mourning moon. This is something else."

Maren paused and looked back at me. "What do you need then?"

I took a slow breath. My heart was beating faster now. Not from fear exactly. Something closer to anticipation.

"Blue vervain," I said. "Moonwort. Powdered limestone."

Maren turned fully to face me. Her expression shifted. "Crushed beet petals?"

I nodded.

Her eyes widened. "That would be a..."

She didn't finish. She stared at me for a long moment and then her hands flew to her mouth.

"No way."

"I'm not sure," I said. My hands were shaking now. "But that is what it feels like. It is what my gut tells me and it doesn't tend to be wrong."

Maren stood frozen for another beat. Then she spun and grabbed a small glass container from one of the lower cabinets. She thrust it toward me.

"Pee in this."

I took the container. My fingers felt clumsy around the smooth glass.

"I'll go make the mixture," Maren said. She was already pulling ingredients from the shelves before I could respond.

I stood carefully and made my way to the small toilet attached to the infirmary. My legs still felt unsteady but the dizziness had faded to a dull hum in the background.

I first took a moment to wash the taste of bile out of my mouth.

Then, inside the cramped space, I filled the container. My hands wouldn't stop shaking. I had to grip it with both hands to keep from dropping it.

When I came back out, Maren already had a beaker sitting on the workspace. The solution inside was a pale violet. Delicate and almost pretty in the lamplight.

I walked over and handed her the container.

She opened it without hesitation and poured the contents into the beaker.

Nothing happened at first.

The violet stayed pale and still.

"Oh," I wouldn't lie. Disappointment rushed over me. "I guess I was—"

But right before I could even finish the words, the solution started to bubble.

I stopped mid-sentence and watched. The bubbles grew more vigorous. The color began to shift and deepen. The pale violet turned to rich purple and even the purple turned darker still.

Within seconds, the entire mixture had transformed into a deep indigo.

Maren gasped. Her hand came up to cover her mouth again.

I stared at the beaker. At the dark swirling liquid that had just confirmed what some small part of me had already known.

"Oh my... goddess..." Maren's voice was barely a whisper. "Congratulations, Luna Fia."

I put both hands to my flat stomach.

The gesture felt automatic. Instinctive.

There was nothing there to feel yet. No swell or movement or any physical sign at all. But I knew. Deep in my bones, I knew for sure now.

A baby.

I was carrying a baby.

A laugh bubbled up from somewhere deep inside me. It came out shaky and breathless. Tears formed hot and fast at the corners of my eyes.

I didn't try to stop them.

They spilled over and ran down my cheeks while I stood there with my hands pressed against my stomach. Against the tiny life growing inside me.

Mine.

Ours.

The thought of Cian flashed through my mind. His face. His voice. The way he had looked at me earlier with that desperate hope in his eyes.

He didn't know yet.

I would have to tell him.

The tears kept coming. But they weren't sad. They were something else entirely. Relief maybe. Joy. A wild overwhelming sense of wonder that I couldn't quite put into words.

Maren moved closer. She put a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"How do you feel?" she asked softly.

I looked up at her. My vision was blurred from the tears but I could still see the warm smile on her face.

"I don't know," I admitted. My voice cracked. "Terrified. Happy. Both."

Maren squeezed my shoulder. "That sounds about right."

I laughed again. It came out watery and broken but real.

A baby.

In the middle of everything. In the middle of coups and poison and making deals with a cruel warlock... In the middle of a war that hadn't even fully started yet...

I was going to be having a baby.

The timing was... terrible. The worst it could possibly be.

But standing there with Maren's hand on my shoulder and my own hands pressed against my stomach, I couldn't bring myself to care.

This tiny fragile thing inside me felt like hope.

Like something worth fighting for.

Worth surviving for.

I wiped at my eyes with the back of my hand but more tears just replaced the ones I cleared away.

"Does anyone else know?" Maren asked.

I shook my head. "No. Just you."

"Are you going to tell Cian?"

The question hung in the air between us.

I thought about it. About walking back to his office right now and interrupting whatever deal he was making with Valentine. About pulling him aside and whispering the news.

But something held me back.

Not doubt. Not fear exactly.

Just the knowledge that this moment was mine. Just for a little while longer. Before it became real to anyone else. Before it changed everything.

"Soon," I said finally. "I'll tell him soon."

Maren nodded. She didn't push. She just stood there with me while I cried and laughed and tried to wrap my mind around what was happening.

A baby.

My baby.

Our baby.

I looked down at my hands still resting against my stomach. They had finally stopped shaking.

The maternal joy that had taken root in my chest grew stronger with every passing second. It pushed back against the fear and the uncertainty and all the chaos swirling around us.

This baby was the future we were fighting for. Not the hell that Aldric had tried to force on Cian. Not the poisoned legacy of cruelty and control. This baby would be born into something different. Something we would build with our own hands from the ashes of everything that would die in the Elder's circle before the moon crept up tonight.

A horn sounded in the distance.

Low and resonant, it echoed across the estate grounds.

Maren's head snapped toward the window. She crossed the room quickly and pushed the glass open. Cool air rushed in.

"Goddess," she breathed. "They're here."

I stood. My legs felt steadier now. "Who?"

Maren looked back at me as I reached the window beside her.

"The Elders."

My heart kicked hard against my ribs.

She turned her gaze back outside. "That means the trial will begin."

*Chapter 362: Burn a Bridge 1*

## **PAULINE**

I woke in the guest room with daylight already pushing through the curtains, thin blades of gold cutting across the floorboards and stopping just short of the bed. For a moment I stayed where I was, listening to the quiet of the estate and letting my thoughts gather themselves into something orderly. My skin felt tight, the familiar dryness that always came after a restless night. I swung my legs off the mattress and crossed the room toward the bathroom without thinking about it too much. Routine had always been my way of keeping the day from unraveling too quickly.

It was also a good thing that because of the many fights my husband and I usually had, I made sure most guest room were stocked with what I needed.

The sink light flicked on and filled the mirror with a soft white glow. I leaned over the counter and began the process the way I always did. Cleanser first, cool against my fingertips as I worked it into my skin. Toner next, followed by the small glass bottle of serum that cost more than most people spent on rent in a month. I pressed it carefully into my cheeks, watching the reflection across from me repeat every motion with clinical precision. The woman in the mirror looked exactly as she always did. Composed.

Controlled. Unreadable. Years of discipline had shaped my face into something that rarely betrayed anything I did not want seen.

I finished with moisturizer and gently tapped it beneath my eyes, smoothing the faint shadows left by poor sleep. Only after everything was in place did I reach for my phone on the nightstand beside the sink. The screen lit up with a single notification waiting for me.

One voicemail.

From Valentine.

I frowned slightly and pressed play, holding the phone against my ear while I continued patting the moisturizer along the curve of my cheekbone. Valentine's voice spilled into the quiet bathroom, bright and almost boyishly pleased with itself in a way that immediately put me on edge.

"Good morning, Pauline. I have excellent news. Our freedom from Aldric is nearing. That mad dog might actually be put down now. Call me when you get this."

My hand froze halfway through the motion.

My finger remained pressed against the skin beneath my eye while the message ended and the phone fell silent again. I lowered it slowly and stared at the screen as if it might offer some additional explanation.

What?

I replayed the message and listened more carefully the second time, focusing on the tone behind his words. Valentine sounded delighted. Not relieved, not cautious. Delighted. The way he lingered on the phrase mad dog carried a satisfaction that made my stomach tighten.

The timestamp caught my attention next. The voicemail had been sent an hour earlier, a bit after the sun had risen. Whatever had happened, Valentine had been awake thinking about it for a while.

I did not bother hesitating.

I called him immediately.

He answered before the first ring had fully finished.

"Pauline."

"What is that ominous message about?" I set the moisturizer down harder than I meant to, the glass bottle striking the marble countertop with a sharp crack that echoed faintly through the bathroom. "And do not try anything stupid. There is a reason we have spent years lying on our backs despite hating the fuck out of that guy. Aldric still has leverage on us."

"Relax," Valentine said, the amusement in his voice impossible to miss. "His true colors have finally been shown to the Alpha of Skollrend."

I went completely still.

"No way."

"I know," he replied, sounding almost giddy. "I had the exact same reaction."

The sudden rush of adrenaline made my knees feel weak. I stepped away from the counter and sat down on the edge of the bathtub before they could betray me entirely. I had grown rather tired of my body reacting like that lately.

"How?" I asked carefully.

"The trial is approaching faster than expected," Valentine said. I could hear the faint clink of ceramic on wood, followed by the unmistakable sound of someone taking a sip of coffee. He always drank it black and far too hot. "Everything is lining up now. It's practically a sealed deal."

My mind began moving through the possibilities with cautious precision.

"This is happening?" I said quietly.

"It is," he replied. "Pauline, we might actually be free of him."

Something in my chest loosened slightly at those words. The shift was small but unmistakable, like the slow release of a breath I had not realized I had been holding for years.

"What about the dead man's switch?" I asked. I kept my tone calm, forcing my voice to remain steady despite the sudden pulse of hope trying to creep into it. "What about the posthumous exposure arrangement? The information he buried in his own people vaults?"

Valentine chuckled softly.

"Long story," he said. "But the pack's own Beta was the Deadman switch. The only one probably."

I blinked at the mirror.

"The Beta."

"Yes."

I pushed myself off the tub and returned to the sink, staring at my reflection as if it might reveal whether this entire conversation was some elaborate hallucination.

"That is too convenient," I said slowly. "Even if Aldric falls, the information still exists somewhere. The fleshcraft, the experiments, the records. Everything."

"And?" Valentine asked lightly.

I frowned.

"If it surfaces after the trial, we are still implicated."

"Not the way you think." I could hear the smile in his voice again. "If the information appears now, it will only strengthen my testimony. People will assume Aldric somehow fabricated it to discredit me before the trial."

He paused for a moment before continuing.

"They will believe it is false evidence planted by a desperate man."

The logic settled into place with surprising ease. I considered it carefully, testing the argument from every angle the way I always did when Valentine presented one of his schemes.

He was right.

If the information surfaced now, it would look like retaliation. Aldric would appear vindictive and unstable. Any evidence connecting us to his work would be interpreted as a smear designed to weaken Valentine's testimony.

"We win this time around, Pauline," he said quietly.

I stared at myself in the mirror.

The same controlled expression looked back at me. The serum had already settled into my skin, leaving it smooth and unblemished beneath the soft bathroom light. Anyone looking at me would see the same composed woman they always saw.

Then something unexpected bubbled up in my chest.

I laughed.

It slipped out before I could stop it, sudden and real and completely unpolished. The sound startled even me.

"So does this mean you can return to your experiments now?" I asked once the laughter faded. "Wenzel still needs a healer."

For a moment Valentine said nothing.

Then he laughed too, a low sound filled with the kind of anticipation that usually preceded one of his more dangerous ideas.

"I don't know. I just got out of this mess. To delve into it again, and so soon, will not be smart."

"Well... That is true. But you have Number Three."

"Number Three is very volatile. Not fit for a pack like Lily of the Valley that will push it."

"It?" I repeated.

"Oh. Him... I meant him."

I picked up the moisturizer again and smoothed more into my hands. My fingers were dry. They were always dry in the mornings.

"Well," I said. "I promised Wenzel a healer in order to protect my granddaughter."

"I thought you didn't have a good relationship with them." Valentine's tone went careful in that way it did when he was testing something. "It was Aldric that forced your hand to save the girl in the first place. You have no shackles binding you to that anymore."

I paused. He was not wrong. The only reason I had gotten involved with Isobel and her daughter Hazel at all was because Aldric had made it necessary. Because he had dangled my own safety and peace in front of me like bait and I had bitten.

"I guess you are right," I said slowly. "But I do want to keep a good relationship with Lily of the Valley. And I promise you, Valentine, they will be useful. If Wenzel sees what you have to offer, you will get everything you want. He is a man too. He wouldn't have to go around the corners to give you what you want like I have to."

There was a pause. Then Valentine made a small sound that might have been agreement.

"In that case, it is best I do a very good job." His voice picked up again, that particular energy he got when he was thinking about his work. "There is a test subject I am missing, though."

My hand stopped moving. I knew exactly what and who is talking about.

"Are you insane?"

"Pauline—"

*Chapter 363: Burn a bridge 2*

## **PAULINE**

"No." I set the moisturizer down. My reflection looked back at me with something sharp in the eyes now. "If Aldric is going to perish now, we can forget about her. She will not be a risk. It is not like she knows much anyway. We can coexist."

"She has been living without any pills." Valentine's voice lost the lightness entirely. He was serious now. Focused in that way that made him dangerous. "And with the way her blood reacted when I tried to touch its matter, she is definitely awakened. She is different. I can feel it."

I closed my eyes.

"Valentine."

"I did my research. Even her mother, although she lived a decently long life, used her gifts clearly a bit too much and the side effects of it... it killed her. I have to have her, Pauline."

"Skollrend is a giant pack that will burn the world if its Luna is touched." I opened my eyes and stared at my reflection. "I will be caught in the crossfire. Again."

"I'm not killing her. She will be returned. I just need to observe her. The girl will be safe."

"Goddess, are you insane?" The words came out harder than I meant them to. "You are the reason I got caught in Aldric's crossfire in the first place. And now that we are free, now that we are rid of that bastard, you want to shackle me again to a new prison?"

"I'm doing this for your sake too."

I laughed. It came out sharp and ugly.

"For my sake?!"

"Think about it," Valentine said. "Call me back when you aren't so emotional."

Then the line went dead.

I stared at the phone in my hand. At the dark screen where his name had been a moment before. Then I set it down very carefully on the counter and pressed both palms flat against the marble.

He was going to do it. I knew he was. He had that tone in his voice, that particular stubborn certainty that meant he had already decided and was just waiting for the rest of the world to catch up. He was going to go after Fia. He was going to take her and study her and pull her apart to see how she worked, and when Skollrend came burning after him, I would be the one standing close enough to catch fire.

No.

I straightened up.

No, I was done. I was done being dragged into his messes. I was done paying for his mistakes. If he wanted to fly too close to the sun again, he could do it alone.

I had to put my foot down. I had to save myself.

I walked out of the guest bathroom and crossed the hall to the main bedroom. I did not knock. I just pushed the door open.

Marcus was still half asleep. He blinked at me from the bed with that confused, soft expression he only ever wore in the mornings before he remembered who he was.

"Come to apologize?" he asked.

"Over my dead body, Marcus."

"Dimitri." He corrected as usual. But I ignored it.

I went straight to the dresser. Third drawer down, all the way in the back, behind the scarves I never wore. My fingers found the pill bottle and I pulled it out.

Marcus sat up straighter.

"What are you doing?"

I did not answer. I just walked back out and shut the door behind me.

The guest room was exactly as I had left it. Bed still unmade. Phone still on the nightstand. I set the pill bottle down next to it and then I stood there for a moment, breathing slowly, thinking about what came next.

Then I called.

Not with my voice. Not out loud. Just the way I always did. The silent pull that Number Four always seemed to feel no matter where she was in the estate.

I waited.

One minute. Two. Three.

Then the door opened.

She crawled inside and closed it behind her. She was wearing a black hoodie, the hood pulled up over her head, but it did nothing to hide the way she looked. Her skin had gone the color of dead bark. Gray and rough and cracking at the edges. The lesions had spread up her neck and onto her jaw. I could smell it from where I stood. That sweet, rotten smell of tissue breaking down from the inside out.

I tried not to look disgusted.

"Your punishment is over," I said. "I will have mercy on you. But I do hope you have learned your place in the grand scheme of things."

She nodded immediately. Her head went down and stayed there.

I picked up the pill bottle and shook out two of the rosy-colored tablets. They gleamed faintly in my palm. I held them out to her.

She took them and threw them into her mouth without hesitating.

The change was immediate. The lesions began to fade, the gray color bleeding out of her skin and leaving something that looked almost normal underneath. She gasped. Then she started to cry.

I stepped forward and pulled her into a hug. She was small against me. Fragile in a way that made something twist uncomfortably in my chest.

"It is alright," I said quietly. "Suffering exists for a bigger purpose. You have learned your lesson."

She nodded against my shoulder. Her breathing was uneven.

"Now you just have to keep doing what you are doing," I continued. "Earn your keep."

She pulled back and looked up at me. Her eyes were red but clear.

"You have a new job for me?"

"Yeah." I let go of her and stepped back. "It will be your last mission. Then you will be free of me."

She went very still. That wariness came into her face, the kind you saw in animals that had been hurt too many times to trust kindness.

"What is it?" she asked.

I looked at her for a long moment. Then I said it.

"You have to kill your maker. Valentine."

She stared at me. Her mouth opened slightly but no sound came out.

"Don't you want revenge for what he did?" I kept my voice soft. Reasonable. "I know you do."

"I'm sorry." Her voice was barely a whisper. "But I won't be able to hurt him. Just like I cannot hurt you."

Fuck.

I had not thought about that.

"And if he dies," she continued, "who will make the pills?"

I looked at her. At the fear in her eyes, the desperate calculation happening behind them. She thought the pills were her only lifeline. She thought Valentine was the only one who could make them.

"You must be way over your head if you think I didn't make insurance regarding the pills." I crossed my arms. "The man is a mad scientist. It would not have taken long before he flew too close to the sun."

She blinked.

"Okay then," I said. "Just watch him. And the day he tries to do anything to the girl I sent you to kill, the one you failed to finish, do it again. Kill her. Or try to. You have to make sure the blame falls on him. Then you will be free of me."

Number Four looked at me for a long time. Something moved across her face. Hope, maybe. Or disbelief. They looked similar sometimes.

"You will give me my freedom?" she asked.

I nodded.

"You will not have to be in Nocturne anymore."

"And the pills too?"

I nodded again.

She looked like she did not believe me. But she also looked like she had no choice but to believe me, because what other choice was there anyway?

"Okay," she said quietly.

I reached out and touched her shoulder. Just once. Just lightly.

"Good."

She left the same way she had come. Quiet and small and disappearing back into whatever corner of the house she hid in when I was not calling for her.

I stood there alone in the guest room with the empty pill bottle in my hand and the weight of what I had just set in motion sitting heavy in my chest.

Valentine wanted to drag me into another fire. He wanted to reach for Fia and pull her apart to see what made her tick, and he did not care who burned when Skollrend came for him.

But I cared.

I had survived too much to go down for his curiosity. I had buried too many things to let him dig them all back up.

If he came for that girl, Number Four would be there. And if Number Four failed again, at least the blame would fall on him. At least I would have distance. At least I would be able to look Skollrend in the eye and say I had nothing to do with it.

I set the pill bottle down on the nightstand.

Then I walked to the window and looked out at the garden. The rose bushes were still there. Isobel's roses, stubborn and thriving despite everything.

I would do one good deed too. I would hand number four over to Lily of the Valley.

A win win at this point.

## **MADLINE**

I sat across from my father in the lounge, watching steam curl up from the rim of my coffee cup. The liquid inside had gone lukewarm five minutes ago but I kept my hands wrapped around the porcelain anyway. It gave me something to hold onto while we made small talk about nothing that mattered. The weather. The nice roses he noticed from the window in the garden. Whether the elders of the circle were being fashionably late because they were all in cohorts with Alpha Aldric.

My father looked relaxed. Since Aldric's arrest, He seemed like a different person, especially since the trial was going to commence and end today. There was a lightness in his posture that I had not seen in years, like someone had finally cut the strings that had been holding him down. He leaned back in his chair with his own cup balanced on the armrest and talked about mundane things.

I guess anything would be mundane at this point since we didn't have the weight of our family's secrets weighing down on us anymore. Overnight, it looked like it had simply evaporated.

I wanted to believe it. I wanted to think that maybe this time things would be different. That maybe we could actually move forward without looking over our shoulders.

But until that trial began and ended with words that needed to be heard, I just couldn't bring myself to be at peace.

Then father's phone rang.

He glanced at the screen and his expression shifted. Not drastically. Just enough that I noticed the subtle tightening around his eyes, the way his mouth pressed into a thin line before he forced it back into something neutral.

"Excuse me," he said, standing up smoothly. "Coven dealings."

He walked out of the Skollrend main estate lounge without waiting for a response, the door clicking shut behind him with a soft finality that made my stomach twist.

Coven dealings... I wasn't sure why. But I didn't trust it.

Maybe because it was the same excuse he always used when he did not want to explain himself. The same words he had thrown at me a hundred times over the years whenever I asked too many questions or lingered too long in doorways I was not supposed to be near.

I stared at the closed door for a long moment.

Then I set my coffee cup down and pressed my palms flat against my thighs.

Something was wrong. I could feel it crawling up the back of my neck like a cold breeze that had no business being there. My father had been acting strange. Too happy. Too confident. Like he had finally gotten exactly what he wanted and was just waiting for the rest of us to catch up.

I thought about Cian. About the last real words he told me before we had to leave his study.

For some unknown reason, those words stuck with me.

"This is exactly who your father is. I hope after this, you stop protecting him. He's just as bad as Aldric."

I had felt the need to mentally defend my father in my heart when he said those words. But as I sat there and thought more about how I had mentally told myself that Cian was painfully wrong, that he did not understand what my father had been through or what he had sacrificed to keep our family safe despite his mistakes.

Something kept telling me what if and as much as I wanted to discredit that vile thought. I wondered why.

Was it because I didn't want there to be a reality where I was wrong. Where I would see again and again that I made the wrong choice to begin with?

No... I told myself. That couldn't be it.

"So why not look?" A voice in the back of my mind pushed.

I did not discredit it this time around. Instead, I closed my eyes and took a slow breath.

Then I whispered the incantation under my breath, letting the magic slip out quiet and small, barely more than a whisper of intent woven into the air around me. It was a minor spell. Nothing that would leave a stench strong enough for anyone like father to notice unless they were specifically looking for it. Just enough to carry sound from one room to another. Just enough to let me hear what I was not supposed to hear.

My father's voice filtered through the connection a moment later, muffled at first and then clear.

"Relax," he was saying. His tone carried that particular lightness he got when he was pleased with himself about something. "His true colors have finally been shown to the Alpha of Skollrend."

There was a pause. I could hear the faint murmur of a woman's voice on the other end of the line but the words were too indistinct to make out clearly.

"I know," my father continued, sounding almost giddy. "I had the exact same reaction."

Another pause. Longer this time.

"The trial is approaching faster than expected," he said. I could hear the faint clink of ceramic on wood, followed by the sound of him taking a sip of coffee. "Everything is lining up now. It is practically a sealed deal."

The woman said something else. My father made a low sound of agreement.

"It is," he replied. "We might actually be free of him."

Free of Aldric. He was talking about Aldric.

I felt a small flicker of relief. Maybe this really was just about the trial. Maybe I had been wrong to worry.

Then his voice shifted.

"Long story," he said. "But the pack's own Beta was the deadman switch. The only one probably."

There was another pause. The woman on the other end said something sharp and quick that I could not quite catch.

"And?" my father asked lightly.

More words from the woman. Her tone had gone tense now, cautious in a way that made my stomach tighten.

"Not the way you think," my father said. "If the information appears now, it will only strengthen my testimony. People will assume Aldric somehow fabricated it to discredit me before the trial."

He paused for a moment before continuing.

"They will believe it is false evidence planted by a desperate man."

My chest went cold.

Information. Evidence. Things that could discredit him.

He was talking about the fleshcraft. He had to be.

"We win this time around," he said quietly.

The woman said something else. I caught fragments this time. Words that sounded like "experiments" and "healer" and something about a pack I did not recognize.

"I don't know," my father replied. "I just got out of this mess. To delve into it again, and so soon, will not be smart."

My breath caught.

Delve into it again.

He was considering it. He was actually considering going back to the experiments.

The woman's voice rose slightly. I could not make out the words but the tone was insistent. Pushing.

"Number Three is very volatile. Not fit for a pack like \*\*\*\* of \*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* that will push it." my father said. Then he corrected himself quickly. "Oh. Him... I meant him."

Him.

Was that a test subject? Was he was talking about a test subject.

"Well," the woman said, her voice coming through clearer now. "I promised—"

The connection wavered and her next words were lost in static.

"I thought you didn't have a good relationship with them," my father said carefully. "It was Aldric that forced your hand in the first place. You have no shackles binding you to that anymore."

There came another pause.

"I guess you are right," the woman replied. Her voice had gone quieter now, harder to hear. "But I do want to keep a good relationship with—"

The rest dissolved into muffled fragments.

"In that case, it is best I do a very good job," my father said. That particular energy had crept back into his voice. The one he got when he was thinking about his work. "There is a test subject I am missing, though."

My hands clenched into fists.

Test subject.

He said it so casually. Like he was talking about a piece of equipment he needed to order. Like it was not a person.

"Are you insane?" the woman's voice came through sharp and clear this time.

"Pauline—"

So it was Pauline. Pauline who? Strati?

"No," Pauline said firmly. The rest of her words were lost again but her tone was unmistakable. She was arguing with him. Trying to talk him out of whatever he was planning.

"She has been living without any pills," my father said. His voice had lost the lightness entirely. He was serious now. Focused in that way that made him dangerous. "And with the way her blood reacted when I tried to touch its matter, she is definitely awakened. She is different. I can feel it."

Blood... Pills... Awakened...

He was talking about one of his experiments. Someone he had already worked on. Someone who was still alive.

He had told me they were all dead. He had looked me in the eye and told me he had ended it, that none of them had survived, that it was all behind us.

He had lied.

*Chapter 365: Ugly Heart 2*

## **MADLINE**

"I did my research," my father continued. "Even her mother, although she lived a decently long life, used her gifts clearly a bit too much and the side effects of it... it killed her. I have to have her."

Pauline said something else. Her voice had gone sharp again, almost panicked.

"I'm not killing her," my father replied. "She will be returned. I just need to observe her."

My stomach turned.

"Are you insane?" Pauline's voice came through clear and furious. "You are the reason I got caught in Aldric's crossfire in the first place. And now that we are free, now that we are rid of that bastard, you want to shackle me again to a new prison?"

"I'm doing this for your sake too."

"For my sake?!"

There was a long pause. Then my father spoke again, his voice calm and measured.

"Think about it," he said. "Call me back when you aren't so emotional."

The line went dead.

I sat there in the lounge with my hands still pressed against my thighs and my heart pounding so hard I could hear it in my ears. The spell dissolved on its own, the magic fading back into nothing as I released my hold on it.

He was going to do it again.

He was going to go back to the fleshcraft. Back to the experiments. Back to everything he had promised was behind us.

Cian had been right...

The thought made something crack open inside my chest, sharp and jagged and impossible to ignore. Cian had looked at my father and seen exactly what he was. And I had stood there and defended him anyway in my head. I had chosen my father over the man I loved because I thought it mattered. Because I thought loyalty meant something.

And my father had not even waited a full day to pass before proving me wrong.

The door opened.

My father walked back into the lounge with his phone in his hand and that same easy expression on his face. He settled back into his chair and drank up his coffee as if nothing had happened.

I stared at him.

He noticed after a moment and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

The word came out so casual. So unbothered. Like he had not just been on the phone planning to do the exact thing he had sworn he would never do again.

I felt something hot and bitter rise up in my throat.

"After everything," I said quietly. "After this family's suffering and my suffering, you still want to do it. You still want to do fleshcraft."

His expression froze.

"You were listening to my conversation?"

"Yes." The word came out harder than I meant it to. "I had to. And I was right too."

Tears burned at the corners of my eyes. I did not try to stop them.

"I made all of those sacrifices for this family," I continued, my voice breaking slightly on the last word. "No. For you. And it was not worth it."

My father set his coffee cup down slowly.

"Madeline..."

"I lost him," I said. The tears spilled over and I did not care anymore. "I lost Cian because I put you first. And you mock me for that even now."

"I am not mocking you."

"I feel like such a fool."

He leaned forward and reached for my hand but I pulled it back before he could touch me.

"I am sorry," he said.

I laughed. It sounded ugly and raw.

"But that is the thing, is it not?" I said. "To me, those just sound like words. Empty words."

I wiped at my face with the back of my hand, smearing the tears across my cheek.

"After this, I am telling Mother," I said. "And I am emancipating myself from you and the Blossom name. I am sick of being a filial daughter to a man who would not put me first. Who would not put his family first over his selfish and self destructive goals. I am done with it."

"Madeline, you need to calm down."

"And if you do try to do that evil shit again," I continued, ignoring him, "I will report you myself. That is the only way I see to protect myself, Mother, and Wilhelm at this point."

My father's jaw tightened.

"You do not mean that."

"I hate you so much."

The words hung in the air between us, sharp and final.

"That is not what is happening," my father said carefully. "You heard part of a conversation out of context. You do not understand the full situation."

"I heard you," I shot back. "Most of it."

"People break the law every day and get away with it," he said. "Just because the law says it is wrong does not mean it is wrong."

I stared at him.

"People suffer because of it," I said. "You even said it yourself. One of your experiments... which by the way you lied that you ended and none of them were alive... is volatile and cannot be... I do not know, sold?"

My father opened his mouth but I kept going.

"How many more are there?" I asked. "How many more people did you hurt? How many more lives did you ruin?"

"Madeline..."

"Do not even answer the questions," I said. "Let this be over and I can be done with anything concerning Primrose and the Blossom house. I am done. I have sacrificed and I cannot do it again. I cannot."

My voice cracked on the last word.

"I want to be happy," I said. "I deserve it. I deserve to be selfish. After all the weight I have accepted for you and this family. I just hate that it wasn't worth it. None of it was."

"I am sorry," my father said. "I will stop. I will be better. It is just this family's bane. We have issues."

"Well, that is not how I want to end up."

I stood up and turned toward the door.

Behind me, I heard my father move. Then I felt it. The shift in the air that always came right before magic, the particular weight of intent gathering itself into something tangible.

I turned around slowly.

My father had his hand raised. His fingers were already curling into the shape of a casting gesture, magic pooling in his palm like water about to spill over.

For a moment I just looked at him. At the man who had raised me. Who had taught me everything I knew about our craft. Who had told me a thousand times that family came first, that loyalty was everything, that we protected our own no matter what.

The shock faded quickly.

I felt nothing but a cold, hollow certainty settle into the space where it had been.

"If you want to do it," I said quietly, "do it. And be quick with it."

My father stared at me. The magic in his hand flickered.

Then he lowered his arm and let it fall to his side.

I did not wait to see what he would say next. I turned around and walked out of the lounge, pulling the door shut behind me with a firm click.

The hallway was empty. Silent. I made it three steps before my knees gave out and I had to brace myself against the wall to keep from collapsing completely.

The tears came all at once, hot and relentless and impossible to stop.

I pressed my forehead against the wall and let them fall.

All of those years. All of those choices. Every time I had put my father first, every time I had defended him, every time I had chosen him over everything else that mattered.

And Cian had been right the entire time.

I thought about the way he had looked at me that last day years ago. The disappointment in his eyes. The quiet resignation in his voice when he told me he would not choose between me and his pack.

I should have picked him. I should have chosen him from the very beginning.

But I had not. And now it was too late.

I slid down the wall until I was sitting on the floor with my knees pulled up to my chest and my arms wrapped around them. The tears kept coming and I let them. There was no point in trying to hold them back anymore.

I had lost him. I had lost Cian because I could not let go of the idea that my father was worth saving. That he deserved my loyalty. That if I just sacrificed enough, if I just gave enough, he would finally become the man I needed him to be.

But he never would.

And I had known that. Somewhere deep down, I had always known.

I just had not wanted to believe it.

Right then... I heard horns. It was low but the constant sound of it sounded important and I headed outside the estate to see cars lining up.

When the car stopped, people inside started stepping out and from their attire and the way they carried themselves, I realized this was the elder's circle.

They were here.

*Chapter 366: Hell is your exes 1*

## **ALDRIC**

The cell smelled even worse as the minutes trickled by.

I had been sitting on the stone bench long enough that the cold had worked its way through my trousers and into my bones. My shirt was damp at the back. My hands, when I looked at them, had a faint tremor I could not fully suppress, no matter how many times I pressed them flat against my thighs.

Something was very wrong with me.

The heat had not stopped. It had deepened. It moved through my chest in waves now, pulling at the edges of my concentration, making it harder to hold a single thought without it slipping sideways. My heartbeat was uneven in a way I could not ignore. Too fast and then too slow, like it could not decide which rhythm to settle into.

I kept my face still.

Ronan was pacing again. He had been pacing for the better part of the last hour, boots scraping the same short path between the bars and the wall while he turned everything over in his head. He was still processing. Still trying to organize the chaos of the day into something he could work with.

I let him pace.

Thinking was fine. Thinking was useful. What I needed was for the panic to stay out of him. Panic made people unpredictable, and I could not afford unpredictable right now. Not with everything balanced the way it was.

I pressed my hand flat against my chest and took a measured breath.

The heat pulsed.

I exhaled slowly.

Then I heard them.

Boots in the corridor. Heavy and uneven, like someone was being dragged rather than walking. A voice followed. Low and strained at first, then rising sharp enough to cut through the stone walls.

Ronan stopped pacing.

We both turned toward the bars.

The guards appeared first. Two of them. Then the figure between them stumbled into view as they hauled the door open and shoved her inside.

I knew her before she found her footing.

*Teagan.*

She looked terrible. Her hair had come loose and her dress was dusty and she had clearly been crying for hours. She caught herself against the far wall and turned around.

Her eyes landed on Ronan first.

Then they found me.

Whatever composure she had left evaporated on the spot.

She crossed the cell in four steps and swung at me.

Her fist connected with the side of my jaw hard enough that my head jerked sideways. White light spidered across my vision for a second. I tasted iron at the corner of my mouth.

"You monster."

She was on me before I could straighten. Her hands clawed at my collar, my chest, grabbing and pulling and shaking.

"You fucking beast. I hate the day I ever lay with you."

Part of me wanted to smile.

Not because the words amused me. Not because I enjoyed any of this. But because even now, even in a cell with my body failing me and the walls closing in from every direction, Teagan was still exactly who she had always been. Passionate. Reckless. Loud in a way that she believed passed for strength.

I kept my face neutral and let her enjoy her little tantrum.

That was when Ronan moved.

He crossed the cell and caught his mother by the arms, pulling her back with enough force that she stumbled. He put himself between us.

"He did nothing," Ronan said. His voice was flat and controlled. "Stop."

Teagan turned on him immediately. "Ronan—"

"What are you even doing here?"

She blinked. The question seemed to stall something in her.

"I came to save you."

He stared at her. "You're in a cell."

"It doesn't matter."

"It clearly does."

"No." She pulled herself upright and smoothed the front of her dress with hands that were still shaking. "I tried to speak reason to your Alpha. That is how I ended up here. His rage consumed everything else."

Ronan's jaw tightened. He glanced back at me for just a fraction of a second.

"It won't matter soon."

Teagan's face changed. The anger shifted to something sharper.

"What does that mean?"

He didn't answer.

She moved toward him. He stepped back. She stopped, and the hurt that crossed her face was immediate and obvious. She collected herself quickly but not before it showed.

"You cannot let him get inside your head even more," she said. Her voice was quieter now. Careful. "When the trial starts, you have to throw it all onto him. Tell them you were manipulated. Tell them everything. Our history. All of it. The sordid details. My cheating. Anything to prove that you were in a bad place and give you leniency."

Ronan said nothing at first. He hated his mother. A position I had soaked in quite well.

"Anything? Including how you killed your husband?"

"Including how I killed your father," she said. Then she corrected herself quickly, catching the word before it fully landed. "Sorry. My husband."

She pressed forward before the silence could take over.

"I already confessed. That is part of why I am standing in this cell. And it was not only me." She looked at me over Ronan's shoulder, and the thing in her eyes was not grief. It was something colder. "The bastard behind you was the mastermind. He planned it. Every single step of it."

Ronan turned to look at me.

I met his eyes and held them.

"He told me," Ronan said finally. His voice was careful. "He told me what he believed your husband was going to do. That he was going to do more than expose everything. That he was going to destroy us both. Me the most."

He turned back toward his mother.

"He thought he was protecting me. After all, you told him that the man was going to have me killed for the shame of it."

The silence that followed was very satisfying.

I watched it happen. Watched the realization move across Teagan's face like a wave breaking. Her mouth opened. Her eyes widened.

"You—" Her voice broke, thin and sharp with horror. "You told him that?"

Then she moved.

She rushed forward, fury flashing across her face, but Ronan caught her before she reached me. His arms locked around her waist, pulling her back against him as she struggled.

*Chapter 367: Hell is your exes 2*

## **ALDRIC**

"Mother, stop," Ronan said sharply.

"Let me go!" she snapped, thrashing in his hold.

Her hands clawed at the air toward me. She twisted violently, trying to break free, her elbow driving back into Ronan's side. He grunted but held on.

"You lied to him!" she shouted at me. "You made him believe that?"

Across the room, I barely reacted.

"I simply told him what he needed to hear," he said calmly. "The truth."

"The truth?" Teagan let out a furious sound and shoved backward with all her strength. Ronan stumbled a step, and that was enough. She twisted out of his grip, slipping from his arms before he could catch her again.

"Teagan—"

Too late.

She closed the distance in seconds.

I could have stopped her. But I did not care too. Whatever was wrong with my guts, it made me apathetic mostly.

Her fist caught me square in the cheek and I went down.

The floor came up faster than I expected. My hands shot out but the trembling in my arms made the landing ugly. I braced and caught myself but the impact rattled through my chest and the heat inside me surged so violently that my vision blurred at the edges for a moment.

Ronan was already there.

He grabbed Teagan by the shoulders and hauled her back.

"Enough," he said sharply. He pulled me up with one hand, his grip solid and certain. He set me back onto the bench and put himself between us again. "I said enough. Stand down."

Teagan breathed hard. Her chest rose and fell in uneven bursts. She stared at me past Ronan's shoulder with her hands clenched at her sides.

Then her expression shifted.

She stopped looking at my face.

Her eyes dropped.

She looked at my hands.

And then she laughed. It was not warm. It was not bitter either. It was something worse. A sound that held recognition in it. The kind of laugh that came from knowing someone for a very long time.

"You sweet summer child," she said.

Ronan frowned. "What?"

She pointed at me. At my hands.

"Look at his nails."

I looked down.

My nails had gone pale. Not gray exactly. Pale. The kind of pale that crept in slowly from the edges and worked its way inward when the body started to lose the battle against something it could not fight on its own.

I had not noticed that yet. What the fuck was that?

"He has taken something," Teagan said. "Poison, I would bet. He intends to take the coward's way out and leave you standing here alone to face everything. To carry his sins along with your own." She let out a short, sharp breath. "This is who he is, Ronan. This has always been who he is."

Ronan turned to me.

He looked at my hands.

I watched his face shift. The certainty that had been holding him together since we were first brought down here developed a crack in it. Small. But I saw it.

My mind moved backward without my permission.

The wine.

The courtyard. Morrigan beside me. Her smile. Her easy manner. The bottle pressed gently into my hand like an offering.

I had taken it without thinking. Of course I had.

*Oh, I was such a fool.*

I stood. My legs shook but I forced them to hold. I looked at my hands properly for the first time. The pale had crept further than I realized. The trembling made more sense now. The heat. The uneven pulse. The way my thoughts kept slipping loose from their moorings.

"I did not do this."

My voice came out steadier than I had any right to expect.

"I did not poison myself. I was poisoned."

Teagan's expression did not change.

"I know you," she said simply. "Better than you think I do. And if this was something done to you against your will, you would be terrified right now. You would be falling apart from your seams. You would be screaming for a healer. That is the kind of man that you are. A manipulative and pretentious fool who believes he is bigger than the system and throws tantrums when it does not work in his favor."

She looked at me.

"But you are not. And that tells me enough."

She turned away from me deliberately. Like I had already ceased to be worth addressing.

"This man lies," she said to Ronan. "He has always been a liar. He is extraordinary at it. I know. I fell for it once." Her voice did not rise. She kept it level, which made it worse somehow. "I was stupid enough to believe that the things he said meant something. That he was different underneath. But there is no underneath. There is only what he wants from you in any given moment."

She stepped closer to her son.

"Look at that man and tell me you believe him now."

Ronan's jaw worked. He looked at me.

And for the first time since we were thrown in here together, I saw the doubt sitting fully in his eyes. Not flickering. Not brief. It had settled.

"Father," he said quietly. "You wouldn't."

I held his gaze.

The rational part of me that had been building walls and laying traps for years knew exactly what was needed here. A clean denial. A firm voice. Absolute certainty. Something to hand him that felt more solid than what Teagan was offering.

But my hands would not stop shaking.

And my nails were still pale.

And the heat was still moving through me like something searching for a way out.

I breathed in slowly.

"Don't disappoint me," I said. "Don't come at me with doubt and foolish questions after everything I have given you."

He watched me.

"This changes nothing," I said. "I am not leaving you. As long as you hold my hand, none of this ends the way they want it to."

Teagan made a soft sound. "Be smart, Ronan."

He looked between us.

Something was moving across his face that I could not read cleanly anymore. The poison was doing that. Making the edges of things soft and unreliable. I pressed my palm against my leg to hide the worst of the shaking.

Ronan opened his mouth.

Whatever he was about to say was swallowed by the sound of boots in the corridor.

The cell door opened in quick succession.

A sentinel stepped inside, and his eyes swept the cell without settling on anyone in particular.

"It is time," he said. "The elder's circle has arrived. Judgment begins now."

*Chapter 368: Bellerophon and the fly 1*

## **ALDRIC**

They walked us in chains.

There was no dignity in it at all. It felt like we were already branded as criminals already.

This shit went meant for an Alpha. This was the way dissenting Omegas and power life forms were treated.

The great hall had been rearranged for this. The long tables pushed back. The floor cleared. Six chairs arranged in a curved line at the far end, each one occupied by a face I had known for years. The elder's circle. Old blood and older law, sitting there with their hands folded and their expressions carefully neutral in the way that people practiced for years before they could make it convincing.

They were not neutral. None of them ever were. Everyone has a side.

But they were very good at pretending.

The crowd that lined the walls was less disciplined. People pressed against each other with their necks craning and their voices low and urgent. I could feel the energy in the room before I heard any individual word. It was charged and uneven and cut in too many directions at once to belong to any single opinion.

Good.

Divided rooms were workable rooms.

A woman near the left wall leaned toward the man beside her and said something I caught only the end of.

"...a witch and a warlock who have wanted this pack to fall for years. She didn't get the Alpha and now she's burning everything down over spite."

The man nodded slowly.

Across the hall, a younger sentinel shook his head and muttered something to the woman beside him. She pressed her lips together. Neither of them looked convinced of anything.

Ronan walked just behind me. I could hear his breathing. Measured, as it was controlled. He was holding himself together better than I expected, which was either a

good sign or a sign that the fracture his mother had made and that I had seen in his eyes earlier had gone somewhere deeper and quieter where I could not see it anymore.

I preferred not to think about that.

The head elder raised one hand.

The room went quiet in stages. First the people nearest the front, then the sound rolled backward like something draining out through the floor.

"This hearing will come to order."

His voice was deep and practiced and landed in the room without effort. Elder Callum. Sixty nine years old and built like someone who had never once been asked to doubt himself. He had sat in that chair for twenty two years. I had watched him do it. I knew how he moved, how he weighted his silences, and more importantly, I knew what he owed me.

He owed me a great deal.

Cian entered from the side door.

His Omega whore, Fia was beside him.

They took their seats along the observing wall and the room reacted to that too. A fresh ripple of murmuring. Some of it respectful and some of it something else.

Elder Callum looked at me.

"The charges against the accused are as follows."

He began to read.

Conspiracy. Treason. Unlawful use of the Skollrend's pack resources. Corruption of sentinel ranks. Attempted murder. Kidnap. Attempted kin slaughter. The list went on and his voice stayed flat through all of it. Like he was reading a supply inventory. Like the words meant nothing to him personally.

I listened to all of it.

I watched Callum's face while he read and I watched the faces of the other elders while he did, and by the time he reached the end I had already mapped who was where. Who was uneasy. Who was working hard to appear impartial. Who had already made up their mind.

Two of them, not counting Callum, were mine.

Elder Pryce on the far left, who had a shipping arrangement with three of my allied packs that would collapse overnight if I went down. Elder Saoirse beside him, who I had kept a very specific secret for twelve years and who had been paying that debt quietly and without complaint ever since.

They were mine.

But even mine had limits and right now both of them, including Callum were sitting stiffly in their seats and not looking at me directly.

There was also was the poison.

The poison was the problem.

My hands were steadier than they had been in the cell but the pale had not left my nails and the heat in my chest had not fully receded. It had dulled to something manageable, which meant whatever Morrigan had used was still working its way through me. Not fast enough to drop me before the trial began, apparently. But present enough that anyone looking closely could see something was wrong.

Which meant I needed them to look.

Elder Callum finished the charges and set down the paper.

Before he could continue, I spoke.

"First."

The word came out clear. I had practiced it inside my head on the walk down here. The weight of it. The timing.

Callum looked at me.

"I need medical attention."

The room broke open.

It was not one sound. It was several sounds happening at once. Laughter from one corner. Sharp disbelief from another. Someone near the back said something too quick for me to catch and the woman beside them responded loudly enough that I heard the word liar before the general noise swallowed it.

"He planned this."

"Why are we even here? We arrested him on the word of people who want us destroyed."

"Look at him though. He does look wrong."

"Of course he looks wrong, he is standing trial."

Elder Callum raised his hand again.

The noise subsided slower this time.

I waited until the room had settled before I continued. Quiet drew more attention than volume. I had learned that before most people in this room were born.

"I was poisoned," I said. "I became aware of it in the cell. I don't know yet whether this was meant to be a mercy or a message but I know what I feel in my own body and I know what these hands look like."

I held them up.

The pale was visible. The faint tremor less so, but I let one hand drop slightly and let the tremor show just enough before I pulled it back.

Several faces in the crowd shifted. Concern replacing certainty. Not in everyone. But in enough.

"This feels political," I said. "Everything about today has felt political. I was dragged before this circle on the testimony of a witch and a warlock. People who have every reason to want this pack destabilized. People who have been circling this family for years." I paused. "I am not asking to be excused from this process. I want a fair trial. The last thing I want is to die in front of this circle and be remembered as a traitor who poisoned himself to avoid the truth and chose the coward's way out."

I turned my eyes toward the elder's circle.

"Bring a healer down here and let them confirm what I am telling you. That is all I ask."

Elder Pryce leaned toward Saoirse and said something under his breath. She nodded once.

Elder Callum looked at Cian.

Cian stood.

"Uncle," he said. His voice was careful. Measured. The voice of a man who had spent a long time thinking about what he wanted to say. "I understand that this feels frightening. But no one in this room is attempting to destroy you without cause. If the testimony brought against you is false, then those who gave it will answer for it. All I am asking is

that we determine the truth. Some of what was said is serious enough that I cannot look away from it. I don't know about any poison. But nobody would have done that to you."

He sat back down.

I looked at him.

He met my eyes steadily and I found, not for the first time, that I genuinely respected the man my nephew had become. Not enough to surrender to him. But enough to acknowledge it privately in my head.

If he wanted a game, I could play a game.

I turned back to the circle.

"Where is your mother, Cian?"

The question landed exactly the way I needed it to. Several heads turned. Cian's expression did not change but something moved behind his eyes.

I looked at the elders directly.

"She shared wine with me this morning right before I got arrested and started to feel sick. She is currently receiving treatment, I would assume. She ingested some of whatever she put in my mouth." I let that sit for a second. "I am not accusing her of anything today. I am simply noting that the Grand Luna of this pack is absent from a trial she should want to witness if the charges against me are true. I wonder... If the warlock and the witch's poison convinced her of sins I am not guilty of and she chose to take me out herself."

Callum's brow furrowed slightly.

The elder beside him, a woman named Vera who I had never fully gotten a grip on, leaned forward in her chair.

"The accused may be telling the truth about his condition," she said to the circle, her voice low enough that I only caught it because I had positioned myself to hear. "We should at least confirm."

*Chapter 369: Bellerophon and the fly 2*

## **ALDRIC**

That was when the door opened.

I heard her before I saw her.

The sound of heels on stone. It was unhurried and it sure sounded deliberate. The kind of entrance that announced itself without a single word being spoken first.

My sister-in-law, Morrigan walked into the hall dressed in red.

The room reacted. I felt the shift in the air before I fully processed what I was looking at.

She looked completely fine.

More than fine. She looked like a woman who had slept well and chosen her outfit with care and arrived exactly when she intended to.

She found her seat along the wall and settled into it like she had simply been delayed by something unimportant.

Then she looked at me.

"Was that an accusation, brother-in-law?"

Her voice was smooth and carried easily through the hall.

"I did not believe what was being said against you," she continued. "I want that stated clearly. And I am certain many saw and heard. But to use me in service of a lie, in front of this circle, is a particularly cruel thing."

She folded her hands in her lap.

"I am here. Clearly not receiving treatment. So what lie is this?"

The hall went very quiet.

I felt the ground shift slightly beneath me and I kept my face still while it happened.

She had anticipated this. She had walked in healthy and composed and dressed in a color that made her impossible to ignore and she had cut off the line before I could use it. I did not know when she had figured me out. I did not know when Morrigan had decided on poison as her method, or how long she had been watching me the way I had been watching her. But she had. And she had struck well first.

It annoyed me considerably.

I held her gaze and she looked back at me with something that was not quite hatred but lived very close to it. She had wanted me to die painfully. She had wanted me to convulse in my cell and be found in a few hours maybe and have it mean nothing, be called nothing, just a man who finally ran out of time because he knew he was guilty and didn't want to face that reality.

I intended to refuse her that.

The head elder turned back to me.

"You are still claiming poisoning?"

"I am," I said. "Whatever she took as an antidote, she recovered faster than I have. That does not change what is in my blood."

Elder Callum turned to confer with the circle. I watched Pryce lean in. He said something short and sharp and then glanced at me once. Saoirse nodded slightly beside him.

They were trying. I could see them trying.

But the room had watched Morrigan walk in looking like that. And the room was doing the math.

Then Madeline stood. Her father also caught my attention. He was smiling down at me. Quite pleased that a day like this had finally arrived.

I looked back at Madeline. Truly looked at her for the first time since they had entered. She stood straight with her hands clasped in front of her and her expression composed in a way that had clearly cost her something.

"I am a witch with a powerful healing ability," she said to the circle. "I can determine whether this man is poisoned and treat it accordingly. I believe he staged this for sympathy and to manipulate these proceedings." She paused. "But I want justice carried out properly. Not muddied by doubt. If he is sick, let me confirm it and remove it as a variable."

Elder Callum looked at the circle.

The room murmured.

One of the younger elders shook his head. "We do not know this woman's gifts well enough to trust them here."

"The pack healers," another said. "We should send for them."

Morrigan's voice cut through cleanly.

"When I was poisoned by an Omega we have now learned was working not for Gabriel but for Aldric himself, it was this witch who healed me." She looked at the elders without blinking. "Drop the prejudice and let her do her work. It is clear to me that someone is trying to delay these proceedings and I would like very much to know why."

The circle murmured among themselves.

I watched Pryce's face. He was trying to object. The angle was there. But Morrigan had framed it well and the room had heard it and the two votes he needed on his side to carry any counter motion were not moving the way they needed to.

Callum was being careful and the other bitch seemed to be holding back. Did she not know what she stood to lose?

His eyes cut to mine for half a second.

I kept my face still.

Elder Callum straightened.

"We will have the witch proceed," he said. "Her gifts are documented and time is not something we have in abundance today."

Madeline descended from the gallery without ceremony.

She stopped in front of me and looked at my face and then down at my hands. Her expression was unreadable. She raised her palms and the air between us shifted. A faint warmth spread from her hands into my chest, different from the fever heat of the poison. This was cleaner. More directed.

I looked down at her while she worked.

Now that I was close, I noticed she had her father's treacherous eyes. Sharp and watchful even when the rest of her face stayed composed. I did not like her. I had never liked her. But I found myself thinking, with a clarity that surprised me, that she was going to be exhausted when this was over. Healing at this level drained mana significantly. Whatever she had left for the rest of this day, this was eating into it.

One less powerful witch to contend with when things moved past words. And they would.

I almost smiled.

The warmth spread deeper and the pale began to retreat from my nails in slow degrees. The tremor in my hands settled. The uneven pulse in my chest smoothed itself out and I drew a full breath for the first time in hours.

Madeline stepped back.

She swayed once, barely noticeable, and then steadied herself and walked away without looking at me again.

I looked up.

Morrigan was watching me from across the hall. Her expression was composed but her eyes were doing something else entirely. She had wanted me to suffer that death. She had planned it carefully. She had sat with me and pushed that wine on me. Even watched me drink it while she kept her face calm the whole time.

And here I was.

Still breathing.

Still standing.

Still here.

I held her gaze for just a moment longer than necessary.

Elder Callum cleared his throat.

"Are you well enough to proceed?"

I turned to face him fully. The strength was back in my legs. My hands were still. My pulse was even.

"I am," I said.

He nodded and shifted his attention down the line.

"And you, Beta Ronan?"

Ronan had not spoken since we were walked in. He stood slightly behind me and to my left with his hands at his sides and his face closed off in a way I recognized. He was still thinking. Still turning things over.

He nodded once.

"Good." Callum gathered the papers in front of him.

The door at the far end of the hall opened one more time.

An older woman entered. Her hair was white and she moved with the deliberate slowness of someone who did not believe in hurrying. The spiritual elder guide... What was her name again? I had not seen her around in months and she was one of the elders who stayed in the estate premises. Her presence shifted the weight of the room in a way that was difficult to articulate.

She joined the circle without a word and settled into the remaining chair.

Callum looked at her briefly and then back at me.

"The charges have been stated," he said. "How do you plead?"

I looked at him. Then at the circle. Then, because I wanted to, I let my eyes move across the room. The watching faces. The held breath. The people who had already decided and the ones who had not and the ones who were waiting to be told what to think.

They finally landed on the Omega who started this real mess. Fia.

"Not guilty," I said.

Callum turned to Ronan.

Ronan was quiet for a moment that stretched longer than it should have.

Then he straightened.

"Not guilty."

"Very well," the head elder said.

He set his papers down and looked at the circle.

"Let us begin."

*Chapter 370: When it rains, it pours 1*

## **CIAN**

I was about to enter the hall when I heard footsteps behind me.

I turned and saw Elara approaching. Her face was pale and her hands were clasped tightly in front of her. She looked like she had been crying recently or was about to start.

"Cian."

Her voice was quiet. Too quiet for someone who usually carried herself with so much confidence.

I waited.

She stopped a few feet away from me and looked up at me with eyes that reminded me too much of her father's. The same shape. The same color. But none of the calculation I had come to expect from Aldric.

"Did he really do those things? All of those horrible things? Do you think he would? I mean... Threatening Madeline... It doesn't make sense to me. It cannot. I need you to tell me it cannot be real."

I kept my expression neutral. The trial was minutes away from starting and I did not have time for this conversation. But she was my cousin. And she was hurting. I couldn't be that person. But I didn't know what sort of person to be for her.

"The trial will reveal all," I said.

Her jaw tightened.

"Please do not do that."

"Do what?"

"Treat me like a child." Her voice cracked slightly. "I am old enough to take the truth. Information must have gotten to you too. You know something. You must know something."

I looked at her and felt the pull of family loyalty warring with every instinct that told me to be cautious. Elara had always been kind to me. She had never given me reason to doubt her. But she was Aldric's daughter. And I did not know how deep that bond ran or what she might do with information if I gave it to her.

"I don't know what to tell you, Elara."

Her face crumpled.

Then she dropped to her knees.

I stepped forward instinctively but stopped myself before I reached for her. She looked up at me with tears streaming down her face and her hands pressed together like she was praying.

"You have to be merciful."

"What?"

"Please." She was sobbing now. "Please. Maybe he did do it. I know he is a man of many faces. I know he is not always kind like he portrays himself. I know he has hurt people. But I am his daughter and I will carry his sins whatever they are."

The words hit me harder than I expected.

I crouched down in front of her and shook my head.

"That is far from the truth. You will carry nothing. His sins are his own. None of yours."

"You do not understand—"

"If he is guilty, it does not matter." I made sure my voice was firm. "It does not change our relationship. You are my cousin and I will love you regardless."

She laughed bitterly through her tears.

"Those are just words. Even if they are true and you might love me, what about everyone else?" She wiped at her face with shaking hands. "You cannot force them to love me or not distrust me. They will see me as his daughter first. Always. I know I am asking for a lot. But please tender mercy. Stop this. It will be the biggest public humiliation."

I felt something tighten in my chest.

"Your father was the one who asked for this," I said quietly. "To deny it, which by the way is impossible now that the elders are here, is to deny what he wants. My hands are tied."

"Cian—"

"It will be fine."

"No." She stood abruptly and stepped back from me. Her face was red and her eyes were wild. "Before I am a Donlon, I will be my father's daughter. Aldric's daughter. I am a finished woman now. This affects everything for me, moving forward."

I reached for her but she turned and ran before I could get close enough.

I watched her disappear around the corner and felt guilt settle heavy in my stomach. I wanted to go after her. I wanted to tell her that none of this was her fault and that I would protect her no matter what happened in that hall. But I could not. Not right now. I had a trial to oversee and a pack to protect. I couldn't give her the one protection that wanted from me. Because no matter what... my uncle... Aldric Donlon needed to be brought down.

So I did the next best thing. I hardened my heart and turned back toward the hall.

That was when I saw Fia and Maren approaching.

Something was wrong... At the very least, something was off.

I could see it in the way Fia held herself. Her shoulders were tight and her hands were clasped in front of her and she looked like she was holding something back. Maren walked slightly behind her with a worried expression on her face.

I walked toward them and stopped when I was close enough to see the tension in Fia's eyes.

"Whatever it is, it will be alright," I said. I reached for her hand and squeezed it gently. "Everything will go according to plan."

She looked up at me and her brow furrowed.

"What do you have planned exactly?"

I glanced at Maren. It wasn't like I didn't trust her. It was just instinct I guess. Maren on the other hand, understood immediately and took a few steps away to give us privacy.

I turned back to Fia and lowered my voice.

"Aldric will not survive this. No matter how hard a fight he puts up." I paused and made sure she was listening. "I also know that Elder Moira will be on our side because her side is the Goddess' side. I intend to use her particular gifts to weed out the traitor in powerful places."

Her eyes widened slightly.

"If Aldric is to fall, his allies and foes will be present," I continued. "No one in that room will escape an oath."

She looked down at her hands and I saw worry flicker across her face.

"What is it?"

"What if Aldric just dies?"

I frowned.

"What does that mean?"

I pulled her closer and studied her face. There was something she was not telling me.

"What did you do?"