

## **To ruin an Omega #Chapter 381: No one mourns the cruel 2 - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 381: No one mourns the cruel 2**

*Chapter 381: No one mourns the cruel 2*

**CIAN**

I lifted my hand and placed it over hers, where it gripped my arm, not to remove it, not yet, but to ground the moment, to make sure she felt the certainty I was trying to give her.

"But I will never forgive myself if he escapes out of here," I continued, holding her gaze as I spoke, letting the truth of that settle between us before I added, quieter but no less firm, "Help my uncle. I will be fine."

She didn't release me immediately, and for a moment it felt like time stretched in that space between us, her grip still tight, her eyes searching mine as though she was trying to find something she could trust enough to let go.

I could see everything happening behind her expression, the fear that refused to loosen its hold, the doubt that lingered no matter what I said, and beneath it all, the instinctive need to keep me close, to stop me from stepping into something she believed would take me from her.

For a moment, I thought she might refuse.

Then, slowly, her fingers loosened.

Her hand slipped away from my arm in stages, reluctant and unsteady, as though every inch of distance between us was something she had to force herself to accept.

I didn't give either of us the chance to reconsider.

The moment she let go, I turned and ran.

The broken window came up fast, its jagged edges catching what little light remained, but I didn't slow as I reached it, launching myself through the opening with enough force to send the remaining shards scattering as I passed through.

I landed hard outside, my boots crunching against the glass that covered the ground beneath me, the sharp fragments shifting and grinding under my weight, glinting faintly in the fading light of the evening.

Straightening, I lifted my head and looked ahead, my focus narrowing immediately as I took in the scene unfolding beyond the walls.

The sentinels were already deep within the tree line, spread out in a loose formation as they moved through the woods, their movements coordinated but urgent, all of them tracking the same target.

Aldric.

Between them and me, two bodies lay crumpled on the ground, their forms twisted at unnatural angles that made it clear they had gone down hard and fast.

Their throats had been torn open so violently that there was no mistaking the force behind it, the earth beneath them dark and soaked through with blood that had already begun to seep into the soil.

My gaze shifted forward again, following the direction of the pursuit, and this time I caught the trail more clearly, the uneven splatters of blood cutting through the grass and leading deeper into the woods, marking his path in a way that made it impossible to lose.

They had hit him.

He was wounded.

Slower than he had been before.

But still moving.

Then he looked back.

Our eyes met across the distance, and in that instant, everything else seemed to fall away: the noise, the movement, the bodies, the chaos behind me, all of it fading into something distant and irrelevant as my focus locked entirely onto him.

It was just him.

And me.

Nothing else mattered.

He turned and ran.

Something inside me gave way, not gradually, not with hesitation, but all at once, like a line snapping under too much strain.

The world narrowed instantly, collapsing into a single point of focus that left no room for anything else, no space for doubt, no space for anything but the need to close the distance between us.

I had to catch him.

I had to end this.

The shift began before I consciously chose it, my body already moving ahead of my thoughts, committing to the change without waiting for permission, as if some deeper part of me had already decided what needed to happen.

Pain tore through me as it always did, sharp and consuming, my bones breaking and reforming beneath my skin, my muscles stretching and tightening as they reshaped, my skin pulling apart to make room for the fur forcing its way through.

It hurt.

It always hurt.

But it didn't matter.

I let it happen, dropping forward and giving in to it completely instead of resisting, allowing the transformation to take over until there was nothing left to fight.

The moment it settled, everything sharpened.

My speed surged immediately, the ground beneath me no longer something I ran on but something I devoured with each stride, the distance between me and my target shrinking faster with every movement.

The world came into focus in a way that was almost overwhelming, every detail sharper, clearer, more defined than before.

Sound sharpened first, separating into layers I could pick apart without effort.

Then scent followed.

Blood, fear, and sweat.

It all flooded in at once, filling my senses until there was no space left for anything else, no distraction strong enough to pull me away from what mattered.

And beneath it all, clear and unmistakable was he.

I locked onto it instantly, my body responding without hesitation as my legs drove me forward, each stride carrying me faster, stronger, and closer.

The trees blurred past me as I moved.

The ground vanished beneath my paws.

Aldric was ahead of me, still in that half-shifted state where his body carried both forms at once, still running despite everything that had already been done to him.

But I was faster, and the distance between us disappeared quickly under the force of my stride, each step driving me closer until there was nothing left but the moment I chose to take him down.

I launched myself forward, my body committing fully to the attack as my jaws opened and my teeth bared, closing the final gap between us in a single, decisive movement.

I caught him at the shoulder.

My fangs sank deep into flesh, tearing through muscle and sinew as the resistance gave way beneath the pressure of my bite.

Aldric screamed, the sound ripped from him as he twisted violently in response, his claws slashing across my side with enough force to break my hold and throw me off balance.

I hit the ground hard and rolled with the impact, forcing myself back onto my feet almost immediately because I simply refused to give him even a second to recover an advantage.

He turned to face me.

His shoulder hung at an unnatural angle, the damage severe and unmistakable, blood pouring steadily from the wound and soaking into his side, but none of it dulled the focus in his eyes or the fury that still burned there.

He came at me again without hesitation.

His claws cut toward my face in a fast, deliberate strike, but I dipped under the attack and lunged forward in the same motion, shifting my aim lower as I drove in.

I went for his leg.

My teeth closed around his thigh, locking down with force.

He roared and brought his fist down on my skull in retaliation, the impact landing hard enough to rattle me, sending a burst of white across my vision as the force of it disrupted my focus.

I released him and stepped back, shaking my head to clear it as I forced myself to reset before he could press further.

By then, the sentinels had caught up, spreading out around us in a loose circle with their guns raised and trained on Aldric, their hesitation obvious as none of them fired.

They could not risk hitting me.

Aldric noticed, his attention shifting toward them as his lips pulled back in a snarl, blood staining his teeth as he assessed the new threat.

One of them fired anyway.

The bullet struck him in the chest, the impact forcing him backward a step before two more shots followed in quick succession, one hitting his stomach and the other catching his side.

He dropped to one knee under the force of it.

I did not wait.

I charged forward again, slamming into him with everything I had and driving him backward into the dirt, the force of the impact carrying us both down as I went straight for his throat.

*Chapter 382: Have a break*

## **CIAN**

My jaws closed, but he got his arm up in time to block.

I bit down hard, feeling bone crack beneath the pressure of my teeth.

He howled and shoved me off with his other hand, throwing me back with enough force to send me crashing into a tree, the impact knocking the air from my lungs in a sudden rush.

By the time I forced myself upright again, he was already pushing to his feet, his body unsteady but still refusing to give out.

Blood covered him now, multiple wounds bleeding freely, his breathing uneven and labored in a way that made it clear how much he had already taken.

But he was still standing.

One of the sentinels moved closer and fired again, the shot hitting his shoulder and spinning him slightly with the impact before forcing him back down onto one knee.

I was on him before he could recover.

My claws raked across his back, tearing through skin and muscle in long, brutal lines, but he twisted sharply and caught me by the scruff, using the grip to throw me sideways and break my momentum.

I hit the ground, rolled, and came back up without hesitation.

We began to circle each other, both of us slowing just enough to measure the other, to search for an opening, to decide how this ended.

We were both bleeding, both wounded, both running on what was left.

But only one of us was walking away from this.

He moved first.

This time, I was ready.

We collided head-on, bodies crashing together in a violent tangle of claws and teeth and raw force, each of us trying to overpower the other, trying to force the fight into something final.

He was stronger than I expected, even wounded, even bleeding out, he was still fighting with a relentless drive that refused to break.

His claws caught me across the ribs in a clean strike, pain flaring instantly as I felt skin split and blood begin to run down my side.

I ignored it.

I shifted my grip and bit down on his arm, the one that was already broken, and this time I committed fully.

The bone shattered completely beneath my jaws.

Aldric screamed again, the sound sharper now, edged with something closer to desperation.

He tore himself free and stumbled backward, his footing less certain than before.

The sentinels took the opening and fired again, three shots in quick succession, all of them hitting as the bullets drove into his chest, his stomach, and his leg.

With that amount of wolfsbane in his system, Aldric went down.

But he did not stay there.

He forced himself back up, slower this time, weaker, his body beginning to fail even as his will refused to follow.

I charged again, putting everything I had left into the movement as I slammed into him and drove us both to the ground.

This time, I did not let go.

My jaws closed around his throat, locking in place as I tasted blood and felt his pulse hammering beneath my teeth, frantic and uneven.

He clawed at me, his movements desperate now, weaker and less controlled as he tried to force me off.

I held on.

I did not loosen my grip.

Then suddenly, he found leverage.

His legs came up and braced against me before he kicked hard, sending me flying backward with enough force to break my hold completely.

I landed badly, my shoulder taking most of the impact. I even heard something shift there, and it came with a sharp, wrong sensation that told me immediately it was not right.

I pushed myself up anyway.

But Aldric was already on me.

He closed the distance and grabbed me by the throat, his grip tightening instantly, claws digging through fur and into skin as he lifted me clean off the ground.

I thrashed and twisted, trying to break free, but his hold did not give; his strength was still overwhelming despite everything.

He pulled me closer until his face was inches from mine. There was blood dripping from his mouth, and it helped make his eyes wild and unhinged.

"You should have stayed down," he rasped.

His other hand came up, his claws extended, the intent behind the movement unmistakable.

He was going to tear me apart, rip me open like it was nothing, without hesitation, without doubt, without even the slightest restraint.

I could see it clearly.

This was it.

This was how it ended.

Then one of his hands exploded.

Not metaphorically. It actually fucking exploded.

Blood, bone, and torn tissue burst outward in a violent spray, the force of it breaking through the moment as Aldric's scream tore from him, sharp and immediate.

His grip on my throat vanished.

I dropped to the ground and shifted back into my human form almost instantly, dragging air into my lungs as I forced myself upright.

I turned my head.

Madeline stood about twenty feet away, her hands still raised as faint traces of magic crackled around her fingers.

She looked exhausted, pale in a way that suggested the spell had cost her more than she wanted to give.

But she was there. She had saved me.

Aldric had dropped to his knees, staring at what remained of his arm, at the stump where his hand had been.

There was so much blood pouring from it in thick, heavy pulses.

Then he looked up at me.

The hatred in his eyes had not faded.

Neither had the fight.

But his body had nothing left to give.

I stepped forward, closing the distance with deliberate steps before grabbing him by the hair and forcing his head back.

His remaining hand lifted weakly, trying to push me away, the movement lacking any real strength, and the only damage that was done was that the ring on his finger scratched me.

I ignored it.

Then I twisted. Hard and just as fast.

I felt his neck snap beneath my hands, the sound sharp and final as it cut cleanly through the air.

But I did not stop there.

Even after the fight had already been decided, even after his body had begun to give out beneath my hands, I kept twisting, kept pulling, refusing to let the moment end until I was certain there was nothing left of him that could rise again.

I felt it as it happened.

The resistance of the bone gave way under the force I applied.

The vertebrae separated one after the other as the structure failed.

The tearing of skin and the pull of muscle as everything that held him together came apart in my grip.

And then— I tore his head clean off his shoulders.

It came away with part of his spine still attached, a long, twisted column of bone slick with blood and torn tissue, the weight of it heavier than it should have been as it hung from my hands.

For a moment, I just stood there and held it.

Aldric's eyes were still open, still fixed in a stare that no longer meant anything.

Whatever had driven him, whatever had kept him moving, was gone completely.

There was nothing behind them now.

He was gone.

Finally gone.

I let it drop.

The head and spine hit the ground with a wet, heavy sound, landing among the dirt and blood that had already soaked the earth beneath us.

Only then did my body catch up with everything that had just happened.

I dropped to my knees.

The strength that had carried me through the fight drained out of me all at once, leaving behind something unsteady and raw.

My entire body was shaking in a way I could not control.

Blood covered me. Both my blood and Aldric's.

I could not tell where one ended and the other began anymore; the line between them blurred until it stopped mattering.

The sentinels approached slowly, their movements cautious, measured, as if they were still unsure whether the danger had truly passed.

One of them spoke, his voice careful.

"Alpha Cian. Are you alright?"

I did not answer right away.

I stayed where I was, kneeling in the dirt, in the blood, trying to steady myself, trying to pull my breathing back into something that resembled control as my chest rose and fell unevenly.

Aldric was dead.

It was over.

Finally over.

I lifted my head and looked toward Madeline.

She had lowered her hands, the last traces of magic gone from her fingers, whatever she had summoned already spent.

"Thank you," I said.

My voice came out rough, worn down to something quieter than I intended, barely more than a whisper.

She gave a small nod in response, but the movement cost her more than it should have. I saw it in the way her balance faltered, in the way her body swayed where she stood.

One of the sentinels reached her in time, catching her before she could fall.

I forced myself up.

Every muscle protested the movement, pain flaring in places I hadn't had time to register before, but I ignored it and pushed through until I was standing again.

"We need to get back," I said, my voice steadier now despite everything, the urgency returning as reality settled back into place. "My uncle Gabriel needs help."

The sentinels nodded.

I looked back at Aldric's head and picked it back up. There was one more thing to do.

*Chapter 383: There once was a promise*

## **CIAN**

I walked back into the hall carrying Aldric's head by the hair.

Blood dripped from the severed neck. It left a trail across the floor behind me, dark spots on pale stone.

The hall had not settled. People were still moving, still whispering, still trying to process what had just happened.

They went silent when they saw me.

Every head turned.

Every eye locked on what I was carrying, then dragged lower, taking in the rest of me.

I was still naked.

Still soaked in blood that wasn't all his. It clung to my skin, dried in places, wet in others, streaked down my chest and legs as I had walked straight out of a slaughter.

I walked to the center of the hall and stopped in front of the elder's circle.

Then I let go.

The head hit the floor with a wet thud. It rolled once before coming to rest facing the gallery.

Aldric's eyes were still open. Staring at nothing.

Someone in the crowd let out a choked sound. A woman near the back started crying. Then the claps of victory followed.

I looked up at Elder Callum.

He was staring at the head with an expression I could not quite read. Shock maybe. Or disgust. Or both.

"That was a bit much," he said finally.

His voice was carefully neutral, but I could hear the judgment underneath.

I met his eyes without flinching.

"He showed his true colors and attempted a coup," I said. My voice was steady and clear. "He also hurt my uncle Gabriel and came dangerously close to killing me. I had no choice."

I paused.

"Not like it was an overdose. He was going to be beheaded anyway."

A murmur rippled through the elders. One of them leaned forward slightly, eyes fixed on the head at my feet.

"You didn't even use a machete," he said, low, almost uneasy. "If the head is not taken clean, the soul does not rest. It lingers. It finds its way back."

Silence pressed in around us. A few of them shifted, as if the thought alone unsettled them.

I exhaled through my nose, unimpressed.

"That's a belief," I said. My voice stayed level, untouched by their unease. "Not a rule."

My gaze dropped briefly to Aldric's head before returning to them.

"He's dead. That's what matters."

Callum's jaw tightened but he did not argue.

I turned away from him and looked at Ronan.

My former friend stood surrounded by sentinels. His hands were still in chains. His face was pale. He was staring at his father's severed head with an expression that looked like horror and grief twisted together.

"It is truly sad that it came to this," I said quietly. "You were my friend."

Ronan's eyes snapped to mine.

I looked away before I could see whatever he wanted me to see there.

I turned back to Callum.

"Sentence the remaining traitor."

Callum stood slowly. He adjusted his robes and cleared his throat.

"Beta Ronan Ashworth," he said. His voice carried through the hall. "You have been found guilty of conspiracy. Of treason. Of aiding in the attempted assassination and usurping of the ruling Alpha. The sentence for these crimes is death by beheading."

The hall erupted into noise again.

Ronan's face went white.

"No," he said. His voice cracked. "No, wait. Please."

He took a step forward, but the sentinels grabbed him and held him in place.

"Give me leniency, and I will tell you plenty of what Aldric planned," he said desperately. "Plenty more people he had in his pockets. The packs he had close ties to. Everything. I will tell you everything."

I did not look at him.

I could not.

My heart ached in a way that made it hard to breathe. But I forced myself to keep moving. I forced myself to walk toward where Fia stood with Maren and Thorne.

They were kneeling on the floor beside Gabriel's body.

Maren was working quickly. Her hands moved with practiced precision. She had a needle and thread. She was stitching the wound on Gabriel's throat closed.

Blood still pooled around him. Too much blood.

I stopped a few feet away.

Fia saw me first.

She stood immediately and crossed the distance between us. Her arms came around me and pulled me against her.

"You are fine," she whispered.

Her voice shook.

I wrapped my arms around her and held on tight.

"I promised, did I not?"

She nodded against my chest.

I looked over her shoulder at Gabriel.

His eyes were closed. His face was pale. His breathing was shallow and uneven.

"Is he fine?" I asked.

Thorne looked up at me.

"We could not move him, and he was not healing," he said. His voice was grim. "I figure this is what years of malnutrition and seclusion do to the beast side of a werewolf. His body and his mind have taken a toll at once. Once we can sew him up, we can get him safely to the infirmary and treat this properly."

I nodded.

"Well, make it quick and leave this place. More blood is about to be shed."

Behind me Ronan was still shouting.

"Wait. Wait. Please, Cian. Just listen to me. I can help you. I can tell you who else was involved. Who else Aldric had under his control. Please."

His voice was getting more desperate with every word.

The sentinels started dragging him toward the door.

Maren worked faster. Her hands moved in quick, efficient motions. Tying off the thread. Cutting it clean.

"Done," she said.

She stood and gestured to Thorne. They both moved to lift Gabriel carefully. One on each side. Supporting his weight between them.

I looked at all of them.

"You four, along with my mother, should leave now."

My mother had already stood from her seat in the gallery. She moved toward us slowly. Her face was pale but composed.

Thorne and Maren started toward the door with Gabriel between them. Fia stayed close beside them. My mother followed.

They were halfway across the hall when Callum spoke.

"And the trial comes to an—"

"I do not think so," I said.

My voice cut through his words cleanly.

Callum stopped mid-sentence.

He turned to look at me. His expression shifted into something harder.

"Not yet," I added.

He stood.

"Alpha Cian," he said carefully. "We came here for Aldric Donlon and Ronan Ashworth. Justice has been served. The trial is concluded."

I did not move.

I watched as Fia and the others reached the door. I watched as the sentinels pulled it open for them. Watched as they disappeared through it.

Then I watched as different sentinels moved into position.

The ones I trusted. The ones Garrett had personally vouched for. They stood in front of the closed doors now with guns in one hand and machetes in the other.

No one was leaving.

I turned back to Callum.

"Before Aldric perished, Pryce stood in arms with him," I said. My voice was calm. Measured too. "And it was clear he expected more to do so. Why the rest of the traitors did not stand, I have no idea. Nor do I care. But I will not suffer more to live and breathe rot into my rule."

The hall went silent.

Callum's face hardened.

"And how will this be proven?" he asked. "Alpha Aldric was proven to be a very manipulative person. He may have had Pryce as an ally. But that could be it. His goal could have been to breed distrust and madness before he went out guns blazing."

I looked at him.

"That is a possibility," I said. "And that is why I will hand it over to the goddess herself."

Callum's eyes widened slightly.

He turned immediately toward Elder Moira.

Moira stood slowly from her seat.

She was the oldest of the elders. Her hair was completely white. Her face was lined with age. But her eyes were sharp and clear.

She stepped forward, and the room seemed to shift around her. The air grew heavier. Thicker.

It was her blessing.

It had to be.

The kind that had been passed down through generations of spiritual leaders. The kind that could not be faked or manipulated or bought.

"The lady Selene is here," Moira said.

Her voice was quiet, but it carried through the hall like thunder.

"Swear your oaths, and if your heart is true, you will be blessed. If not, you will die a painful death that you deserve."

*Chapter 384: Say your oath*

**CIAN**

The hall erupted into noise.

People were shouting. Protesting and demanding to know what was happening.

I raised my voice above all of it.

"Put your hand to your chest and swear your loyalty to Skollrend and me. Now!"

The command rang out clear and absolute.

For a moment, no one moved.

Then, slowly, people began to obey.

Hands came up and pressed against chests. Some people looked terrified. Others looked defiant. A few looked resigned.

Moira raised both of her hands.

The air around her shifted, barely noticeable at first. A strange stillness settled in, like the room had drawn in a breath and forgotten to let it go.

"Repeat after me," she said. "I swear my loyalty to Alpha Cian Donlon and to the pack of Skollrend. I swear to serve with honor and truth. I swear this on my life and on the goddess who watches over us all."

The words echoed through the hall.

Then people started repeating them.

Slowly at first. Then louder.

"I swear my loyalty to Alpha Cian Donlon and to the pack of Skollrend. I swear to serve with honor and truth. I swear this on my life and on the goddess who watches over us all."

Something shifted as the voices joined together.

The space around Moira seemed to draw tighter, like the air itself was being pulled toward her. Not visible, not something I could point to, but it was there, settling over the room.

It spread with the sound of the oath. Each voice added to it, deepening it, until it felt like it was pressing against my skin.

By the time the last words were spoken, it wrapped around every person in the hall, quiet and steady, holding them there.

Most of them reacted for a moment, a subtle shift in posture, a breath caught, a hand tightening at their side. Then it passed, and they stood as they were before.

But not all of them.

A woman near the back screamed.

It was sharp and sudden, cutting through the last echoes of the oath. She grabbed at her throat, fingers digging into her skin like she could pry something off.

Her eyes went wide. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. Not a word, not even a breath.

She staggered once.

Then she dropped.

Her body hit the floor and did not move again.

Another scream came from the left side of the hall.

A man this time. He doubled over, clutching his neck, choking on nothing anyone else could see. His chest heaved, desperate, useless.

He tried to run.

His legs gave out beneath him.

He fell hard, convulsed once, then went still.

More screams followed.

Twelve people in total.

Twelve traitors who had sworn false oaths.

The goddess had judged them and found them wanting.

The hall had gone completely silent now.

Everyone stared at the bodies. As proof that the goddess's small gifts to Moira were real. That the goddess was watching. That lies could not survive in her presence.

I looked at Callum.

His face had gone pale. He was staring at one of the bodies. A woman who had been sitting in the front row. Someone he probably knew well.

"I did not hear you say a word, Elder Callum," I asked quietly. "The oath concerns all."

For a moment, he said nothing.

Then slowly, he turned his head, not toward me, but toward someone else.

"Elder Saiorse," he said.

The shift in the room was immediate, subtle, but unmistakable as attention followed his gaze.

Saiorse stilled where she stood.

"You as well," Callum added, his voice calm in a way that felt deliberate.

A pause settled over her as my eyes wandered to her.

"Right... You did not say your oath as well."

Then she lifted her chin, but it came a second too late, like she was forcing herself into composure rather than holding it naturally.

"I am loyal to Skollrend," she said.

Her voice held, but her eyes had already moved, flicking to Callum with something sharper than confusion. Shock. Betrayal. A quiet, dawning realization of what he had just done.

Callum did not react to it.

"What about me?" I asked.

The question hung between us, heavier now.

A few people shifted where they stood, watching closely, sensing something unraveling.

Saiorse's composure faltered for just a moment. It was small, almost imperceptible, but it was there in the way her shoulders tightened and her breath caught before she could steady it.

"Of course," she said.

I held her gaze, unmoved.

"Then say the oath."

The silence that followed pressed in on all sides.

Saiorse did not move at first.

Her eyes stayed on Callum, searching his face as if waiting for something to break, for some sign that this was not what it looked like. There was none.

Then she turned back to face me, and something in her expression shifted.

No hesitation this time. This looked a lot like a decision.

Then she turned and ran.

The crack of gunfire tore through the hall before she made it three steps.

The first shot hit her high in the back, jerking her forward. The next followed almost immediately, then the rest came in rapid succession, a controlled, merciless barrage that left no space between impact and impact.

Her body struggled to keep moving, driven by instinct even as it failed her. Blood sprayed across the stone, across the hems of robes, across the feet of those closest to her.

She collapsed hard, but the shots did not stop.

They continued until there was nothing left to resist them.

By the time the gunfire ceased, her body lay twisted and unrecognizable, torn apart by the force of it.

The silence that followed felt heavier than the noise that came before it.

One of the sentinels stepped forward, unhurried, as though this had already been decided long before the moment arrived.

He reached down, gripping her hair, and pulled her head back to expose her throat.

The machete came down with a single, decisive strike.

The sound was wet and final as bone gave way.

Her head separated cleanly enough, rolling once across the blood-slick floor before coming to a stop.

No one spoke.

No one moved.

What had just happened did not need to be explained.

I let the silence stretch just long enough to settle over them again.

Then I turned back to Callum.

"Are you going to let the goddess handle her business," I asked, my voice even, "or will that be me?"

For a fraction of a second, he didn't answer.

Something in his expression shifted.

Then he moved.

Fast enough that most of the room didn't react in time.

His hand twisted as he lunged, bones shifting beneath skin, fingers lengthening into something sharper, something made to tear rather than grasp.

He came straight for me.

I didn't step back.

I caught his wrist mid-strike, stopping the motion before it could land. The force of it traveled up my arm, but it wasn't enough. Not even close.

I twisted.

There was a sharp crack as something in his arm gave, and before he could recover, I drove my foot into his chest and sent him flying back.

He hit the ground hard, his body skidding across the stone before crashing into Saiorse's corpse.

For a moment, he didn't move.

Then he sucked in a breath, panicked now, no longer composed. His eyes darted around the hall, searching for something that wasn't there anymore.

A sentinel stepped forward.

Machete already in hand.

Callum saw him coming.

"I swear—" he started, the words tumbling out too fast, too late. "I swear my loyalty to Alpha Cian Donlon and to the pack of Skollrend—"

He didn't finish.

Something caught him.

Not hands. Not anything visible.

But his body jerked upward, lifted clean off the ground like he weighed nothing at all.

His words cut off into a strangled sound as his limbs tensed against whatever held him.

Then his neck snapped.

The sound was sharp. Final.

His body went slack immediately after, whatever held him releasing just as suddenly.

He dropped to the floor in a heap beside Saiorse.

Dead, dead, dead.

Only then did I turn to address the rest of the hall.

"Let this be a lesson," I said. My voice carried clearly. "Treason will not be tolerated in Skollrend. Lies will not be tolerated. Aldric Donlon built his power on manipulation, fear, and betrayal. That ends today."

I paused and let the words settle.

"Anyone who cannot swear true loyalty to this pack should leave now. You will not be harmed. You will not be pursued. But you will not be welcome here."

No one moved.

I waited.

Still nothing.

"Good," I said. "Then we move forward. Together."

I looked at the sentinels guarding the door.

"Remove the bodies. Clear the hall. The trial is... over."

*Chapter 385: I wish us the best*

### **SPECIAL Chapter: TEAGAN**

The cell was colder than it had been before.

Or maybe it just felt that way now. Now that I had nothing left to do but sit here and wait for them to come for me.

I pressed my back against the stone wall and pulled my knees up to my chest. The position did nothing to warm me. But it made me feel smaller. Less present. Like if I curled up tight enough, maybe I could disappear entirely.

I had failed.

Not just today. Not just in the study, when I had tried to save my boy Ronan and ended up making everything worse.

I had failed years ago.

The moment I made the choice to lie with Aldric. The moment I let him convince me that my husband was the problem. The moment I agreed to help him cover it all up.

I had set Ronan on this path.

I had made him what he was.

And now he was going to die for it.

The thought made something twist violently in my chest. Sharp and hot and impossible to breathe through.

I pressed my forehead against my knees and tried to steady myself.

Being a mother was supposed to mean something.

It was supposed to mean protecting your child. Guiding them. Giving them the tools they needed to survive in a world that would try to break them.

I had done none of that.

Instead, I had lied to him. Used him. Let him grow up thinking his father hated him for no reason when the truth was so much worse.

And when he finally learned the truth, when he finally understood what I had done, I had not been there to help him process it. To help him heal.

Aldric had been there instead.

Aldric had taken my broken son and twisted him into something even more damaged. Something dangerous.

And I had let it happen.

The door at the end of the corridor opened.

I lifted my head.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway. Multiple sets. Heavy boots against stone.

The guards were coming back.

I stood slowly and moved toward the bars.

Two sentinels appeared. They were dragging Ronan between them. His hands were still in chains. His head was down. He looked exhausted.

One of the sentinels laughed.

"We have to go sharpen the machete," he said to the other. "Make sure it is ready for the beheading."

The second one grinned.

"Better sharpen it well. We do not want a repeat of last time. Took three swings to get through."

They both laughed.

Horror washed over me.

They were talking about killing my son like it was nothing. Like he was nothing.

They reached the cell and unlocked the door. Then they shoved Ronan inside.

He stumbled and caught himself against the wall.

The door slammed shut behind him.

The sentinels walked away, still laughing. Their voices faded down the corridor until there was nothing but silence again.

Ronan did not move from where he stood.

I crossed the cell quickly and stopped a few feet away from him.

"What happened to Aldric?" I asked.

My voice came out quieter than I intended. Shakier.

Ronan lifted his head slowly and looked at me.

"He is dead."

The words were flat and empty when they should have brought me peace because I knew what it meant for my boy.

I felt my breath catch.

"And you were sentenced."

He stared at me for a long moment. Then his expression shifted into something harder.

"Why?" he asked. "Do you want to make this about yourself again, Mom?"

The accusation hit me like a slap.

I shook my head quickly.

"No. I had time to reflect, and I see I sent you down this path."

I took a step closer.

"Not all of it is my fault. But a big chunk is. I made you this, and I am the reason you ended up here."

I reached out slowly. My hand trembled as I lifted it toward his face.

He did not push me away.

My fingers touched his cheek gently. His skin was cold.

A sigh of pain escaped me. It caught in my throat and turned into something that sounded like a sob.

"I guess you want to make up to give yourself peace," Ronan said. His voice was bitter. "So you feel less guilt when I perish, which will be any minute now."

I shook my head.

"I confessed to being an accessory to murder. I will die too."

He blinked.

For a moment, he looked surprised. Then the bitterness returned.

"Then what is the point of this?"

I looked at him. Really looked at him.

My son.

The boy I had carried for nine months. The boy I had held when he cried. The boy I had failed in every way that mattered.

"Being beheaded by a machete is not a way to go," I said quietly.

Ronan frowned.

"What does that mean?"

"You will not be able to come back to this world again."

He let out a short laugh. It sounded hollow.

"That is superstitious. You should not subscribe to that."

"There is truth in superstition."

I dropped my hand from his face and stepped back slightly.

"Maybe I will not have the chance to be the best in this life. But I promise you here, in our next life, I will be the best of the best."

The words felt inadequate. Too small for what I needed to say. But they were all I had.

I moved forward and pulled him into a hug.

He went stiff at first. Then slowly his body relaxed against mine.

"What life though?" he asked quietly. "If your superstitions have any truth in them... There will be no new life for us when we get beheaded."

I did not answer.

I just held him tighter.

Tears burned at the corners of my eyes. I blinked them back, but they came anyway. Hot and relentless.

I shifted my position slightly and moved behind him. My arms stayed around him, but now my hands were positioned differently.

One hand came up to rest against his throat.

The chains on his wrists would prevent him from stopping me. I had noticed that earlier. The way they restricted his movement. The way they kept his hands locked in front of him.

He could not reach behind himself.

He could not stop this.

I tightened my grip.

Not hard. Not yet.

Ronan went rigid immediately sensing my righteous intentions.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

His voice was sharp, and he was so confused.

Goddess, my little boy. My beautiful, beautiful boy.

I did not answer.

Instead, I tightened my grip more. My fingers pressed against his windpipe. Cutting off the air as quickly as I could manage.

He struggled immediately.

His body twisted. His hands came up and pulled at my arms. But the chains made it impossible for him to get leverage. He could not break free.

"Mom?" His voice came out strangled and panicked. "What are you doing? Mom?"

I kissed the top of his head.

"I know, baby. I know. I know."

My voice broke completely.

"But it will be fine soon. Do not fight. Mama loves you, and she is coming with you soon."

He kept struggling.

His movements were frantic now. Desperate.

"Mom, please. It hurts."

The words tore at me.

I squeezed my eyes shut and held on tighter.

"I know. I know. I am sorry. I am so sorry."

His struggles began to weaken.

His hands stopped pulling at my arms. His body started to sag.

I lowered us both to the floor slowly. My arms stayed locked around his throat.

He tried to speak again, but no sound came out.

Just a wet gasping noise that made bile rise in my throat.

I kept holding on. Until his body went limp in my arms.

I counted to thirty in my head. Then I counted to thirty again.

Only then did I let go.

Ronan slumped forward. His head hung at an odd angle. His eyes were half open, but there was nothing behind them.

He was gone.

I pulled him back against me and cradled his head in my lap.

The tears came harder now. Violent sobs that shook my whole body.

"I am sorry," I whispered. "I am so sorry. I am so sorry."

I rocked back and forth with his body in my arms.

My son.

My beautiful broken son.

I had killed him.

But it was better this way.

Better than letting them drag him out of this cell and force him to his knees. Better than making him wait while they raised the machete. Better than the pain and the fear and the knowledge that he was about to die in front of a crowd of people who hated him with the hope that he never got a second chance at life.

This was mercy.

This was the only thing I could give him now.

I stayed there for a long time holding him... Crying over him.

Then finally, I forced myself to let go.

I laid his body down gently on the floor. I even made sure to straighten his limbs and close his eyes properly.

Then I stood.

My hands were shaking so badly I could barely control them.

I looked down at my clothes. At the simple dress I had been wearing since they threw me in here.

It would work.

I started pulling at the fabric. Tearing it into strips. The material was old and worn. It gave easily under my hands.

I worked quickly and just as methodically.

I tied the strips together, knotted them tight, and made sure they would hold.

When I had enough length, I looked up.

There was a pipe running along the ceiling. Old iron. Rusted but solid.

I climbed onto the stone bench that ran along the wall. My legs shook beneath me, but I forced myself to keep moving.

I tied one end of the makeshift rope around the pipe, pulled it tight as I tested the knot.

It held.

I fashioned the other end into a loop, slipped it over my head, and positioned it carefully around my throat.

Then I looked down at Ronan one more time.

He looked peaceful now. Like he was just sleeping.

"I will see you soon, baby," I whispered.

Then I jumped.

The fall was short.

The rope caught me immediately.

Pain exploded through my neck. Sharp and all-consuming. My body jerked and twisted. My hands came up instinctively and clawed at the rope.

I could not breathe.

The pressure was immense. It felt like my head was going to separate from my body.

My vision started to blur.

But against my mind, I won the battle as I forced myself to stop fighting it.

I let my hands drop to my sides.

The pain was still there. Still overwhelming. But I focused on something else.

A memory.

Ronan as a child. Maybe four or five years old.

We were in a meadow. The grass was tall, green, and dotted with wildflowers. The sun was warm on our faces.

He was running ahead of me. His little legs were pumping as fast as they could go. His laughter filled the air.

I chased after him, laughing too.

"Mama, catch me!" he shouted.

"I am coming!" I called back.

He ran faster.

I ran even faster, too.

The meadow seemed to stretch on forever. The sky was impossibly blue. The world was perfect.

He stumbled, and I caught him before he could fall. I scooped him up into my arms and spun him around.

He shrieked with delight.

"Again, Mama! Again!"

I spun him again. His laughter rang out like music.

Then I set him down, and he grabbed my hand.

"Come on," he said. "Let us go find more flowers."

"Alright, baby. Lead the way."

He tugged me forward. Still laughing. Still so full of joy.

I followed him through the meadow.

The sun was warm.

The grass was soft beneath our feet.

Everything was perfect.

Everything was exactly as it should be.

The memory faded, and the pain slowly faded with it.

And then there was nothing.

All that remained was just darkness.

Just silence.

But most importantly... *peace*.

I quite liked that.

*Chapter 386: The Healing Factor 1*

## **FIA**

We moved quickly through the corridors.

Thorne and Maren carried Gabriel between them. His body hung limp and heavy. His head lolled forward with each step they took.

I walked beside them with my hand hovering near Gabriel's shoulder. Not touching per se. I was, however, ready in case they needed help.

Mother-in-law, Morrigan, followed close behind. Her footsteps were slower than they should have been. Uneven.

I glanced back at her.

Her face had gone pale again. The color that had returned after she woke from the poison had started to fade. She pressed one hand against the wall to steady herself.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

She waved me off with her free hand.

"I am fine. Just tired."

But she did not look fine.

We reached the infirmary, and Thorne pushed the door open with his shoulder. They carried Gabriel inside and lowered him carefully onto one of the cots.

His breathing was still shallow. Still uneven.

I moved to stand beside the bed while Maren began checking his vitals. Her fingers pressed against his wrist. Then his neck. Her brow furrowed.

"His pulse is weak," she said quietly.

Thorne moved to the other side of the bed and started checking the stitches on Gabriel's throat. They were holding. No fresh blood seeped through.

Behind us, Morrigan swayed where she stood.

I turned just in time to see her grab the edge of a nearby table to keep from falling.

"Grand Luna," I said sharply.

Maren looked up immediately. She abandoned Gabriel and crossed to the grand Luna in three quick steps.

"You need to sit down," Maren said.

"I am fine."

"You are not fine. You are about to collapse."

Maren guided her toward a chair and helped her sit. Morrigan sank into it with a soft exhale. Her eyes closed briefly.

"I will make you something," Maren said. "It will help you rest properly. The moss is losing its power."

"I do not need to rest."

"You do. Your body has been through too much today. The white moss only delayed the strain. It did not remove it."

Morrigan opened her eyes and looked at Maren.

"How long will I be out?"

"Hours. Maybe longer."

Morrigan's jaw tightened, but she nodded.

"Fine. But make it quick."

Maren moved toward the cabinets and began pulling out various bottles and jars. She worked quickly. Measuring. Mixing. Her hands moved with practiced precision.

I turned back to Gabriel.

Thorne had finished checking the stitches and was now examining the rest of him. Looking for other injuries we might have missed.

I stood at the foot of the bed and stared at Gabriel's face.

He looked so different from Aldric, even though they did share similarities.

It was strange how my mind kept trying to place Aldric over his face, like it could force the resemblance into something clearer. As I said, there were similarities, yes. The line of the jaw. The shape of his brow. But where Aldric carried a kind of sharp, controlled presence, Gabriel looked... worn.

Hollowed out.

His skin had a dull cast to it, stretched faintly over his cheekbones as if something beneath had been slowly taken from him over time. Not starved in the obvious sense, but drained. His lips were dry, faintly cracked, and there was a tension in his face even in unconsciousness, like rest wasn't something his body knew how to hold onto.

Hungry.

Not just for food.

Something deeper sat under it, something that made my chest tighten the longer I looked. Like whatever kept him going was running low, and had been for a while.

Years of imprisonment must have stripped him down to almost nothing. His cheeks were hollow. His skin was stretched too tight over his bones. His hair was a mess of tangles and gray.

"It must have been nerve-wracking," I said quietly.

Thorne looked up at me.

"What?"

"Being imprisoned for years. Not knowing if anyone would find you. Not knowing if you would ever get out."

I paused.

"It is insane that someone you love can just do that to you."

The words settled in the air between us.

I thought about my mother.

About my grandmother.

About what they had suffered at the hands of Valentine Blossom.

The experiments. The pain. The way he had used them and would have eventually discarded them like they were nothing.

My hand curled into a fist at my side.

Valentine.

I had to tell Cian about him. About what he had done. About what he was capable of.

Cian needed to know so he could avoid all and any more contact with that cruel man.

Though honestly, Cian killing him would be more than favorable.

The man had broken the tenets of supernatural society. He had harmed people. Werewolves especially. He had destroyed lives.

He deserved whatever justice came for him.

Behind me, I heard Maren moving. The soft clink of glass against glass. The quiet murmur of her voice as she spoke to Morrigan.

Then Morrigan's voice came softer.

"Thank you."

I glanced back and saw Maren handing her a small cup. Morrigan drank it quickly. Her face twisted at the taste, but she finished it.

Within moments, her eyes started to droop.

Maren helped her stand and guided her toward one of the other cots. Morrigan lay down without protest. Her eyes closed almost immediately.

Her breathing evened out.

She was asleep.

Maren pulled a blanket over her and then returned to where Thorne and I stood beside Gabriel.

"How is he?" she asked.

"Stable," Thorne said. "For now."

I looked down at Gabriel again.

His chest rose and fell in shallow breaths. Too shallow.

Then his body jerked.

It was small at first. Just a twitch in his shoulder.

Then it happened again. Harder this time.

His whole body started shaking.

"What the fuck is happening?" Thorne asked.

Maren moved immediately. She grabbed Gabriel's shoulders and tried to hold him still but the convulsions were too strong.

His back arched off the bed. His limbs thrashed. His head snapped to the side.

"Help me hold him down," Maren said.

I moved to the other side of the bed and grabbed his legs. Thorne took his arms.

We tried to keep him still, but his body fought against us. The shaking grew more violent. More erratic.

Foam started forming at the corners of his mouth.

"Goddess," I whispered.

Maren's eyes were wide. She looked at Thorne.

"Get the restraints."

Thorne released Gabriel's arms and ran toward the far cabinet. He pulled out leather straps and brought them back quickly.

We worked together to secure Gabriel's wrists and ankles to the bed. The restraints held but his body still convulsed against them.

The foam at his mouth turned pink.

Blood.

"I am confused," I said. My voice came out shaky. "What is happening to him? It does not make sense for him to be going into shock when the wound was covered up. He should be healing now."

He was an Alpha after all. Malnutrition or worse, their healing factor was ten times greater than that of most wolves.

Maren pressed her fingers against his neck as she checked his pulse.

Her face went pale.

"I do not think he is healing."

"What do you mean?"

"His immune system and healing factor must be in shambles right now. Years of malnutrition. Years of being cut off from his wolf. His body does not know how to heal itself anymore. Not fast enough."

*Chapter 387: The Healing Factor 2*

**FIA**

The words hit me like a blow.

Gabriel's body jerked again. Harder than before.

Then his eyes snapped open.

They were unfocused. Wild. Filled with something that looked like terror.

Blood started pouring from his nose.

Then from his mouth.

It ran down his chin and onto the pillow beneath his head.

"No," I said. "No, this cannot be happening."

Maren grabbed a cloth and tried to wipe away the blood, but more just kept coming.

Gabriel's breathing turned ragged. Wet. Like he was drowning.

I stood frozen. Watching him die... Watching him slip away after everything we had done to save him.

Then I heard it.

The hum.

It started low. So faint I almost thought I imagined it because of how badly I hoped it would find me again. It was a distant vibration at first. Like something stirring just beneath the surface of the world.

Then it grew.

Not louder in sound alone, but in presence. It pressed into the room, into my chest, into my bones, until it was impossible to ignore.

I looked down at my hands.

Light bled from my palms.

Soft at first. A celestial blue glow that flickered like it wasn't sure it belonged to me. Then it steadied, deepened, and spread across my skin in slow pulses that matched the rhythm of the hum.

It felt... alive.

*The goddess.*

She wasn't just near.

*She was here.*

The realization settled into me with a quiet certainty that made my breath catch.

Maren stilled across the room. Her mouth opened slightly before she caught herself. Her eyes locked onto me, wide and sharp.

"Are you going to heal him?"

I didn't answer her. I couldn't look away from my hands.

The light was stronger now. Brighter. It curled between my fingers, gathering, as if waiting for something. For me.

Or for her will.

The hum deepened, and with it came a pull. Not forceful, not demanding, but steady. Patient. It had already decided what would happen and was simply waiting for me to catch up.

My fingers twitched.

Not entirely my own.

I swallowed, my voice quieter than I expected, but steadier too.

"I don't think this is my choice."

I lifted my gaze, the glow reflecting faintly in Maren's eyes.

"She's already decided."

The hum grew louder. More insistent.

My hands moved before I could second-guess myself.

I placed them on Gabriel's throat. Right over the wound Maren had stitched closed, and the light in response exploded outward.

It filled the room in a bright and blinding manner. I could not see anything except the glow.

Heat flooded through me. It started in my chest and spread outward through my arms. Down into my hands.

I felt it pouring into Gabriel.

The goddess's power. Her blessing.

It moved through him like water. Filling every broken part. Every damaged cell. Every weakened organ.

I could feel his body responding.

The convulsions slowed, then stopped.

His breathing evened out. That wet rattle that was supposed to be a breath disappeared.

The blood stopped flowing.

I kept my hands pressed against his throat and let the light work.

It drained me.

I felt it pulling energy from somewhere deep inside. Taking more and more with each passing second.

My legs started to shake.

My vision blurred at the edges.

But I did not stop.

I could not stop.

Not until he was whole again.

The light pulsed brighter. So bright I had to close my eyes against it.

I felt Gabriel's pulse beneath my hands. Felt it growing stronger. Steadier.

His body was healing.

The malnutrition reversing itself. The damage from years of imprisonment undoing itself.

The goddess was remaking him.

And she was using me to do it.

I felt my strength draining faster now.

My hands trembled against his throat. My knees buckled.

Someone caught me before I could fall.

Thorne.

He held me upright, and I forced myself to keep going.

Just a little longer.

Just until it was done.

The hum reached a crescendo. The light flared so bright it felt like it was burning through my closed eyelids.

Then it stopped.

All at once.

The light disappeared. The hum cut off. The heat vanished.

I opened my eyes to a world that refused to stay still, the room tilting at an unnatural angle as though the ground beneath me had quietly shifted without warning. For a moment, I could not tell if it was the space around me that moved or if it was something inside my own body that had come undone.

My gaze dropped to Gabriel.

His eyes were closed, not in pain but in rest, and his breathing came slow and steady, rising and falling with a calm rhythm that did not belong to someone who had been dying moments ago. The color had returned to his face, replacing the pallor that had drained him before, and the wound at his throat had vanished so completely that I found myself staring, searching for any sign that it had ever been there.

There was nothing.

No scar or mark was present. There was no proof that anything had happened at all.

He looked as though he had simply fallen asleep.

Whole, untouched, and alive in a way that felt almost unreal.

"Fia," Thorne called, but his voice did not reach me the way it should have. It stretched, distorted, as if it had to travel across a great distance before finding me, and even then, it felt thin, barely there.

I tried to answer him, but my throat tightened before I could form the words, and whatever response I meant to give dissolved somewhere between thought and breath.

A heaviness began to settle over me, creeping in slowly at first, then all at once, like a tide I had not noticed rising until it was already too late. The edges of my vision darkened, shadows bleeding inward until the world narrowed into something small and unsteady.

I could hear them still.

Thorne and Maren.

Their voices overlapped, urgent and sharp in a way that suggested panic, yet none of it made sense to me anymore. The sounds reached me without meaning, as though language itself had slipped just beyond my grasp.

My body felt distant, as if it no longer fully belonged to me, and when I tried to move, to ground myself in something solid, I found nothing to hold onto.

The room continued to blur, its shape breaking apart at the edges, the light bending and folding into darkness until I could no longer tell where one ended and the other began.

I knew I should fight it.

I knew I should hold on.

But the effort required more than I had left to give, and the exhaustion pressing down on me felt deeper than anything I had ever known, sinking into my bones, into the very core of me, until resistance seemed pointless.

The last thing I felt was the quiet pull of it, gentle and absolute, as everything slipped away at once.

Then, there was nothing at all.

*Chapter 388: Make peace with it*

## **CIAN**

The bodies had been cleared from the hall.

Blood still stained the stone in dark patches, stubborn where it had settled into the grooves. The sentinels, with a lot of help from Omegas, worked in silence, scrubbing, rinsing, and scrubbing again. The sharp scent of cleaning solution tried to mask the copper in the air, but it did not quite succeed. Copper still clung to the back of the throat, thick and metallic.

I stood near the center of the room and watched them work.

Not because it needed watching, but because it needed to be seen.

It still needed to settle in the minds of many that this was what treason looked like when it ended.

My mind did not linger on it for long. It had already moved ahead, turning over the next steps with quiet precision. The council would need restructuring. Positions reassigned. Those who had stayed would need to be tested in ways that went beyond words. Loyalty was no longer something I could afford to assume even if the goddess had assured me that the ones alive stood by me.

Security would need tightening. Communication lines reworked. Every weak point Aldric had built into this pack would have to be found and cut out.

And then there were the external factions. They would hear about this. News like this did not stay contained. It would spread, twisted or not, and how I responded in the next few days would decide whether Skollrend was seen as stable or vulnerable.

There was no room for hesitation now.

But before any of that, there were still loose ends to close.

I lifted my gaze.

At the far end of the hall, near the entrance, three figures stood just past the threshold, the light from the corridor stretching faintly behind them, outlining their shapes against the darker interior.

Madeline was the first to catch my eye. Her brother, Wilhelm at her side, and Valentine was a step behind them.

Madeline looked exhausted. Her face was pale and drawn. The spell she had used to save me during the fight had clearly taken more out of her than she wanted to admit.

Wilhelm stood with his arms crossed. His expression was carefully neutral, but I could see the tension in the way he held himself.

Valentine looked as composed as ever. His hands were clasped behind his back. His face showed nothing, and when he noticed me, he let out a Cheshire grin.

I saw Valentine mouth something, and a second later, they all moved down in controlled and measured steps.

Their pace matched the weight of the room, as if they knew better than to disrupt it.

They stopped a few feet away from me.

Close enough to be addressed. Far enough to show restraint.

Madeline's gaze flicked briefly to the floor before returning to me.

I took a slow breath and let it out.

"The soul kiss," I said. "It is time to break it."

Valentine's eyes flicked toward Madeline briefly, then back to me.

"The conditions have been met," he said. "Aldric and Ronan have been punished for their crimes. The traitors have been exposed. Justice has been carried out exactly as you promised."

I nodded.

"Then we are done."

The air between us shifted. It was subtle. Almost imperceptible. But I felt it.

The weight that had been sitting in my chest since I made the first soul kiss with Valentine lifted. The magic that had bound us together dissolved like smoke.

I took another breath, and it came easier this time.

I was free.

I was finally free of him.

Valentine's expression did not change, but something in his posture relaxed slightly. He felt it too.

Wilhelm stepped forward, and this time there was no attempt at ceremony, no effort to dress the moment up as anything more than what it was, because we both understood it too well to pretend otherwise.

I reached out first, not out of urgency but because there was nothing left to delay, and he met me halfway, his hand firm when it closed around mine.

The magic responded immediately.

It unraveled faster than before, slipping apart with an ease that felt almost unsettling, as though it had never truly settled into place, as though whatever had bound us had already begun to loosen long before we stood here to end it.

There was a brief pressure in my chest. It was not sharp enough to hurt but it was present enough to be noticed, and then it faded just as quickly, leaving behind a strange kind of emptiness that did not quite feel like loss.

Wilhelm drew in a breath that sounded steadier than it actually was.

For a fraction of a second, something in his expression shifted, his composure slipping just enough to reveal that this had not been as simple for him as he would pretend, but he recovered almost immediately, his jaw tightening as he forced himself back into control.

The pact was that strong, even though it had a short stay.

"It is done," he said, his voice quiet but certain.

I let go of his hand, and he stepped back without hesitation, as though putting distance between us was the final confirmation that nothing remained.

Silence followed, stretching longer than it should have, settling into the space in a way that made everything feel momentarily suspended.

And then there was only Madeline.

I turned to her, aware of the shift before I fully registered it, aware that this moment would not unfold as neatly as the last.

"I guess that leaves us," I said, the words coming out more evenly than I felt.

She did not respond at once.

Instead, she shook her head, a small, almost absent motion that carried more certainty than hesitation.

"No need."

The answer did not land where I expected it to.

I frowned slightly, trying to understand if I had misheard her or misunderstood what she meant. "What?"

This time, when her gaze met mine, there was no avoidance in it, no flicker of doubt or conflict, only a steadiness that felt newly formed, as though it had taken effort to reach this point and she had no intention of stepping back from it.

"I want to keep it," she said.

The words settled between us, and for a moment, everything else seemed to recede, the distant sound of movement in the hall fading into something indistinct as my attention fixed entirely on her.

I searched her face instinctively, looking for the hesitation that should have been there, for the uncertainty that usually followed a choice like this.

There was none.

"Why?" I asked because I needed to hear her say it, needed to understand what had changed.

Her expression softened, but it did not lose its resolve, and when she stepped closer, it felt less like uncertainty and more like intention.

"So I remember," she said slowly, choosing each word with care rather than rushing through them, "what it felt like to believe that I had lost control and autonomy, and what it cost me when I believed I did."

She paused, not because she was unsure, but because she was allowing the weight of it to sit where it needed to.

"And so I don't lie to myself in the future," she continued, her voice quieter now, though no less steady. "About what I'm capable of, or how easy it is to cross that line when I convince myself I have a reason."

I did not interrupt.

"I thought letting go would break me," she added, and this time there was the slightest trace of something softer beneath the words, not quite regret, not quite relief, but something that lived somewhere between the two. "For a long while, I thought it was because I would not be able to survive it. Survive you and the separation. So I held on for dear life. But now I see... as clear as day... It was not because I couldn't survive it, but it was simply because I didn't want to find out who I was or could be without it... without you. I liked being drunk in love. To be sober with a reality that you were not in... It did not feel like a life worth living."

A quiet, almost self-aware smile touched her lips before fading again.

"I just didn't want to do it," she finished, more simply this time, the truth of it stripped of everything else.

She took another step closer, closing the distance without hesitation.

"But I am not afraid of it anymore," she said, and this time the words did not feel like something she was trying to convince herself of, but something she had already accepted. "I can be sober, and I can get over you and live a long and happy life being separated."

Her gaze did not waver.

"So I'm keeping it," she said. "To remember you. To remember the past we shared and the pain I gave you... The pain I gave us... and everything that came after. I do not want my darkness to ever hurt the people I love ever again."

She closed the remaining distance between us and wrapped her arms around me.

The contact was brief, but it was not hesitant.

It was real.

A goodbye that did not need to be said twice.

"Be happy, Cian," she murmured.

Then she pulled back.

For a second, I just looked at her.

This was not how I had expected this to end. But I was happy she had made peace with this. Just as I had.

"Madeline," Valentine said sharply, shattering the moment.

The word cut through the quiet, edged with something that had not been there before; Disgust.

She did not look at him immediately.

When she did, it was calm.

"I can make my own choices," she said.

*Chapter 389: Fancy Boring?*

## **CIAN**

There was no defiance in her tone. No need for it even.

For Madeline, this was her truth.

Valentine's jaw tightened, something darker flickering behind his eyes, but he said nothing more, especially when we made eye contact.

Madeline held her gaze for a second longer before she turned away from him entirely as she took a few steps back.

The space between us shifted again. The air became tense, but Valentine immediately broke the silence.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "For keeping your word."

I looked at him for a long moment.

"I wish I could say it makes me happy that I am letting you go. After all, the accusations that were against you are true. But we did make a deal, and you got me, my uncle, back. So enjoy your clean slate. *Go and sin no more.*"

Valentine's lips curved into a faint smile.

"I am a changed man."

Madeline let out a sharp laugh.

It was bitter and humorless.

"A lie from the pit of hell," she said.

Valentine turned to look at her. His smile faded.

"Madeline—"

"You should get the files, or whatever it is Aldric has against you, from Ronan before he is beheaded," she said. Her voice was hard. "And hold it against my father whenever and anytime that you can to ensure people are safe. Or else I do not think he can start with a clean slate or even let our family enjoy some fucking peace."

Valentine's jaw tightened.

"Madeline."

"Did I lie?"

She did not wait for an answer. She turned and walked toward the door without looking back.

Wilhelm hesitated for a moment. Then he followed her.

The door closed behind them with a soft click.

That left Valentine and me alone in the hall.

The silence stretched between us. I could hear the sentinels and Omega still working in the background. The scrape of brushes against stone. The splash of water in buckets as well as mops.

Valentine broke the silence again.

"My daughter is in a heightened state at the moment."

"I disagree. Your daughter is a very smart woman, and I would be a fool not take her words seriously."

Valentine took in a deep breath. "Having a supreme by your side that is not your enemy is the right call, especially with how fragile your politics could become."

"I guess I have to take her parting words seriously then," I continued, my voice measured, not raised, not sharpened, but firm in a way that left little room for misinterpretation. "Aldric had you cornered with whatever he held over your head, and it worked well enough for him. There is no reason I cannot do the same if it ever becomes necessary."

Valentine's composure did not break, but it shifted, subtly, almost imperceptibly, the kind of shift that only revealed itself in the tightening of his jaw and the way his shoulders squared as though bracing against something unseen.

"That would be a mistake," he said after a moment, though the conviction in his voice was not as absolute as it might have been before.

"Would it?" I asked, tilting my head slightly, not in mockery but in quiet consideration. "Because from where I stand, it seems like the only language you have ever responded to well."

He did not answer immediately.

For a brief moment, something flickered across his expression, something caught between irritation and reluctant acknowledgment, and then it was gone, buried beneath the same controlled exterior he had worn since the beginning.

"You have my word," he said instead, choosing a different path, one that sounded cleaner and easier to accept. "I will not give you reason to act on such thoughts."

I let the silence stretch just long enough to make it clear that I was weighing that statement, not taking it at face value, not rejecting it either, but placing it exactly where it belonged, somewhere between possibility and doubt.

Then I nodded once.

"See that you don't."

The look of shock on his face did not come from fear alone, but from the realization that I had said it plainly, without disguise, without softening it into something more polite.

For a man like Valentine, that mattered.

It meant I was not playing at civility.

I held his gaze, not pressing further, not repeating myself, because the implication had already settled where it needed to. He understood it. Whether he chose to accept it was something else entirely.

"Still," I added, my tone shifting just slightly. It was not soft, but it had become less edged. "I am not like my uncle."

That got his attention.

"I will not move against you for the sake of control, or out of habit, or because I enjoy having something to hold over your head," I continued, meeting his gaze directly so there would be no confusion about what I meant. "If I ever hurt you, it will be because you gave me reason to, because you chose to break the terms we agreed on."

The distinction mattered.

Not just for him, but for me.

It was the line I intended to hold.

His eyes searched mine briefly, as if trying to measure whether I believed what I was saying or if this was simply another version of the same game played differently.

Whatever he found there seemed to settle something, because his expression eased, not into comfort, but into acceptance.

"That is... fair," he said at last.

I gave a small nod, acknowledging the agreement for what it was.

"We are done here," I said, letting the finality of it rest in my voice.

There was no more to negotiate, nothing left unresolved that could be handled in this hall, with the scent of blood still clinging stubbornly to the stone despite every effort to wash it away.

I glanced past him briefly, taking in the quiet, the distant movement of those still working, the remnants of what had happened here, and the strange calm that had followed it.

"I have somewhere else to be," I added, turning my attention back to him. "My wife is waiting, and I intend to celebrate what I believe will be the beginning of a golden age of peace."

I then reached out and tapped his shoulder once. The gesture felt strange. Almost friendly. But it was the closest I could come to acknowledging what he had done for me without pretending we were anything other than what we were.

Two men who had used each other to achieve their own goals.

He inclined his head slightly.

"Congratulations on your victory, Alpha Cian."

I did not respond. I just turned and walked toward the door.

My hand was on the handle when he spoke again.

"For what it is worth, I do hope you get your golden age."

I looked back at him.

He was still standing in the center of the hall. Surrounded by blood stains and the remnants of violence. But his expression was sincere.

"So do I," I said.

Then I pulled the door open and stepped out into the corridor.

The air felt lighter out here. Cleaner.

I started walking toward the infirmary. My mind was already shifting focus. Moving past Valentine and Madeline and all the complicated politics that had brought us to this point.

Fia was waiting for me.

My mother was safe.

Gabriel was alive.

Aldric was dead.

The traitors had been exposed and eliminated.

For the first time in what felt like years, I could breathe without feeling the weight of a thousand threats pressing down on me.

Then I continued toward the infirmary.

The door was already open when I arrived. I could hear voices inside. Maren's low and steady. Thorne's rougher.

I stepped through the doorway and stopped.

Fia was lying on one of the cots. Her eyes were closed. Her face was pale.

Maren stood beside her, checking her pulse. Thorne was nearby, adjusting a blanket over her.

"What happened?" I asked.

Maren looked up.

"She healed Gabriel. Completely. The goddess used her to do it, and it drained her."

I crossed the room quickly and stopped beside the cot.

Fia looked so small lying there. So fragile.

"Will she be alright?"

"Yes. She just needs rest. Her body will recover on its own."

I reached out and brushed a strand of hair away from her face. My hand trembled slightly.

She was alright.

She was safe.

I looked over at the cot where Gabriel lay. He was apparently unconscious, but his breathing was deep and even. The color had returned to his face. The wound on his throat was completely gone.

"He is healed?" I asked.

"Completely," Maren said. "Whatever Fia did, it fixed everything. Years of damage undone in minutes. He was even awake a few minutes ago. But I guess he needed rest, too."

I felt something loosen in my chest.

Uncle Gabriel was going to be alright.

Fia was going to be alright.

My mother was already asleep in another cot nearby, resting peacefully.

Everyone I cared about was safe.

I pulled a chair over and sat down beside Fia's bed. My hand found hers, and I laced our fingers together.

Her hand was warm.

I closed my eyes and just breathed.

It was over.

All of it.

The fighting. The bloodshed. The constant threat of betrayal and death hanging over everything.

It was finally over.

*Chapter 390: "The End is Near"*

## **VALENTINE**

I waited until Cian's footsteps had completely faded down the corridor before allowing myself to breathe.

The exhale left me slow and controlled, though the curse that followed slipped out under my breath.

Madeline had just painted a target on my back.

She had warned him and handed him the exact blueprint he would need to control me, to bind me the same way Aldric once had.

And Cian had listened.

I had seen it clearly in his eyes. The way he had looked at me when he spoke about those files, about keeping them in reserve, about using them if I ever stepped out of line.

He would do it.

He was not Aldric. He did not crave control for its own sake, did not wield it with the same quiet cruelty. But he would use it if he believed he had reason to.

Which meant I had to be careful.

More careful than I had ever been.

I turned toward the door, already moving before the thought had fully settled. I needed to find Madeline. Needed to get to her before she made things worse, before she handed him anything else he could use against me.

She was emotional. Hurt. I understood that much.

But understanding did not change what she had done.

She had just placed a weapon in Cian's hands, one that could be turned against me, against all of us.

I stepped into the corridor and paused, glancing both ways. The hallway stretched out in either direction, quiet and empty.

There was no sign of her.

I started walking, my pace steady as I checked each room along the way, pushing doors open, scanning quickly for any trace of her presence.

There was nothing.

I turned the corner and headed toward the guest wing. Madeline had stayed here before, back when she had been engaged to Cian. Old habits had a way of resurfacing, especially when emotions ran high. If she had retreated anywhere, it would be somewhere familiar.

I found the door to her old room and pushed it open without hesitation.

It was empty.

The furniture remained exactly as it had been, but the space carried the stillness of disuse. It felt untouched, as though no one had set foot inside for days, maybe longer.

I closed the door behind me and lingered in the hallway, letting my thoughts settle into something sharper, more deliberate.

She had probably left already. Gone outside with Wilhelm. We were heading back to Primrose tonight anyway.

I should just let her go.

We could talk when she got home. When she had time to calm down and think clearly.

I started toward the main entrance.

That was when I smelled it.

Faint but unmistakable.

Rotting flowers. Sweet and cloying and wrong.

I stopped.

A door beside me was slightly ajar. Just a crack. Like someone had closed it but not latched it properly.

The smell was coming from inside.

I smiled.

Then I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

It slammed shut behind me.

Not from the wind. Not from momentum.

From a familiar energy that was akin to magic itself.

I did not turn around. I just stood there and waited as a figure emerged from behind the wardrobe.

She was still small, like I remembered. Though I could not see her face because she was hooded. I did not like the way she moved, though. She moved with the careful, deliberate steps of someone who knew exactly how dangerous they were.

So I figured this could not be good. I channeled the tiniest offensive magic into my fingers, waiting for a slight wrong move to ignite it.

The hood fell back, and as I suspected, it was indeed number Four.

Her face was pale but healthy. The lesions were completely gone from when I last saw her. Someone was taking her pills consistently.

"How are you, Number Four?" I asked. "Your gifts of small miracles have gotten better. But do better to hide the cloying scent of it."

She looked at me with those dark, hollow eyes.

"I wanted you to notice."

Interesting.

"I was going to ask what you were doing here."

"Luna Pauline instructed me to watch you."

I felt something cold settle in my chest.

Pauline.

Of course.

"Really?" I kept my voice light. Curious. "Why?"

Number Four tilted her head slightly.

"She is scared you will implicate her because of your interest in the girl. She likes the freedom that has come with that man's death, and she instructed me to secretly watch you and kill you when you try to make the move she believes will drag her right back to hell."

I let the words settle for a moment.

Pauline had sent her to kill me.

My own collaborator. My partner in all of this.

She had decided I was too much of a risk and sent Number Four to eliminate me before I could drag her down with me.

I should have seen it coming.

Pauline had always been a survivor first. Loyal second.

I looked at Number Four.

"You are here to take your best shot then."

She shook her head immediately.

"I do not know if I can beat you, and I do not even want to try."

Smart girl.

"You probably did the same thing you did to me for her sake, for your sake too. If I attack you, it will probably hurt me."

She was right.

The binding I had placed on her made it impossible for her to harm me directly without suffering the consequences herself. The same binding I had used on all of them. A safeguard for my safety and that of my family.

But then she raised her hand.

The sheet on the bed behind me moved.

It lifted into the air and twisted as it reformed itself into something long and thin.

Then it wrapped around my throat.

The pressure was immediate. Not enough to choke me. Not yet. But enough to make the threat clear.

I smiled.

"Your evolution is beautiful."

Number Four's expression did not change.

"So you do intend to kill me."

She shook her head again. "I already said I am not."

The sheet tightened slightly. Just enough to make breathing uncomfortable.

"The loophole does not give me freedom. I need either her or you alive to live. But I do not trust Pauline. She is irrational and scary."

Her voice was flat. As a matter of fact.

"I would rather bank my cards on you. You are a monster, too. But you are familiar and rational in the sense I care about. So I shed my loyalty to Pauline and swear it to you instead. I will be your ally."

The sheet loosened.

I reached up and pulled it away from my throat. It fell limp in my hands.

Number Four watched me carefully.

"And in return?" I asked.

"I want to live. I want to be free. Your goal was to create a healer from the age of legends, and you did. I know that is all you wanted."

She stepped closer.

"I will help you take this girl, and you will give me the recipe to ensure I keep living and you have to promise me I will have freedom as well. What do you say?"

I looked at her for a long moment.

Number Four had always been the most promising of my failures. She had survived in ways that the others had not. She had adapted. Evolved. Found ways around the bindings I had placed on her.

She was clever.

And she was right. All I wanted was to study the girl. To understand what made her different. What made her special.

If Number Four could help me get that, then the rest did not matter.

I smiled.

"You and the rest are disappointments compared to this girl. So yes. If I get her and you help me in most ways than one, I will help you. I am *that* benevolent."

I crossed the room and pulled her into a hug.

She went stiff at first. Then, slowly relaxed.

"But are you up for it?" I asked quietly.

She nodded against my chest.

"I have felt resistance three times now. With you. With Pauline. And with that girl."

She pulled back and looked up at me.

"It makes sense now. She is like me, is she not?"

I smiled wider.

"She is better. My first success, probably."

Number Four's eyes widened slightly. Then something shifted in her expression. Understanding. Maybe even excitement.

"I will help you get what you want if it gets me out of this hell."

I reached out and cupped her face in both hands and tilted her head up so she had to look directly at me.

"Good girl."

She held my gaze without flinching.

We stood there for a moment. The room was quiet except for the faint sound of people still working in the hall below.

Then I let go and stepped back.

"We need to be careful," I said. "Her mate, the Alpha, is in a sensitive state right now. He might not be like his counterparts... But he will not hesitate to move against me if he thinks I am a threat. And Madeline has already given him the tools to do it."

Number Four nodded.

"What do you need me to do?"

"I am not good at spying, and I do not want to tick off the Alpha, so you will do it in my place. You will watch the girl. Learn her patterns. Where she goes. Who she sees. When she is alone."

I paused.

"But do not touch her yet. Not until I say. We need to wait for the right moment. When the pack is distracted. When Cian is focused elsewhere."

"And Pauline?"

"Let her think you are still following her orders. Let her believe you are watching me to kill me when I make my move."

Number Four frowned slightly.

"She will know something is wrong eventually."

"Maybe. But by then it will be too late."

I walked toward the door and stopped with my hand on the handle.

"You made the right choice," I said without looking back. "Pauline would have thrown you away the moment you stopped being useful. I will not do that. As long as you help me, you will have everything you need to survive."

"And my freedom?"

I looked back at her.

"When this is over, when I have what I want, you will be free. *I promise.*"

She nodded slowly.

I pulled the door open and stepped out into the hallway.