

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 391: Goodbye Goodbye - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 391: Goodbye Goodbye

Chapter 391: Goodbye Goodbye

MADLINE

The air outside felt different.

Not cooler. Not warmer. Just... altered in a way I could not quite name.

I stood on the wide stone terrace overlooking the courtyard and let the midday sun rest against my face. The light was bright, almost harsh, but after the dim corridors inside, it felt grounding. Real.

Behind me, faint sounds carried from within the estate. Movement. Voices. The steady rhythm of people working, cleaning, putting everything back together after everything that had happened.

I did not turn.

I stayed where I was and breathed.

The door opened behind me. Footsteps followed, light and familiar against the stone.

Wilhelm.

He came to a stop beside me without speaking. For a moment, he simply stood there, his presence quiet, his gaze fixed on the same view stretched out before us.

The courtyard lay below, open and sunlit. The fountain at its center still ran, water spilling into the basin in a steady, unbothered rhythm. A few servants moved between the buildings, their voices too distant to make out, blending into a soft, indistinct hum.

"Are you alright?" Wilhelm asked at last.

I did not answer immediately.

I was not sure how to.

Was I alright?

I had just walked away from Cian, from the man I had loved for years, the man I had built my entire life around.

I had kept the soul kiss. Chosen to carry it. Chosen to let it remain as a reminder of everything I had done wrong.

And I had called my father a liar in front of the Alpha of Skollrend. Told Cian to use Aldric's files against him if he ever stepped out of line.

In the span of an hour, I had burned every bridge I could think of.

So was I alright?

"I do not know," I said finally.

Wilhelm shifted slightly beside me. I could feel his attention turn toward me, but I kept my eyes forward, fixed on the fountain, on the movement below, on anything that did not require me to look at him.

"That was brave," he said quietly. "What you did in there."

A short laugh left me before I could stop it. Bitter, sharper than I intended.

"Brave or stupid?"

"Both, maybe."

I turned to look at him then.

He was watching me with that careful expression he always wore when he was worried, the one he tried to hide behind a layer of calm neutrality that never quite held.

"I am not going back to the coven," I said.

The words came out before I had fully committed to them, but the moment they left my mouth, I knew there was no taking them back. They settled into place with a certainty I could not ignore.

Wilhelm went very still.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I am not going back," I said. "Not to Primrose. Not to the Blossom house. Not to any of it."

I turned fully toward him now, no longer avoiding his gaze.

"I want to be normal for once."

The confession hung in the air between us.

Wilhelm's expression shifted. Surprise first. Then understanding. Then something that looked like sadness.

"Madeline—"

"I am scared of our family's darkness," I said. The words came faster now. Like they had been waiting to spill out for years. "I am scared of what Father is capable of. What he has already done. What he will do again if given the chance. I am afraid that with time, I will become just like him. There is a darkness in our family. Our ancestors have always relished power. I have touched it before, and I never want to enjoy it."

I took a step closer to him.

"I want you and Mother to come with me. We can leave. All three of us. We can start over somewhere far away from all of this."

Wilhelm's face softened.

He reached out and touched my shoulder gently.

"You know that will not be possible."

I felt my chest tighten.

"Why not?"

"Because of this new perspective you seem to hold. Because of what you just said to Father in front of the Alpha. Because of everything that has happened today."

He paused.

"Father can cope with losing one of us. But not all three. And Mother will not leave him. You know she will not."

I looked away.

He was right.

Of course, he was right.

Our mother had spent her entire life standing by our father. Through everything. Through all his mistakes and his cruelties and his obsessions. However, she did not know all of it. But even if she did, she would not leave him now.

I doubted that she would. Not even for us.

"And you?" I asked quietly. "You could leave. You could come with me."

Wilhelm shook his head slowly.

"I cannot be normal for you, too."

"Why not?"

"Because I enjoy magic, Madeline. I enjoy what I can do with it. The power. The possibilities. All of it."

He squeezed my shoulder once before letting go.

"I know you do not feel the same way. I know it has been different for you. But I cannot walk away from it."

I felt tears burn at the corners of my eyes.

"I wish I could say the same," I whispered. "But magic for me is starting to feel like a curse. And I feel I am better without it."

Wilhelm was quiet for a moment.

Then he said softly, "Is that a vow?"

I blinked.

A vow.

The word carried weight in our world. A vow made by a witch was binding. It changed things on a fundamental level.

Was I willing to do that?

Was I willing to give up magic completely?

I thought about everything it had brought me. The pain. The manipulation. The way my father had used it to hurt people. The way I had used it myself.

I thought about the spell I had cast to save Cian during the fight. The way it had drained me. The way it had felt like giving away pieces of myself.

Magic had never felt like a gift to me.

It had always felt like a burden.

"I think so," I said.

Wilhelm studied my face for a long moment.

Then he nodded slowly.

"You have done well with it, though. You saved Cian's life today."

"I have done more evil than good."

The words came out flat. Certain.

Wilhelm frowned.

"That is not true."

"It is."

I looked at him directly now.

"I have used magic to manipulate people. To hurt people. To kill people. To serve our father's interests even when I knew they were wrong. I have been complicit in things I cannot take back."

I paused.

"Magic amplified all of that. It made it easier. It made it possible."

Wilhelm opened his mouth like he wanted to argue. Then he closed it again.

"I yearn for normalcy," I said quietly. "For a life where I am not defined by what I can do with magic. Where I am just a person. Where I can make choices based on what is right instead of what is powerful."

Wilhelm's expression shifted into something softer. Something that looked like understanding mixed with grief.

"Then I hope you find it," he said.

I felt the tears spill over.

I stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek.

"I will miss you," I whispered. "Say hi to Mom for me."

Then I turned and started walking away.

I made it maybe ten steps before I heard him move.

His footsteps were quick. Urgent.

Then his arms came around me from behind.

He pulled me into a hug. Tight and desperate.

"We will miss you," he said. His voice was thick.

I turned in his arms and hugged him back just as tightly.

"I know. I will miss you too."

We stood there for a long moment. Holding onto each other.

Then, finally, Wilhelm pulled back.

His eyes were red. But he was not crying.

"Where will you go?" he asked.

I had not thought that far ahead yet.

"I do not know. Somewhere quiet. Somewhere far away from all of this."

"Will you be safe?"

"I will manage."

Wilhelm looked like he wanted to argue. To tell me this was a bad idea. To convince me to come home.

But he did not.

He just nodded.

"If you ever need anything—"

"I know where to find you."

He smiled. It was small and sad but genuine.

"Take care of yourself, Madeline."

"You too."

I stepped back and forced myself to let go completely.

Then I turned and walked toward the gates.

I did not look back.

If I looked back, I would lose my nerve. I would change my mind. I would let fear or guilt or love pull me back into a life I could not live anymore.

So I kept my eyes forward and kept walking.

The gates were open. The sentinels standing guard looked at me with mild curiosity, but they did not stop me.

Why would they?

I was leaving. Not arriving.

I walked through the gates and onto the road beyond.

The sun was high overhead now. The light was warm on my skin.

I had no plan. No destination. No idea what I was going to do next.

But for the first time in years, I felt like I could breathe.

The weight that had been sitting on my chest for so long had lifted.

I was free.

Not from the soul kiss. That would stay with me. A reminder of everything I had done and everything I had lost.

But free from the expectations. From the darkness. From the constant pull of magic and family and obligations, I could not escape.

I walked down the road and did not look back.

Behind me, Skollrend grew smaller. The estate fading into the distance.

Ahead, the road stretched empty and uncertain.

But it was mine.

And that was enough.

Chapter 392: A reason to stay 1

CIAN

The door to the infirmary opened again.

A sentinel stepped inside. His face had lost its color, his hands clenched tightly at his sides as if he were holding himself together by force.

I looked up from where I sat beside Fia's bed.

"Alpha Cian," he said, his voice strained. "I need to speak with you."

Something in his tone settled uneasily in my chest.

I rose, slower than I intended, and crossed the room toward him. We stopped near the doorway, just far enough that the others would not overhear.

"What is it?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

The sentinel swallowed, his throat working.

"It is Beta Ronan and his mother, Teagan."

My jaw tightened.

"What about them?"

"They are dead, sir."

The words struck with the force of something physical.

I stared at him, my mind already moving ahead of the explanation.

"What do you mean?" I asked, sharper now. "Was Teagan executed without trial?"

"No, sir," the sentinel said quickly. "That did not happen."

A brief, tense pause followed.

"Then explain."

"We found them in their cell. Ronan was strangled. Teagan hanged herself."

My breath stalled.

The sentinel continued, more controlled now.

"It appears Teagan killed her son first. Then she used her clothes to fashion a rope and hanged herself from a pipe in the ceiling."

For a moment, everything inside me went still.

I could not move. Nor could I speak.

Ronan was dead... Even Teagan was dead.

Gone, both of them, in a way that felt too abrupt to make sense of.

Behind me, Maren let out a quiet gasp. Thorne muttered a curse under his breath.

I turned to look at them. Their expressions mirrored what I felt but could not yet place.

There was shock. A lot of unease and a quiet, creeping disbelief.

"This would have happened anyway," Thorne said after a moment, his voice subdued. "They were sentenced to death. This just happened sooner."

Yeah... Ronan had been sentenced.

Teagan had not.

Her trial had not even begun.

That difference sat heavily in my chest.

This was not how it should have unfolded.

I turned back to the sentinel.

"Where are the bodies now?"

"Still in the cell, sir. We were waiting for your orders."

I drew in a slow breath, then let it out carefully.

"Bury them with respect," I said. "Together. They were traitors, but they were still pack. Give them that much."

The sentinel nodded.

"Yes, Alpha."

He turned and left without another word.

I remained where I was, staring at the doorway long after he was gone, trying to absorb what I had just been told.

I had been ready for this. For Ronan to be gone. But it did sting a little.

Was it because... he was a man I had trusted once? A man who had stood at my side and betrayed it without hesitation.

And now he was gone before I could make him answer for everything he had done the right way. Under the weight of a machete.

Or was it because I had not gotten the deadman switch from him before he died?

The files Aldric had kept, the leverage he had used to control people, especially Valentine. I did hate that all of it was still out there somewhere. Hidden. Waiting.

I had intended to interrogate Ronan for a hot minute to force the truth out of him if I had to. I needed to know where those files were to secure them for myself and future use.

Now that path had been cut off completely.

Frustration stirred, sharp and immediate, but I forced it down before it could take hold.

It did not matter.

Valentine did not know I lacked the files. He would assume I had already secured them, and he would move with caution because of it.

For now, that was enough.

The rest could be dealt with later.

I turned back toward Fia's bed.

That was when I saw her eyes flutter open.

I crossed the room quickly and sank back into the chair beside her.

"Fia."

Her gaze found me slowly, as though pulling itself into focus. Then she smiled in a faint but real manner.

"Hey."

Relief moved through me in a quiet rush.

I reached for her hand, closing my fingers around it.

"Are you alright?"

She gave a small nod.

"I am alright. I am just tired."

"You healed Gabriel. So it is understandable."

"It was strange," she said softly. "I had never been that drained using the gifts before."

Her voice was worn, as though the effort had taken more from her than she was letting on.

I tightened my hold on her hand, careful not to hurt her.

"Well.. Let us get out of here."

Her smile deepened just slightly. "I would not hate that."

I stood and slipped one arm beneath her knees, the other supporting her back, before lifting her carefully.

She felt lighter than I expected, though that might have been the lingering edge of adrenaline still running through me.

Either way, I held her close against my chest as I turned toward the door.

Maren's voice followed us.

"She should rest. Do not let her overdo it."

"I will not," I replied, not turning back.

I carried Fia into the corridor. The hallway had quieted, most people already gone, returning to their duties or their rooms.

Fia tilted her head, looking up at me.

"What happens now to Skollrend?" she asked. "With all that has happened?"

I considered the question before answering.

"Nothing much, for now," I said. "I will need to dismantle the external alliances Aldric built. I will have to prove, to those watching, that the infiltration of traitors was an isolated breach and that I can still hold this pack together."

I paused, then added,

"The royal family may already be watching. They will want to know if Skollrend is stable, or if it requires intervention."

Fia's brow furrowed slightly.

"That sounds like a lot of pressure."

"It is. But I can handle it. I can handle a lot, actually."

She smiled.

"I am sure you got this."

I looked down at her. At the trust in her eyes. The certainty.

It made something warm settle in my chest.

We reached my suite, and I pushed the door open with my shoulder. The room was exactly as I had left it this morning. Bed unmade. Clothes draped over a chair.

It felt like a lifetime ago.

I carried Fia to the bed and lowered her gently onto the mattress. She sank into it with a soft sigh.

I sat down beside her.

"You had something to tell me if I am remembering right," I said.

Fia sat up slowly. She adjusted the pillows behind her and then folded her hands in her lap.

"Right."

I moved closer. Something in her expression made my pulse quicken.

Her heart was beating faster. I could feel the nervousness radiating off her in waves.

"It is not a bad thing, right?" I asked carefully.

"No."

She took a slow breath.

"With all that has happened, I would like to think it is a good thing."

She paused.

"I should just let it out. I am... pregnant."

For a moment, I could not move.

Could not breathe.

Could not even process what she had just said.

Pregnant...

She was pregnant?

We were going to have a baby?!

Then something broke loose inside me, and I laughed.

It came out loud, unrestrained, as it managed to break through everything else.

"Really?"

Fia nodded. Her smile was wide now and just as genuine.

"Yeah. I found out today."

"I cannot believe this."

I was still laughing. I could not stop.

"If you have clear pregnancy symptoms now, it would mean it has been a while, and it was not that close to heat season."

"I know. But it happened anyway."

Chapter 393: A reason to stay 2

CIAN

I closed the space between us and pulled her into my arms, holding her tight against me.

"I love you so much," I whispered into her hair.

She wrapped her arms around me and held on just as tightly.

"I am glad you did not die on me," she said. Her voice was thick with emotion. "I am glad it all worked out in the end, even if I still have this unsettling feeling in my chest."

I pulled back slightly so I could look at her.

I took her hand in mine and squeezed gently.

"It is fine," I said. "That crippling fear has no place here now. Everything is fine."

She looked at me. Her eyes searched mine.

"Who knows," she said quietly. "Maybe he has someone out there who—"

My lips crushed hers with an urgency that bordered on violent, a desperation that had been building since this ordeal was over. My hands moved into her hair, rough and insistent, tilting her head back so I could deepen the kiss. She gasped, caught off guard by the intensity, but her body pressed into mine, fitting against me in a way that felt too right to ignore.

I swallowed the sound, my mouth moving over hers, tasting, taking. There was a faint trace of lip gloss on her mouth, and something soft beneath it that was entirely her. My heart pounded hard against my ribs, each beat feeding the need that had been tightening in me all day. I needed this. Needed her. The feeling pushed close to something reckless.

She let out a low sound, soft but unguarded, and it went straight through me. Her hands gripped at my shirt, pulling, trying to close whatever space still existed between us. I could feel the warmth of her through the thin fabric of her dress, the press of her body against mine. It was not enough. It did not come close to enough.

I kissed her like I had been holding back for too long, like restraint had finally given way. There was nothing careful about it, nothing measured. I wanted more, wanted to pull her closer, to erase every inch of distance between us. The rest of the world faded, losing shape and meaning until there was only this, only her, only the pull that refused to loosen its grip.

I kissed her until breathing became difficult, until everything else slipped away, until the moment held steady and complete around us.

I kissed her until I could not breathe. Until the fear and the doubt and the lingering shadows of everything that had happened today dissolved into nothing.

Then I pulled back just enough to look into her eyes.

"Everything is fine," I said again.

My voice was firm and absolute.

Fia stared at me for a moment. Then she smiled.

"Okay."

She leaned forward and kissed me back.

This time it was softer. Slower. Like we had all the time in the world.

I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her again. And again. Each one a promise. Each one a reminder.

We were safe.

We were together.

We were going to have a baby.

Everything else could wait.

When we finally broke apart, we were both breathing hard. Fia's cheeks were flushed. Her eyes were bright.

I rested my forehead against hers.

"I cannot believe we are going to be parents," I said.

She laughed softly.

"Neither can I."

"When did you find out exactly?"

"This morning. Right before the trial resumed. Maren ran the test."

"And you did not tell me?"

"I wanted to. But everything was happening so fast. And then you went after Aldric, and I thought—"

Her voice broke.

I pulled her close again.

"I am here," I said. "I am not going anywhere."

"I know."

She pressed her face against my chest.

"I was so scared," she whispered. "When I saw you go after him. When I thought the vision was coming true. I was so scared."

"The vision did not come true. I am still here."

"I know. I just... I keep thinking about what could have happened. What almost happened."

I stroked her hair gently.

"But it did not happen. We won. Aldric is dead. The traitors are gone. We are safe."

She nodded against me.

"We are safe."

We stayed like that for a long time. Just holding each other. Letting the reality of everything settle in.

Finally, Fia pulled back and looked up at me.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"Now?" I smiled. "Now we rest. We recover. We take care of each other and the baby growing inside you."

Her hand moved to her stomach.

"It still does not feel real."

"It will. Eventually."

I placed my hand over hers.

"We are going to be good parents," I said.

"You think so?"

"I know so."

She smiled.

"I hope you are right."

"I am always right."

She laughed and shoved me lightly.

"You are insufferable."

"You love me anyway."

"I do."

She leaned up and kissed me again.

This time it was gentle. Sweet. Full of all the quiet joy we had not had time to feel yet.

When we pulled apart, I stood and started removing my boots.

"What are you doing?" Fia asked.

"Getting comfortable. We both need rest."

I stripped off my shirt and tossed it onto the chair. Then I climbed into bed beside her.

Fia shifted to make room. I pulled her against me and wrapped my arms around her.

She settled into my chest with a soft sigh.

"This is nice," she murmured.

"It is."

I closed my eyes and just breathed.

The room was quiet and peaceful.

Outside, I could hear distant voices. The faint sounds of the estate returning to normal.

But in here it was just us.

Just Fia and me and the tiny life growing inside her.

"Cian?" Fia said softly.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For surviving. For fighting. For coming back to me."

I tightened my arms around her.

"Always."

She pressed a kiss to my chest.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

We lay there together. Wrapped in each other. Safe and whole and alive.

Everything we had fought for. Everything we had risked.

It had led to this moment.

And it was perfect.

Fia's breathing began to even out. Her body relaxed against mine.

She was falling asleep.

I kissed the top of her head gently.

"Rest," I whispered. "I have got you."

She made a soft sound of agreement.

Then she was asleep.

I stayed awake a little longer. Just watching her. Making sure she was really okay.

My hand moved to rest over her stomach. Over the place where our child was growing.

Our baby.

The thought still felt surreal. Like something too good to be true.

But it was true.

We were going to be parents.

I was going to be a father.

The responsibility of it settled over me like a weight. But it was not a burden.

It was a promise.

I would protect them both. I would give this child a life free from the darkness that had consumed my uncle. Free from the fear and the violence and the constant threat of betrayal.

I would build something better.

For them.

For Fia.

For our future.

I closed my eyes and let myself drift.

The exhaustion caught up with me all at once. Bone deep and overwhelming.

But I was not afraid anymore.

For the first time in years, I felt at peace.

Aldric was dead.

The traitors were gone.

My pack was safe.

My family was safe.

And tomorrow I would begin rebuilding. Strengthening. Creating the golden age I had promised.

But tonight?

Tonight I would rest.

With my wife in my arms and my child growing inside her.

And that seemed enough.

Chapter 394: "The end is here" 1

GABRIEL

My eyes dragged open like they didn't belong to me, slow and stubborn, as if waking up was something my body hadn't agreed to yet. The ceiling above me was the first thing I saw, pale stone stretched wide and spotless, too clean in a way that made my chest tighten. I lay there for a moment, trying to anchor myself, trying to understand why everything felt so distant, like I'd been dropped into someone else's life without warning.

It came back in pieces.

The infirmary.

That was where I was.

My hand moved before I could think it through, fingers pressing against my throat, searching, expecting something. A tear. A ridge. Pain. Anything that would match what I remembered. But there was nothing. I only felt smooth skin under my touch.

I froze there, fingertips lingering like they didn't trust what they were feeling.

Because I remembered it too clearly. The way that bastard had hurt me badly without mercy. I remembered the sharp, ripping pain that had stolen the air from my lungs before I could even react. I remembered the blood, hot and thick, spilling faster than I could stop it, the way my body had jerked helplessly as I tried to breathe through something that wouldn't let me. I remembered the panic, raw and choking, as everything narrowed and dimmed.

I was at death's door.

The thought didn't come with panic. It settled in quietly, like a fact I couldn't argue with.

I pushed myself upright, slower than I intended, my body lagging behind the command as if it needed time to catch up. Everything felt off. Heavy in a way that didn't quite make sense, like I'd been stitched back together wrong or placed into something that was supposed to be my vessel but wasn't entirely mine.

Movement pulled my attention across the room.

Two figures were already closing the distance, their footsteps quick and purposeful. I knew them before they even reached me.

Maren and Thorne.

Relief flickered across Maren's face the moment our eyes met, though she tried to keep it contained, like she didn't want to show too much. "You are awake," she said, her voice careful, steady in a way that felt practiced.

Thorne stopped beside the bed, folding his arms across his chest, his gaze fixed on me. There was something in his expression I couldn't quite place. Not relief. Not entirely. Something sharper. Something that lingered too long.

"How do you feel?" Maren asked.

I opened my mouth, ready to answer, but nothing came out. The words got stuck somewhere between my chest and my throat, caught on something I couldn't name.

Because it all came rushing back instead.

Hands holding me down.

The restraints biting into my wrists and ankles, unforgiving, keeping me in place while my body fought against them, muscles straining until they burned. I could feel it again, the violent shaking I hadn't been able to control, the way my back had arched off the surface beneath me as if my body was trying to tear itself free.

And then—

Her.

The girl.

Fia.

The memory sharpened, cutting through everything else. Her hands on my throat, steady despite the chaos around us. I remembered the moment the light burst from her palms, bright enough to swallow everything, blinding in a way that had made me shut my eyes even as I felt it sink into me.

Something in my chest tightened, and I sucked in a breath as if I'd been underwater.

"I was healed by that girl," I said, my voice coming out rough, uneven against the silence that had settled in the room. "Fia."

Maren didn't hesitate. She nodded once, like there was no room for doubt. "She saved your life."

Saved.

The word sat strangely with me.

"How?" It slipped out before I could stop it, quieter this time, edged with something I couldn't quite hide.

Thorne gave a small shrug, like the question didn't matter, like it wasn't something worth digging into. "Who knows," he said, his tone almost dismissive. "That is just how she is. Thank the goddess that is how she is."

I looked at him, really looked this time, trying to find something in his face that matched the weight of what had happened. But there was nothing there that made sense of it. No explanation. No hesitation.

Just acceptance.

And that unsettled me more than anything else.

Did they not comprehend the word healed?

I was not just patched together. I was not barely surviving. I was completely healed.

All of that damage was gone as it had never existed.

It didn't make sense.

I should have felt relief. Gratitude, even. I should have clung to the fact that I was still here, still breathing, that whatever had taken me to the edge hadn't been enough to push me over.

But none of that came.

Instead, there was this quiet, gnawing sense that something wasn't right, that I had missed something important in the space between dying and waking up.

"And what about the traitors?" I asked the question, cutting through the room before I could soften it. My voice came out harsher than I intended, like it had been dragged over something sharp on its way out. "Ronan... Aldric too..."

Maren's expression shifted immediately, whatever relief had been there fading into something darker and heavier.

"They are dead."

I felt something twist in my chest. Sharp and immediate.

Ronan was dead.

"Thorne will tell Alpha Cian you are awake now," Maren said. She moved toward the cabinets and started organizing supplies.

Thorne turned toward the door.

That was when I raised a hand.

"Wait. Give me a minute to get myself together."

Thorne paused and looked back at me.

"Where is the bathroom?" I asked, even though I knew where it was.

He pointed toward a door not too far away.

"Right there."

I nodded and swung my legs over the side of the bed. My feet touched the cold stone floor.

Standing was harder than it should have been.

My legs felt weird. Like I had not gotten full use of them yet. Like they belonged to someone who had been lying down for too long and forgot how to walk properly.

I forced myself upright anyway and took a few unsteady steps toward the bathroom.

Maren watched me carefully.

"Do you need help?"

"No. I am fine."

I was not fine.

But I needed to be alone.

I reached the bathroom door and pushed it open. Then I stepped inside and locked it behind me.

The space was small. There was a sink. There was a toilet. There was also a mirror mounted on the wall above the sink.

I leaned over the sink and twisted the faucet, letting the water run for a second before I cupped my hands beneath it. The cold hit my skin hard, sharp enough to pull me fully into the moment, and I splashed it over my face without hesitation. It dripped down my jaw, soaked into the collar of my shirt, but I didn't care. For a few seconds, it helped. It steadied something in me that had been slipping since I woke up.

I stayed there, hands braced against the edge of the sink, breathing slowly, trying to hold onto that feeling.

Then the itch started.

At first, it was faint. Easy to ignore. Just a small irritation somewhere along my upper back, the kind you brush off without thinking. I shifted my shoulders, hoping it would pass.

It didn't.

It sharpened instead, turning into something meaner, something that dug in deeper with every second. The sensation spread, branching out across my back like it had somewhere to be, like it was following a path I couldn't see. It wasn't just an itch anymore. It burned. It crawled. It felt like something alive was moving under my skin, slow and deliberate.

I sucked in a breath and reached back, dragging my fingers across the spot, pressing harder than I needed to. It didn't help. If anything, it made it worse. The moment my nails touched my skin, the sensation flared, hot and angry, like I had disturbed something that didn't want to be touched.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath, twisting awkwardly, trying to reach further, to chase the feeling as it spread beyond where I could comfortably get to.

It was useless.

The itch deepened into something unbearable, and a low, frustrated sound built in my chest before I could stop it. I grabbed the hem of my shirt and yanked it over my head, the fabric catching briefly before it came free. The air against my skin should have cooled me down, but it didn't. The heat was coming from beneath, from inside, radiating outward like a slow burn I couldn't escape.

I turned toward the mirror.

For a second, I didn't understand what I was looking at.

My back—

I shifted, angling myself so I could see better, my breath catching somewhere between my lungs and my throat as the image settled into something I could process.

The marks.

They now stretched across my skin in uneven patterns, winding over my shoulders and down my spine.

They weren't scars. This wasn't that.

These were... deliberate.

Lines intersected and curved into shapes that didn't quite make sense, symbols that felt wrong just looking at them. The longer I stared, the harder it became to focus, like the patterns refused to stay still. There was movement there, subtle but undeniable, as if they were shifting just beneath the surface of my skin, rearranging themselves when I wasn't looking directly at them.

A slow, creeping unease settled into my chest.

They were burning.

Not figuratively. Not something I was imagining because of the itch.

It was actually burning.

I could feel the heat clearly now, pulsing through each mark like something had been etched into me with a brand. It spread across my back in waves, each one sharper than the last, until I had to grip the edge of the sink again just to steady myself.

"What the fuck did that bitch do?" I whispered.

The words slipped out, low and rough, before I even registered them.

I went still.

My breath caught.

Wait.

What?

A strange, hollow pause opened up in my head, like something had skipped.

I hadn't meant to say that.

Chapter 395: "The end is here" 2

GABRIEL

More than that, I hadn't even thought it.

The realization landed hard, sending a cold ripple through me that had nothing to do with the water still clinging to my skin. My eyes flicked back to the mirror, locking onto my own reflection as if it could give me an answer.

It didn't.

I looked the same. Pale, drawn, the kind of hollow you don't shake off easily after years of being locked away from everything that made you human. There were shadows under my eyes, a sharpness to my cheekbones that hadn't been there before, but none of that was new.

I knew this version of myself.

Or I should have.

Because something was off.

It wasn't obvious at first. Not something I could point to immediately. But the longer I stared, the more it pressed in, quiet and insistent.

My eyes.

They were mine. I recognized the shape, the color, the way they should have looked after everything I'd been through.

But there was something sitting behind them that didn't belong.

Something watching.

The thought made my stomach twist.

I tightened my grip on the sink, my fingers curling until the pressure bordered on painful, grounding myself in something real. My hands trembled despite it, small, involuntary movements I couldn't quite stop.

No.

The word formed in my head before I could push it away.

No, this wasn't right.

This wasn't happening.

It couldn't be.

"Get a grip," I muttered, more to fill the silence than anything else.

I dragged a hand down my face, exhaled slowly, then looked up again.

At first, it was the same.

Then it wasn't.

There was movement behind me.

Not in the room. Not something I could hear or feel. Just a shift in the reflection, subtle enough that I almost missed it, like a shadow that didn't belong to anything in the space.

My breath stalled.

I didn't turn around.

I kept my eyes on the mirror.

The space behind me stretched empty, the pale walls of the infirmary exactly where they should be, the door closed, everything still. But in the reflection, something lingered just at the edge, just out of focus, like it didn't want to be seen fully.

A shape.

Tall. Familiar.

My chest tightened before my mind could catch up.

No.

That wasn't—

The air in the room didn't change, but something in me did. Every instinct I had sharpened at once, my body going rigid as that shape stepped closer, clearer now, no longer hiding at the edge of my vision.

I knew that silhouette.

I knew it in a way that went deeper than recognition, deeper than memory.

My stomach dropped.

Slowly, like I was afraid of what I'd find, I lifted my gaze to meet the reflection properly.

He was standing right behind me.

Not in the room.

Only in the mirror.

My brother.

The word hit before I could stop it, heavy and disorienting.

And he was smiling.

Not the kind I knew.

This one was wrong.

Too wide. Too sharp. It stretched across his face like it didn't belong there, like it had been forced into place and left to sit.

My throat went dry.

"You're—" My voice cracked, barely there. "You're dead."

The words felt useless the moment they left me.

He tilted his head slightly, slow, almost curious, like he was studying me, like I was the strange one here.

Then his lips parted.

"Found you."

The voice was his.

But it wasn't.

It echoed, layered over itself in a way that made something in my chest twist, like there were too many versions of it speaking at once, slightly out of sync.

Cold shot down my spine.

I jerked back instinctively—

But by then, it was too late.

ALDRIC

The rune soul transfer had been hindered.

I could feel him still. Gabriel. My weak pathetic brother.

He was alive inside me. Trapped somewhere deep. Clawing at the edges of my consciousness like a rat trying to escape a cage.

But he was not in control.

I was.

I looked at the reflection in the mirror and felt disgust twist through me.

Gabriel's face stared back. Gaunt and pale and marked by years of suffering I had inflicted on him.

This was not the body I wanted.

This was not the face I wanted to wear.

But it was mine now.

At least temporarily.

I smiled.

The expression looked wrong on Gabriel's face. Too sharp. Too cruel.

But it was mine.

And that at least felt good.

The Omega had interfered.

When she had placed her hands on Gabriel's throat and poured that goddess-blessed light into him, it had disrupted the transfer.

The rune magic I had activated with Gabriel's blood and the ring should have been clean. Should have pulled my soul completely into Gabriel's body while his soul was shoved into mine.

A perfect swap.

My dying body for his newly healed one.

But the light had tangled everything. It had bound Gabriel's soul too tightly to his own flesh. Made it impossible to fully dislodge him.

So now we were both here.

Two souls in one body.

But I was the one holding the reins.

Apparently, I had been right about her. She was special.

A healer. What were the odds?

I flexed Gabriel's hands. Felt the muscles respond. Felt the strength returning to limbs that had been wasted by years of starvation.

The healing had worked.

Gabriel's body was whole again. Strong again.

And it was mine.

I turned away from the mirror and looked down at the marks on Gabriel's back.

The runes were still burning. Still active. What this meant... I had no idea. But it did not matter.

There was still work to be done.

Even if it also meant Gabriel was still fighting.

I could feel him. A presence in the back of this mind. Screaming. Raging. Trying to claw his way back into control.

It was amusing.

Let him scream.

Let him rage.

It would not change anything.

I was in control now.

And I had plans.

Cian thought he had won. Thought he had killed me. Thought the threat was over.

He was wrong.

So beautifully wrong.

I pulled Gabriel's shirt back on and smoothed it down. Then I unlocked the bathroom door and stepped back out into the infirmary.

Maren looked up immediately.

"Are you alright?"

I nodded.

"Just needed a moment."

My voice came out steady and calm. Exactly like Gabriel would sound.

I had practiced this. Spent years listening to him. Watching him. Learning every inflection. Every mannerism.

I could be him.

Perfectly.

Thorne was still standing near the door. He was watching me with that careful, suspicious look he always wore.

"You sure you are good?" he asked.

"I am fine. Just adjusting."

I walked toward the bed and sat down on the edge of it.

Maren moved closer.

"The Alpha will want to see you soon. He will have questions."

"I am sure he will."

I kept my expression neutral. Open. The way Gabriel would look when he was trying to be helpful.

Inside, I was smiling.

Cian would come to see me. He would ask me about Aldric. About the years I spent imprisoned. About what I knew.

And I would tell him exactly what he wanted to hear.

I would play the part of the grateful uncle. The victim who had been saved. The ally who wanted nothing more than to help rebuild what Aldric had destroyed.

And Cian would believe me.

Because why would he not?

Gabriel was innocent. Gabriel was a victim. Gabriel had been proven right.

No one would suspect the truth.

No one would think to look deeper.

I felt Gabriel stir again in the back of my mind. A surge of panic. A desperate attempt to push forward. To take control.

I shoved him down hard.

Stay quiet, brother.

This is my show now.

Gabriel's resistance faded. But it was not gone. Just suppressed.

I looked at Maren.

"Where is Cian now?"

"In his chambers with Luna Fia. They are resting."

Perfect.

"And my sister-in-law? Morrigan?"

"She is back in her room now. She used white moss to force herself upright during the trial. Her body is recovering now."

I nodded slowly.

"And the pack? How are they handling everything that happened?"

Maren hesitated.

"Shaken. But relieved. Aldric's death has brought a sense of closure. People are starting to believe things will get better."

I smiled.

"That is good. They deserve peace after everything Aldric put them through."

The words tasted like ash in my mouth.

But I said them anyway.

Maren smiled back at me. Genuine and warm.

"It is good to have you back, Alpha Gabriel."

"It is good to be back."

Liar.

Thorne pushed off from the wall.

"I will go tell the Alpha you are awake."

"Thank you."

He left without another word.

The door closed behind him.

I sat there on the edge of the bed and let the silence settle.

Maren went back to organizing supplies. She hummed softly while she worked. Some tune I did not recognize.

I watched her for a moment.

Then I looked down at my hands. Gabriel's hands.

They were clean now. The dirt and grime from years of imprisonment washed away.

But I could still feel the blood on them.

Metaphorically.

All the blood I had spilled. All the lives I had taken. All the damage I had done.

It was still there.

And soon there would be more.

I had lost my body. Lost my face. Lost the power and position I had spent years building.

But I had not lost.

Not yet.

I was still here. Still alive. Still in control.

And I was inside Skollrend now. Inside the heart of Cian's territory. Surrounded by his people. His family.

He had no idea.

None of them did.

I smiled again.

Gabriel's face was not as satisfying to wear as my own. But it would do.

For now.

I did not intend to gain trust or build my way back up. The cute reveal that Fia was a healer brought a wonderful idea at the back of my mind.

The idea for a perfect show. One that would involve the royals.

Chapter 396: Your Power 1

HAZEL

My phone felt heavier than it should have when Laslo finally handed it back.

I turned it over in my hands. The screen was dark. Clean. Like it had been wiped down while they kept it from me.

"Thank you," I said.

Laslo nodded once and turned to leave.

There was no point waiting since he trailed right behind me before I unlocked the screen

Thirty-two missed messages.

My eyes widened, and I felt something in my stomach drop.

I opened the thread from Aldric first.

The earliest message was the one from yesterday. The one I had seen before they took my phone. The one I had not answered because I did not know what to say.

I saved your life, and now you owe me. Bagging the Lily of the Valley Alpha is no small feat. Since you know nothing about your half-sister Fia, a nice alternative would be spying on your grandmother for me. I want two things. How did she bend Lily of the Valley to her advantage, and what exactly did she use to try to kill Fia? If you do disappoint me or prove to not be worth your keep, you find out quite quickly how your new fairytale life can go poof in your face. I would ask you to be selfish like your grandmother and pick yourself in everything you do. It's good policy.

I had read it a dozen times when it first came in—had stared at it until the words stopped making sense.

Spy on my grandmother.

Report back to him.

Betray Pauline to keep myself safe.

He was not wrong. Even if I had not answered.

I had told myself I would figure it out later. That I would find a way to navigate this without burning every bridge I had left.

But now there were more messages.

Eleven more.

Each one sharper than the last.

I need an answer, Hazel.

Do not make me remind you what happens when people ignore me.

You are not in a position to play games.

Your silence is noted.

Time is running out.

The last one had come in seven hours ago.

This is your final warning. Answer me, or I will assume you have chosen your side.

My hands started shaking.

I scrolled back up through the thread and read them again and then again.

He was going to retaliate.

He was going to come after me.

Or worse. He was going to tell Wenzel I was working with him. That I was a spy. That I could not be trusted.

Anything that would send that man into deciding I was not worth my keep.

And Wenzel would not hesitate to get rid of me.

The betrothal had saved me from one execution. But it would not save me from that man.

And Silvercreek or even Nocturne were not strong enough to protect me from that fire.

I looked up when I entered the room.

Laslo was still standing near the door. He had not left yet. He was watching me with that same blank expression he always wore.

"It is quite hot in here," I said.

My voice came out steadier than I felt.

Laslo frowned slightly.

"The temperature has not changed."

"I know. But I... feel hot. I want to shower again."

He looked at me like I had said something absurd.

"You showered not too long ago."

"I know. But I feel gross. Please. Just give me some privacy."

Laslo did not move.

I set the phone down on the bed and started pulling off my gown. I knew how shit worked around here.

His eyes widened when I made the move.

"What are you doing?"

"Preparing to shower. Like I said."

I pulled the gown over my head and dropped it on the floor. Then I reached for the hook of my bra.

Laslo turned immediately and walked toward the door.

"I will be outside," he said stiffly.

The door closed behind him.

I stood there for a moment. Half undressed. Heart pounding.

Then I grabbed my phone and pulled my gown back on.

I scrolled to Aldric's contact under the name Gabriel and pressed call.

It rang once. Then two times.

When it rang the third time, it went to voicemail.

I hung up and tried again, only to get back the same result.

I called a third time. Then a fourth time.

Even a fifth time.

Each time it rang and rang and then dropped to voicemail.

He was not picking up.

Or he was refusing to pick up.

Either way, I was running out of options.

I stared at the screen for a long moment. Then I scrolled to Pauline's contact and pressed call.

She answered on the second ring.

"Yes... Hazel?" Her voice was clipped. It made it clear she did not have time for theatrics. Not that I was about to give one.

"Grandmother. I need to talk to you."

There was a pause.

"What is wrong?"

"I am scared that Aldric will retaliate against me."

There was another pause. It was longer this time.

"What did the bastard demand from you?"

I hesitated.

I could not tell her the truth. I could not admit that Aldric wanted me to spy on her. That he was asking questions about how she had bent Lily of the Valley to her advantage... About what she had used to try to kill Fia.

If I told her that, she would know I was caught in the middle. That I was a liability.

And I could not afford to be a liability. Not to her. Not to anyone.

So I lied.

"He wants me to monitor Lily of the Valley for his advantage. Reporting back to him about what happens here. Who is loyal to Wenzel. What weaknesses the pack has."

Pauline let out a sharp breath.

"Pay him no mind anymore."

"But he keeps messaging me. He says time is running out. He says—"

"His cup has run over and he will be dead soon enough if he is not already dead."

I felt my breath catch.

"What?"

"There was a trial at Skollrend. Aldric and his followers were exposed. He is either dead or will be very soon. Either way, he is not in a position to threaten you anymore."

Relief flooded through me so fast it made my knees weak.

Dead...

Aldric was dead...

Or as good as dead.

I would not have to answer his messages. I would not have to choose between betraying my grandmother or betraying myself.

"Thank you, Grandmother."

"Do not thank me yet. Too much contact with anyone from Skollrend could put you back on their radar. Especially when you need to stay quiet and stay invisible. So all of your mess can blow over."

"I will. I promise."

"You called the bastard. You are definitely back on their radar."

There was a brief silence.

I did not know what to say. She was right. I hated that she was right.

Then Pauline's voice softened slightly.

"How is Lily of the Valley?"

I looked around the room. At the thin, pretty walls. The small, vast windows. The door that Laslo was probably leaning very closely against.

"It is insanely misogynistic here."

Pauline did not sound surprised.

"That is their way. Considering that Wenzel married into the royal family. He needed to feel powerful in some way."

I shelved that somewhere because it felt important. Still, I had bones to pick.

"There are rules that sound right out of the dark ages. Women are not allowed to leave the estate without permission. We cannot hold positions of authority. We are expected to defer to our husbands or a man of authority in all things."

I paused.

"Did you know about this?"

"I knew."

Chapter 397: Your Power 2

HAZEL

"And you still let me come here?"

"You will survive it, Hazel. You survived worse."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to scream that this was different. That surviving was not the same as living.

But I did not.

Instead, I said quietly, "My husband-to-be does not like me one bit. I do not think I will survive it if he grows a spine against his father."

Pauline was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, "I did not think that would be a problem for you."

I frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"You seemed like you've always been adaptable. Resourceful. You do not need him to like you. You just need him to marry you."

"It would not be a problem," I said. "If the rules were not so strange. If everyone here did not seem to be repressing their sexuality as if it were something shameful."

I could hear Pauline exhale slowly.

"My husband and I tolerate ourselves," she said. "That is all marriage requires. Just do what you need to secure your position and have his kids. Heat season is coming soon. Use that."

I felt something twist in my chest.

"Well, that would be easy for you."

The words came out sharper than I intended.

"Excuse me?"

"Everyone knows how Grandfather moves. Anything with a feminine face would do."

The silence on the other end of the line was cold.

"Watch your tongue, Hazel."

I closed my eyes.

"I apologize."

Pauline did not respond immediately.

When she finally spoke again, her voice was measured and controlled.

"Is there anything else you need?"

I hesitated.

Then I said, "Actually, yes. I need external help so the heat season goes right."

"What kind of help?"

"The most potent aphrodisiac you can get."

There was a pause.

"You want an aphrodisiac."

"Yes."

"For Lysander."

"Well... Yes. You make it sound like I don't need it. But trust me. I do. More than anything."

"It is heat season, Hazel. Look at your own history. You will find out it is the one time men do not have restraint. Even if he seems like the most uptight prick."

"Not this one, grandmother Pauline."

Pauline let out a breath that sounded almost like a laugh. But there was no humor in it.

"You are that worried he will not perform?"

"I am worried he will not want to."

I looked at the locked door.

"But I need this to work. I need to get pregnant. I need to secure my position here so they do not have a reason to send me back to Silvercreek in case anything goes wrong. Because I know Fia will not let the second opportunity to behead me go to waste."

Pauline was quiet for a long moment.

"I can get you something," she said finally. "But it will take time. A week at least."

"Heat season is not that far away, and depending on the moon cycle, it could be earlier. Please grandmother. This benefits everybody."

"Then I will try my best to have it to you before then."

Relief washed over me again.

"Thank you."

"Do not thank me yet. These things are not without risk. You will need to be careful with the dosage. Too much and it could hurt you. Or him."

"I will be careful."

"You had better be. I did not save you from one mess just to watch you create another."

I nodded even though she could not see me.

"I understand."

"Good. I will send it through a courier. Someone discreet. Do not let anyone see you receive it."

"I do not know grandmother. This pack is a strange place. Let me visit you instead. It will be safer. Even if I will be chaperoned like a fucking child.."

"If it pleases you."

"It does," I replied.

"And Hazel?"

"Yes?"

"Stop worrying about Aldric. He is gone. Focus on surviving where you are now."

"I will."

She hung up without saying goodbye.

I lowered the phone and stared at the blank screen.

Aldric was dead.

Or dying.

Either way, he was not a threat anymore.

I should have felt relief. Should have felt safe.

But I did not.

Because Aldric being gone did not change where I was. Did not change the fact that I was trapped in this place with rules that felt like chains and a husband-to-be who looked at me like I was an inconvenience.

I set the phone down on the bed and walked to the window.

The view outside was the same as always. Manicured gardens. High stone walls. Guards posted at every entrance.

It looked beautiful from a distance.

But up close, it felt like a prison.

I had traded one death sentence for another.

At Silvercreek, I would have been beheaded for what I did.

Here, I would just be suffocated slowly. Year after year. Until there was nothing left of who I used to be.

I pressed my forehead against the cool glass and closed my eyes.

Heat season was coming.

I would take the aphrodisiac Pauline sent. I would do whatever I needed to do to make Wenzel have me.

I would get pregnant. Secure the best position for myself and continue to prove my worth.

And maybe after that, things would get easier.

Maybe after that, I would have more freedom. More choices.

I mean... if Alpha Wenzel's dead wife was a royal, there was no way she suffered the treatment he thrust on this pack. It would never have worked. I could be that. I had to be that.

Or maybe I would just keep surviving.

One day at a time.

One rule at a time.

One indignity at a time.

Until I forgot what it felt like to be anything other than this.

I opened my eyes and looked out at the gardens again.

Fia was not living like this. Somewhere beyond those walls, Fia was living her life. She had freedom. She had love. She was protected.

She had a mate who adored her. A pack that was not supposed to respect her but for some reason now did. A future that was hers to shape.

And I had this.

A policed room. A reluctant husband. A grandmother who saw me as a tool to be used.

I wondered if Fia even thought about me anymore.

If she remembered that we were sisters.

If she cared.

Probably not.

Why would she?

I had never been anything to her but a complication. A reminder of her hellish past.

And now I was gone. Not even in the way she wanted.

Still... Out of sight, out of mind, right?

I turned away from the window and walked back to the bed.

My phone was still sitting there. Screen dark.

I picked it up and opened the messages from Aldric one last time.

Then I deleted the entire thread.

Every message. Every threat. Every demand.

Gone.

If he were dead, there was no reason to keep them.

And if he was not dead yet, then he would be soon.

Either way, I was done answering to him.

I was done answering to anyone who thought they could control me.

Even the rules of this pack, and the only way out of that, is to soar above it.

A knock on the door tore me out of my fantasies.

"Miss Hazel, I do not hear water."

Yeah... this rubbish had to go.

Chapter 398: Aye kan 1(M)

FIA

I woke to the feeling of eyes on me.

My lids felt heavy, but I forced them open. The first thing I saw was Cian. He was propped up on one elbow, watching me with an expression I couldn't quite read. Soft but intense. Tender but hungry.

"Like what you see?" I asked, my voice still rough with sleep.

A slow smile curved his lips. "You can sense what I feel through the bond. Have a look for yourself."

I did. I reached out through that invisible thread connecting us and felt the wave of desire hit me like a physical thing. It was warm and thick and absolutely ravenous. My breath caught.

I chuckled and shifted closer to him. My hand found his chest, and I let my fingers trace lazy patterns across his body. "Well, well. Someone's feeling insatiable today."

His eyes darkened. "Can you blame me?"

"Not particularly." I leaned even closer until my lips brushed against his ear. "Especially when I'm feeling the exact same way."

I felt him tense beneath my touch. Felt his pulse jump under my fingertips.

"The day isn't even over yet," I murmured against his skin.

"Well." His voice had dropped lower. Rougher. "A certain someone did say we only live once. And it's not like we don't have a lot to celebrate."

I pulled back just enough to look at him. "I think if we are celebrating, A date would be spectacular."

"Why have one when you can have both?"

Heat bloomed in my chest. I smiled. "I quite like that answer."

Then I kissed him.

Hard.

My mouth crashed into his, and he responded immediately. His lips parted, and I took advantage, my tongue sliding against his. The kiss was hungry and just as desperate. Like we hadn't just spent hours tangled together earlier.

My hands went to his shirt. I worked the buttons open without breaking the kiss, my fingers fumbling slightly in my eagerness. I pushed the fabric off his shoulders, and he helped me, shrugging out of it and tossing it somewhere behind him.

I broke the kiss long enough to pull my gown over my head. Then I was straddling him, my thighs on either side of his hips, nothing between us but his pants and my underwear.

I leaned down and kissed him again. This time slower. More deliberate. I explored his mouth thoroughly while my hands roamed over his chest, his shoulders, his arms. I loved the feel of him beneath me. All hard muscle and warm skin.

His hands came up to grip my waist. His fingers dug into my flesh, and I could feel the restraint in his touch. Like he was holding himself back.

I hated that. I wanted it all. I wanted him all. With all the heat and brashness that came with it.

I pulled away from his mouth and kissed down his jaw, his neck, and even his collarbone. I bit down gently on the spot where his neck met his shoulder, and he groaned.

"Fia," he breathed.

I smiled against his skin. I loved the way he said my name. Like a prayer and a curse mixed in one bottle.

I moved lower, kissing down his chest. My hands went to the waistband of his pants, and I worked them open. He lifted his hips to help me, and I pulled them down along with his briefs.

He sprang free, hard and ready. I wrapped my hand around him and stroked once. I heard him let out a sigh as his body jerked back in response. I did it a second time, and this time, he hissed through his teeth.

I climbed back up his body and straddled him again. This time, I positioned myself directly over his cock. I was still wearing my panties, but the thin fabric did nothing to hide the heat between us.

I started to grind against him.

Slowly at first. Rolling my hips in a steady rhythm that had him groaning beneath me. I could feel him hard and hot against my core, separated only by the thin barrier of lace.

"Fuck, Fia," he moaned.

His hands came up to cup my breasts. He kneaded the flesh, his thumbs brushing over my nipples. The sensation sent sparks racing down my spine.

I ground down harder and faster. I needed him to say my name again in that fucking throaty moan of his. The friction was perfect. Not enough but somehow too much all at once.

Cian leaned up and took one nipple into his mouth. His tongue swirled around the peak before he sucked hard.

Now it was my turn to be in a hard place.

I gasped, my movements faltering for just a moment before I found my rhythm again.

He switched to my other breast. This time, his teeth grazed the sensitive bud, and I cried out. The pleasure was sharp and sweet, and it made me grind against him even harder.

"Cian," I moaned. "Oh goddess, Cian."

His hands gripped my hips, guiding my movements. Helping me find the perfect angle. The perfect pressure.

But it still wasn't enough. I needed more. I needed him inside me.

I reached down between us and shifted my panties to the side. Cian's eyes were locked on where our bodies were about to join.

I positioned him at my entrance and slowly sank down.

We both groaned as he filled me. The stretch was exquisite.

Perfect, I dared say.

I took him inch by inch until he was fully seated inside me.

For a moment, I just stayed there. Adjusting, while savoring the feeling of being completely connected to him.

Then I started to move.

I lifted myself up slowly before sinking back down. The pace was sensual and also deliberate. I wanted to draw this out. I *needed* to make it last.

Cian's hands stayed on my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh. His eyes never left mine. The intensity in his gaze made my breath catch.

I rolled my hips, changing the angle slightly. The new position hit something deep inside me that made me gasp.

"Right there," I breathed. "Just like that."

I kept moving. Kept riding him with slow, deep strokes that had us both panting. His hands slid up from my hips to my waist, then higher to cup my breasts again.

He leaned up and captured my mouth in a searing kiss. Our tongues tangled as I continued to move on top of him. The combination of sensations was overwhelming.

Then something shifted.