

To ruin an Omega

#Chapter 41: Pitch Black Coffee - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 41: Pitch Black Coffee

Chapter 41: Pitch Black Coffee

CIAN

I watched from the window of my study.

Below in the gardens, Fia stood with her sister. From this distance, I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I could see their body language. Hazel had her arms around Fia. Her face was pressed against Fia's shoulder. Her whole body was shaking like she was crying.

It looked like a reunion. Two sisters embracing after a difficult event. The concerned sibling checking on her wayward sister and being the bigger person. Anyone watching would have seen exactly that.

But through the bond, I felt something else entirely.

Fear. Sharp and sudden. It spiked through my chest so hard I actually pressed a hand against my ribs. Then came something worse. Horror. The kind that made your stomach drop and your skin go cold. Fia was terrified down there.

I leaned closer to the window.

Hazel pulled back slightly. Still holding Fia's shoulders. Still crying. Her mouth was moving. She was saying something. Her expression was devastated. Heartbroken.

But Fia's face had gone completely blank.

Not sad. Not relieved. Just empty. Like someone had reached inside her and scooped everything out.

Through the bond came a wave of grief so intense it nearly knocked me back a step. It wasn't mine. It couldn't be mine. But I felt it anyway. Felt it like my own heart was breaking.

What the hell was happening down there?

Hazel touched Fia's arms. Examining something. The rash probably. Making a blatant show of concern. Then Fia jerked away. I saw her mouth move. Saw the guards shift their attention toward them.

Hazel reached for Fia again. Pulled her close. From here it looked comforting. Sisterly. But the bond kept screaming danger danger danger in a loop I couldn't shut off.

I should have gone down there. Should have interrupted this reunion and demanded to know what was being said. But I stayed at the window and kept watching. Because something told me this was important. That if I looked away I'd miss something crucial.

Hazel was whispering something. I saw her lips barely moving. Saw her face stay perfectly composed even while tears ran down her cheeks. Yet Fia was the one breaking.

I could feel it through the bond. Feel her crumbling under whatever Hazel was saying. It wasn't just fear anymore. It was despair. Complete and utter hopelessness.

My wolf stirred. Uncomfortable.

Mate hurt, it said. Mate needs us.

But I didn't move.

I was still staring at Fia when the knock came.

"Enter."

The door opened. One of the sentinels stepped inside. "Alpha Cian. Luna Isobel requests an audience with you."

I turned away from the window. "Now?"

"Yes, Alpha. She says it's important."

Of course it was. I glanced back at the garden. Fia hadn't moved. Neither had Hazel. They were still standing there like statues while guards watched and servants whispered.

"Let her in."

The sentinel bowed and left. A moment later Isobel entered my study. She was composed. Elegant. Her expression was neutral but I caught something in her eyes. Something calculating I had noticed even on the wedding day.

I smiled and kept my tone pleasant when I spoke. "Would you like tea, mother in law?"

"I prefer coffee," she said. "I like it black and bitter."

"I can work with that."

I moved to the small coffee station I kept in my study and started preparing her drink while she stood near the doorway. Still composed. Still watching me with those sharp eyes.

"Have a seat," I said as I gestured toward one of the chairs near my desk. "Why aren't you catching up with your daughter?"

Isobel moved to the chair but didn't sit. "I cannot look at her."

I paused. Looked at her. "Fia?"

"Yes." Her voice was flat. Cold. "I thought I could. But it turns out I am still angry."

I went back to making the coffee and let the silence stretch while I worked. When I glanced at her she was staring out the window toward the gardens.

"Your daughter is not like you," I said.

She turned to look at me. "What?"

"Take a look at the view." I nodded toward the window. "She is the epitome of turning the other cheek."

Isobel walked to the window. Stood where I'd been standing moments before. Looking down at where Hazel and Fia had their reunion. From here she could probably still see both of them.

"Quite the view," she said softly. "Was this why you chose the garden?"

"Hmmmm." I hummed in agreement as I finished the coffee. The rich bitter smell filled the study.

"My daughter has always been a saint," Isobel continued. Still looking out the window. "It is why some people have the audacity to steal what belongs to her."

I raised an eyebrow. "Me?"

She turned. "I did not mean..."

"I do not belong to anyone." I kept my voice even. Calm. But there was an edge there.

Isobel's expression cracked slightly. She actually wiped at her eyes. Real tears or fake ones, I couldn't tell. "I apologize for my language, Alpha Cian. I did not mean to offend you."

I brought her the coffee and held it out. She took it with both hands like it was something precious.

"I am not offended," I said.

I then walked back to my desk and leaned against it. "I still do not know why you are here though."

Isobel drank. She let the coffee sit on her tongue for a moment before swallowing. Then she looked at me directly.

"I will be frank. I came here for one purpose and one alone."

"What is that?"

"I want my daughter to marry you."

The words hung in the air between us.

I didn't react. I just kept my expression neutral while my mind worked through what she'd just said. What she was really asking for.

"That will not be possible," I said finally. "I am already married."

"But you do not love her." Isobel's voice was urgent now. Desperate. "You can toss her aside."

"I do not love Hazel either. It was merely political for me."

"So?"

"That is why you are here." I crossed my arms. "Politics. You lost Skollrend. Me." I paused. Let the next words hit hard. "Fia might be your daughter. But she is not your blood. Is that not it?"

Isobel's face went very still.

"Of course it is politics," she said after a moment. Her voice was quieter now. More honest. "But I wanted a stable life for my daughter." She drank more coffee. "I married for love. The crisis was there was no mate bond and even during our marriage, the goddess did not bless our chosen bond with a match of fate like she surprisingly did with Fia and you."

She moved back to the window. Looked down at the gardens again.

"I practically forced my father to let me marry into a small pack." She sighed. "I thought..." Another sigh. More coffee. "When you came to us with a proposal, it was like a dream come true."

I watched her carefully. Watched the way her shoulders sagged slightly. The way her hand tightened on the coffee cup.

"I could make it up to my father," she continued. "And Fia who I raised and loved took that away from me."

She looked back through the window. Down at where Fia still stood with Hazel.

"I cannot be the bigger person." Her voice was tight. "But I am curious, what are your intentions are with her?"

I considered my answer. Considered how much truth to give this woman who'd just admitted she saw her stepdaughter as an obstacle. Who'd come here hoping to fix a political mistake.

"We will not last long," I said finally. "But I do not intend to cross the goddess by rejecting Fia so quickly when the goddess has decided this chosen match can be a match of fate."

Isobel turned and waited for me to continue.

"She can be cruel when you get on her bad side," I said. "And I have someone I cannot lose to a game with a god now."

My mother. My primary pack. The woman who depended on me. I wouldn't risk her just to satisfy my pride or break a bond I didn't want.

"But when it is over," I continued, "I really do not intend to remarry. Certainly not your daughter."

Isobel drank more coffee. Her expression was carefully blank. "She is a Luna. Beautiful too. You chose her for a reason. What could the issue?"

"Yes." I met her eyes. "I chose her for a reason. Your pack was small and broke. Convenient for me."

The words were harsh. Deliberately so. But they were true and we both knew it.

Isobel drank again and she proceeded to empty the cup. When she spoke next her voice had an edge. "You promised to punish her back at Silver Creek. For her deceit. But she does not look like she is suffering here."

I straightened. Felt my jaw tighten. "My pack, my business."

We stared at each other. The pleasant facade was completely gone now. This was just two people sizing each other up. Trying to figure out who had the upper hand.

I did.

"Is that all, Luna Isobel?"

She set the empty cup on my desk. "Yes. Thank you for the coffee."

I took the cup. "The pleasure is all mine."

She walked toward the door. Paused with her hand on the handle. For a moment I thought she might say something else. Might drop the political mask entirely and say what she really thought.

But she didn't. Instead, she opened the door and left.

I stood alone in my study with an empty coffee cup in my hand and sat with the weird interaction I just had with Isobel. Through the bond I felt Fia's emotions start to return. Not fear this time. Not grief. This was something worse.

An absolute emptiness that made it seem like she'd given up entirely. Like whatever Hazel had said down there now had killed something inside her.

I looked out the window again. But Hazel was gone and Fia was on the ground now, kneeling in the grass. Her phone had fallen beside her. She was bent over like she was going to be sick.

Guards were moving toward her. Some were concerned; Others confused. Unsure of what had happened or what to do.

My wolf was pacing. Growling even.

Mate hurt. Mate needs help.

I set the coffee cup down and sprinted for the door.

Chapter 42: Heart Burn 1

CIAN

I took the stairs two at a time. The walls blurred past me, but it still did not feel fast enough. My study was on the second floor. The gardens were at ground level. The distance stretched, every step heavier than the last. Through the bond, I felt her

emotions spiraling. That same hollowness she carried earlier had cracked wide open now, spreading like a shadow consuming everything in its reach.

By the time I reached the garden entrance, guards had gathered, their postures stiff and unsure.

Fia was on her knees in the grass. Her phone lay forgotten beside her. One hand clutched her stomach like she could physically hold herself together if she just pressed hard enough. Her whole body shook as if she'd been struck by something that shattered her from the inside out.

The guards hovered, uncertain. A few had reached out, but none dared touch her. An omega servant wrung her hands and looked around frantically for someone to tell her what to do.

"Move." My voice cut through the silence.

They obeyed instantly, parting without hesitation, creating space for me to pass through.

I crossed the remaining distance and knelt in front of her. She flinched at the sound of my boots brushing the grass. Her eyes were wide, horrified, rimmed with tears she hadn't yet let fall.

I reached out and placed a hand gently on her head. Her hair was warm beneath my palm, still kissed by the sun.

"What's wrong?" I asked, even though I already felt the storm thrashing in her chest.

She didn't look up. Her gaze stayed locked on the ground. Her breathing came in short, stifled gasps.

"They killed him," she whispered.

It was barely a sound. Barely a breath.

"Who?"

"Milo." Her voice cracked on the name. "They killed Milo."

I noticed her phone lying in the grass, screen facing down. Curious, I picked it up and tapped the display. The lock screen lit up, familiar and still. I swiped, half-expecting a barrage of missed calls, pictures or alarming messages.

But there was nothing. Just Hazel's quiet profile staring back at me. The inbox was empty, the call log blank.

"There's nothing here."

Fia's head snapped up. Her eyes were red. Wild. She looked at the phone in my hand like it had betrayed her.

"It was a view once... Forget it...Of course you don't believe me." She laughed but there was no humor in it. Just bitterness. "Of course."

She snatched the phone from my hand and pushed herself up, but her legs buckled beneath her. She caught the fountain edge with a shaky grip, steadied herself, then tried to move away again. The stubborn set of her jaw told me she was determined to ignore the pain, but the angry red welts across her skin said otherwise.

It gave me an excuse to stay close. I stepped forward, closing the distance in a few strides, and caught her wrist before she could escape. She went completely still at the touch, rigid and silent.

"Your welts need more medicine," I said quietly.

"I don't care."

"I do."

I didn't raise my voice. I simply pulled her back toward me, not roughly, but with enough strength that resistance was useless. "You're coming with me."

She twisted, trying to wrench her arm free, but I held on, patient. Her efforts were more frantic than forceful, and I didn't stop walking. Across the gardens, where evening shadows were beginning to grow long. Through the stone archway, back into the dim corridor where servants hurried to clear a path without meeting our eyes. Up the stairs, each step making her breathing grow uneven.

I opened the Luna suite door and guided her inside. She still clawed at my grip, but it was weaker now. Like the strength it took to fight was draining out of her, drop by drop, leaving nothing but exhaustion in its place.

The medical supplies were still on the vanity where she'd probably left them this morning. I walked Fia over to the chair and pushed her down into it. She sat but crossed her arms over her chest. Defensive.

I grabbed the cream and her wrist again. This time she let me extend her arm without fighting.

The welts looked better than they had this morning. The redness had faded some. But they were still raised. Still angry looking. I unscrewed the cap on the cream and started applying it in smooth circular motions.

Fia watched me work. Her jaw was tight. Her free hand was clenched in her lap.

"Assuming I did believe you," I said without looking up. "What did you see?"

She was quiet for so long I thought she wouldn't answer.

Then she spoke.

"Hazel sent me a beheading."

My hand stilled for just a second before I continued spreading the cream.

"A what?"

"A photo." Her voice was flat now. Dead. "Of Milo's head. On a platter. His eyes were still open."

I finished with one arm and reached for the other. She extended it without me having to ask.

"Milo was my mate."

The words hit me wrong. Made something uncomfortable twist in my chest. I ignored it. Goddess forbid I acknowledge what it was.

"He rejected me," Fia continued. "On the day I got trapped with you."

Trapped...

She'd called our bond a trap. Like I'd done this to her on purpose. Like I'd wanted any of this.

"I didn't trap you." The words came out harder than I intended. "If anything, you trapped me."

Fia's eyes snapped to mine. There was fire in them now. Some of that emptiness burning away.

"Is that what made you decide to steal Hazel's place?" I asked. "Because of what Milo did?"

She scoffed and tried to pull her hand away but I held firm.

"Don't." It was an order, and she knew not to push me.

"I thought Hazel absconded with my mate." Her voice was sharp now. Angry even. "I was convinced my pack was going to be punished when you found out. It would seem like a great disrespect. And you do have a reputation."

Chapter 43: Heart Burn 2

CIAN

"Nothing I didn't construct." I went back to applying the cream. "Rumors have a powerful effect on most."

"The thing is..." She paused. Took a breath. "I was dishonest. Yes. But I was tricked by Isobel and Hazel. Because neither Hazel or Milo ran away."

I said nothing. I just kept working on her arm.

"I know you must know there are holes in their story," she said, voice steady, even though her gaze trembled. "But your pride and misdirected anger won't let you admit it. Your hate too."

I didn't respond at first. The words stung, but not because they were wrong. I finished applying the cream to her swollen welts and screwed the cap shut, placing the tube neatly on the counter. I still hadn't let go of her wrist. Her pulse was frantic under my fingertips.

"Silver Creek doesn't seem like a place where tyranny rules," I said finally. "That's why I chose your pack for my marriage. If this Milo is dead, it must be because of something he did, and judging by the company he kept..."

"Hazel is good at manipulating," she interrupted, softer this time, like she was speaking more to herself than to me. "She did something. I don't know what. But Milo was coming to save me. He was coming to tell you the truth. And Hazel couldn't let that happen. It would implicate her. That is why Milo is dead."

I felt her wrist twitch under my hold, and without realizing it, I loosened my grip. Then, I let go entirely.

I leaned back against the vanity, arms crossing over my chest in a way I hoped looked detached. Unbothered. But inside, something twisted. Unsettled.

"Why do you care about a man who betrayed you?" I asked. "Most would rejoice at his death."

She didn't hesitate, just lowered her gaze to her hands, fingers brushing over the cream still glistening on her skin. "I needed him," she whispered. "Maybe this is my fault."

Her voice was small. Fragile. It made my chest tighten as though something inside me was being crushed by an unseen hand. The mate bond flared in response, surging with instinctive need—to reach out, to soothe, to gather her close and promise she was safe.

I shut it down. Hard. Like slamming a door in the face of a raging storm. The bond reeled but didn't disappear. It pulsed behind the barrier I'd built, loud and insistent, flooding my veins with heat and ache until it felt impossible to ignore.

But I did. I hid it well. She couldn't know what it was doing to me, that I was one breath away from abandoning logic and letting my guard fall.

She was still a liar. Still a deceiver. And no matter how much the bond wanted her, I couldn't let myself forget that.

But I also did not want her sad.

"That wouldn't have saved you," I said at last, breaking the heavy silence between us.

Fia's head lifted, her eyes clouded with confusion.

"Even if he had come," I continued, "even if he'd told me everything, you still willingly participated in deceit against me. Even if it was for what you think was a right reason." I let the words settle like cold ash between us. "If he had come, did you think I would have let you go?"

The blood drained from her face.

"Don't blame yourself too much," I went on. "Put your mind to better use. Like getting ready to meet my mother tonight."

"Your mother?" she echoed, stunned.

"A worried mind will only compromise your immune system further. Especially for an omega. And I can't have that."

I turned and walked to the door before she could respond, before the bond could tear through my shields and drag something tender out of me. Something I didn't want her to hear.

My hand hovered over the doorknob when her voice came, quiet and resigned.

"You don't believe me."

It wasn't a plea. Just truth.

I didn't answer. I opened the door and stepped out, closing it harder than necessary. The sound echoed down the empty hallway.

I leaned against the wall, exhaling. The bond was still there, loud and pounding in my chest.

I pulled out my phone, needing something, anything, to steady the storm twisting inside me. The bond would not go quiet, so I focused on the screen instead and scrolled to Ronan's contact. My thumb hesitated for just a second, then I tapped.

He picked up on the second ring.

"What do you need, Cian?" His voice was sharp, curious.

"I need you to look into someone," I said, forcing my tone to stay level. "A sentinel in Silver Creek. His name is Milo."

There was a beat of silence on the other end. Then Ronan's tone shifted, cautious.

"Why are you digging into Silver Creek?"

"Just do it."

"Is this about that girl?"

"Ronan," I warned.

"Do not tell me you're softening for her," he said, half-amused, half-disbelieving.

My jaw tensed. I could feel the phone digging into my palm, my grip tightening as if I could grind his doubt into dust just by holding on harder.

"Just shut up and do it," I snapped, and ended the call before he had the chance to say anything else.

I shoved the phone back into my pocket and stared at the closed door of the Luna suite. Through the bond, Fia's emotions seeped through—no longer raw or defensive. Just quiet. Resigned. Like she never expected anything different from me in the first place.

Like she had already accepted that I would not believe her.

I pushed off the wall and walked away, each step putting distance between me and that room. Between me and the truth I was too stubborn to consider.

My wolf was restless, pacing circles in the back of my mind. Its low growl echoed louder than my thoughts, furious and unmet.

I told it to shut up.

It did not listen.

It did not seem to anymore.

Chapter 44: Like Minds 1

HAZEL

The moment we stepped out of the garden, my mother's composure shattered.

Her hand shot out and gripped my arm with enough force to bruise. Her nails dug through the silk of my sleeve, and before I could even process what was happening, she yanked me forward so violently I stumbled.

"You fool," she hissed. Her voice was low but seething with fury. "You absolute fool."

I tried to pull away but her grip only tightened. We were out of sight now, tucked behind the hedge that lined the path back to the main driveway. Hidden from the guards. Hidden from Fia's crying eyes and Cian's prying guards.

"What are you talking about?" I kept my voice steady even though my heart had started racing. My mother had been angry many times before. But this was different. This was rage.

She shoved me back, and I caught myself against the stone wall. The impact knocked the breath from my lungs.

"We threw away a diamond," she said. Each word was clipped. Sharp. "We threw away a diamond and kept the trash."

I stared at her. "What?"

"Fia." My mother's face twisted with something between disgust and desperation. "That omega. We gave her power. We gave her everything and we kept nothing for ourselves."

My confusion turned to disbelief. "Mother, what are you saying?"

"She's not suffering here!" My mother gestured wildly back toward the house. Toward the gardens where we'd just been. "Did you see? You needed to see it. The way... Did you see the way he looks at her? The way he protects her?"

I laughed. I couldn't help it. The sound came out sharp and bitter. "Mother, are you delusional? He doesn't care about her. He said it himself. She's an obligation. A responsibility forced on him by the mate bond."

"You're blind," my mother snapped. "You're blind if you think that's all it is."

"There were welts on her arms." I stepped forward and met her eyes directly. "Red angry welts all over her skin. She was suffering. She. Is. Suffering. And you didn't see her face when I told her about Milo. She broke. Completely broke. That omega is miserable here and Cian doesn't give a damn about her."

My mother shook her head. "No. She probably has welts because the environment is still new. Because she is still settling. That's normal. Omegas have the worst immune system. That's expected. But he was tending to her, Hazel. He was caring for her. The way he spoke to me. It was protective. If he did not care, he would not be that way. I am not blind. His pack, his business. Miss me with that bullshit."

"Or maybe he just wanted you out of his business," I shot back. "You said as much. His pack, His business. Those were his exact words, right? Alphas have pride, Mother. You said that yourself. He's not going to let us dictate how he treats his Luna, even if she's trash."

My mother's hand came up fast. I saw the movement but didn't register what was happening until her palm connected with my cheek.

The slap echoed in the quiet space between us.

I stood there stunned. My face stung where she'd hit me. Heat spread across my skin and I could already feel the shape of her hand starting to form in red.

"How dare you," I whispered.

"How dare I?" My mother's voice rose slightly before she caught herself and lowered it again. "How dare you lose Cian Donlon. How dare you let that omega take what should have been yours."

"I didn't let her do anything." My own anger was starting to build now. Starting to push past the shock of being struck. "I had a choice. I gave her Cian. She has him because I did not want him. You helped me, remember? You helped me get rid of him. So what is going on now? What terrifies you?"

My mother's eyes flickered. For the first time, I saw it clearly. Not just her anger. Not just her bitterness.

Fear.

It cut deeper than any slap.

She didn't answer right away. Didn't shout or deny what I'd said. She just stood there with her hand still raised, shaking slightly as if the force she'd used had rattled her more than me.

"What terrifies me?" she repeated softly.

The words seemed to drain her. Her shoulders sagged. Her breathing grew shallow.

"I thought we were safe," she said. "I thought with you free, and Fia sent off in your place... I thought we'd dodged a curse. But I was so wrong. You would have had everything if you had married Cian. But no. We gave that away. My love for you blinded me to reason."

"Oh, please," I said flatly, "if anything, you should be thanking me. You're acting like Fia is suddenly about to become a maiden of the Moon Goddess just because Cian put you in your place. Knowing you, you probably said some shit to him. What did you say?"

"Forget that." Mother argued.

"There we have it," I scoffed.

"Hazel! She is in the Luna suite of this pack," my mother snapped. "Eating from gold plates. Probably being served by the highest-ranking omegas in the pack. That was supposed to be you."

"And? She's sitting in a fancy cage. That's all."

My mother stared at me like she wanted to tear the certainty right out of my body.

"You didn't see what I saw," she said slowly. "The way he stood when he spoke of her. His body was angled—guarded. I've seen that before. I saw it in your father when anyone even breathed wrong in... in... Fia's mother's direction. That is not how an Alpha speaks of someone he despises. An Omega he despises."

"What I saw," I shot back, "was a woman breaking. A woman who is one nudge away from a complete mental collapse. Her mate bond...goddess given trash by the way... is eating her alive. This pack hates her. Cian barely tolerates her. She's alone. And she knows it."

"If you think she's weak," my mother said. "That will be your downfall."

"No," I said, stepping closer. "I think she's finished. Unlike you, mother, I do not let my enemies rise before I clip their wings."

"The pack won't let an outsider rise. Especially one that infiltrated their ranks with deceit. She has no allies. No power. Just a title wrapped around her throat like a noose. And Cian? You heard him. The only loyalty he has to her is because the goddess forced it."

"I'm disappointed in you," my mother said quietly. The words hurt more than the slap had. "I thought you were smarter than this. I thought you would understand what could be at stake if I am right."

"I understand perfectly." I straightened my spine and lifted my chin. "If I wanted Cian Donlon, I could have him. He is but a man with a cock for brains. But I do not want him. And I do not care about Fia. I'm telling you to sit back and watch me. I will be the bride of an equally powerful Alpha. I will actually be wanted, though. You'll see."

Chapter 45: Like Minds 2

HAZEL

My mother's expression shifted. The anger faded slightly, replaced by something closer to skepticism. "What?"

"Just watch me," I repeated. "I don't need Cian Donlon. There are other Alphas. Other opportunities."

But even as I said the words, doubt crept in. My mother's fear was infectious. Her worry about losing Skollrend, about having made a terrible mistake, it was starting to seep into my own thoughts.

What if she was right? What if Cian really was softening toward Fia? What if the welts and the suffering were temporary and he was already starting to care for her?

No. That was impossible. I'd seen his face when he talked about her. Heard the coldness in his voice. He didn't want her. He was stuck with her. There was a difference.

My mother was still watching me with that skeptical expression. "Skollrend is the sixth biggest pack in the world," she said slowly. "Sixth in terms of finance and military strength. Do you understand what that means?"

"Of course I do."

"My father's pack is ranked twenty-eighth and my husband, your father's pack is ranked a measly ninety ninth." She stepped closer. "What do you have aside from your beauty that would catch an equally powerful Alpha? You won't be the only one competing for their attention."

The words stung but I kept my expression calm. "I have the popularity that Alpha Cian gave me by being interested in me."

My mother paused. Considered that. "You do have a point," she admitted. "A few Alphas have already approached your father asking about your hand in marriage."

"I don't want those small fries," I said immediately. Those offers had been from minor Alphas. Pack leaders of territories barely worth mentioning. They saw me as damaged goods now. A rejected bride they could scoop up at a discount.

I was worth more than that.

"Father and you were invited to Alpha Julius Knight's second wedding, right?" I asked.

My mother nodded slowly. "Yes. Courtesy of our connection to Skollrend."

"Alpha Julius is equally powerful to Cian." I could feel the plan forming in my mind as I spoke. "And men of influence will be there. Important Alphas. Pack leaders with real power and real resources. In preparation for the ball, I'll make my presence known there first."

I met my mother's eyes directly.

"You'll see, Mother. I made no mistake with Cian. This will work out better than we planned."

My mother studied me for a long moment. I could see her weighing my words. Weighing the possibilities.

Finally she nodded. "Alright."

We walked back to the car in silence. The driver opened the door and we climbed inside. The leather seats were cool against my skin. The engine started and we began pulling away from Skollrend's massive gates.

I looked back at the house through the window. At the sprawling estate that should have been mine. At the wealth and power that had slipped through my fingers because of one unlucky twist of fate.

My mother sat across from me with her hands folded in her lap. She was staring out her own window but I could tell she wasn't really seeing the landscape. She was lost in thought. Lost in worry.

That worry was contagious.

What if she was right? What if I'd miscalculated? What if Cian really was developing feelings for Fia and I'd missed all the signs because I'd been so focused on my own plans?

No. I'd seen Fia's face in the garden. I'd seen her break when I told her about Milo and then sent the photo. That wasn't the face of someone who was happy. Who was thriving. That was the face of someone barely holding on.

Cian might be tending to her at face value but he wasn't healing her. He was just keeping her alive. There was a difference.

Still.

The doubt lingered. It sat heavy in my chest and made it hard to breathe properly.

I pulled out my phone and opened the notes app. Typed quickly while my mother wasn't paying attention.

Keep tabs on Fia. Watch her closely. Make sure she stays broken.

I couldn't let her recover. Couldn't let her find any kind of happiness or stability at Skollrend. Because if she did, if she somehow won Cian over, then everything I'd worked for would be lost.

I would find another Alpha. Someone better than Cian. Someone who would make my mother see that I hadn't failed. That I'd actually succeeded by dodging that arranged marriage.

And in the meantime, I'd make sure Fia suffered. Make sure she never forgot what she' was and would be for the rest of her life.

My cheek still stung from where my mother had struck me. I touched it gently and felt the heat still radiating from my skin.

She'd never hit me before. Not once in all my years. The fact that she'd done it now, that she'd been angry enough to lose control like that, it scared me more than I wanted to admit.

What if I really had made a mistake? What if letting Fia take my place at that altar had been the worst decision of my life?

I looked at my mother again. She was still staring out the window. Still lost in her own thoughts.

"I won't fail you," I said quietly.

She didn't respond. Didn't even acknowledge that she'd heard me.

The doubt grew heavier. Pressed down on my chest until it felt like I couldn't get enough air.

But I pushed it away. Buried it deep where it couldn't interfere with my plans.

I would prove my mother wrong. I would show her that I hadn't thrown away anything valuable. That Cian and Skollrend weren't worth the trouble.

And I would make Fia regret ever putting that idea in my mother's mind.

The car turned onto the main road and Skollrend disappeared behind the trees. But I kept staring back. Kept watching until there was nothing left to see.

This wasn't over. Not even close.

Chapter 46: Borrowed Hope in a Locked Kingdom

FIA

I stared at my phone like it could give me answers it didn't have.

My father's contact was still on the screen. I'd been looking at it for ten minutes now. Maybe longer. Time felt strange. Slippery. Like I couldn't quite hold onto it.

I hit call.

The dial tone rang once. Twice. Three times.

Then nothing. The call just dropped. Like it had hit a wall and died.

I tried again. Same thing. The phone connected for a second and then cut off completely.

My hands were shaking. I pulled up my messages instead and started typing.

Father, please. I need to talk to you. Something terrible has happened.

I hit send.

The message sat there for a second with the little spinning circle next to it. Then it turned red. Failed to send.

I tried again.

Please answer me. I am not fine.

Failed to send.

Hazel killed Milo. She's lying about everything. Please believe me.

Failed to send.

I kept typing. Kept hitting send. Each message bounced back like I was throwing rocks at a brick wall. Like my father's number had been disconnected. But I knew better. I was blocked.

My chest felt tight. My throat was closing up. I wanted to scream but I couldn't make a sound.

Someone had cut me off. Someone had made sure I couldn't reach him. And I knew exactly who.

I was tempted to demand why she did it. She would be honest too. Because she knew it would hurt me. She enjoyed and relished my pain.

I sat on the edge of the bed with my phone clutched in both hands and tried to think. There had to be another way. Someone else I could call. Someone who might listen.

But who? Who in Silver Creek would even believe me? Who would take my side over Hazel's?

No one. The answer was no one.

Everyone there thought I was disturbed. Unhinged. A liar who'd tried to steal her sister's mate. They'd all watched me get dragged away in disgrace. They'd all seen Hazel crying. Playing the victim. Being perfect.

My mind kept circling back to the same thought. Maybe I could borrow someone's phone. Someone here in Skollrend. If it was someone Silver Creek did not have it out for, maybe I would be listened to.

But then... this was Skollrend... and I was public enemy number one here as well. Who would hand me their phone?

The thought of it even sounded dumb.

I could admit that because, yes, I was not delusional.

Because what would I even say? Hi, can I use your phone to call my father who won't answer because my sister probably convinced him that I'm crazy and there is a huge chance that she blocked me on his phone.

I was trapped. Completely and totally trapped. Because if I bought the idea that either Hazel or Isobel had me blocked... Why had father not tried to reach out too? Unless of course... he believed everything. Unless there was not a doubt in his mind that I was this monster they sold him.

Would the man I knew be like that?

A knock at the door made me jump. The phone nearly slipped from my hands.

"Yes?" My voice came out hoarse.

The door opened slightly. Just a crack. Then wider.

It was the omega from before. The one who'd brought me here earlier. She stepped inside and bowed her head.

"Luna Fia."

I didn't correct her. I just waited. I did not have the strength to speak much. But the saccharine title was making me sick.

"It's almost nighttime," she said. Her tone was formal but not unkind. "You'll be having dinner with the Grand Luna. We were given express orders to make sure you look presentable and that this night goes smoothly."

I stared at her. Dinner. With Cian's mother. Like my world hadn't just ended. Like Milo wasn't dead. Like Hazel hadn't just destroyed the last shred of hope I had.

The omega hesitated. Then she spoke again and her voice was gentler this time.

"Forgive my crude words, but you look a mess. That cannot stand if you'll be seeing Luna Morrigan."

Luna Morrigan. So that was her name.

I sighed. There was no point fighting this. No point pretending I could hide in this room forever. Hazel had made sure of that. She'd made sure I had nowhere to go. Nothing to do but play along with whatever game this was.

"So that's her name?" I asked.

The omega nodded. She moved to the dresser and pulled out a dress I hadn't noticed before. It was deep blue. Simple but elegant. She laid it carefully across the chair.

"I'll go start the water," she said.

I followed her into the bathroom. I had not cared for it when I was taken into the Luna suite. It was massive, with white marble and gold fixtures. The tub was big enough for three people. Maybe four.

The omega turned on the faucet. Water gushed out and steam started rising almost immediately.

"Luna Morrigan," I said. "What sort of person is she?"

The omega glanced at me. Her expression softened.

"She was kind," she said. Then she corrected herself. "She is kind. This pack is lucky to have her."

Was. Is. The shift in tense didn't escape me.

"It's such a shame," the omega continued. Her voice dropped. "That she was claimed by the rot."

The rot. A term I detested so much

"How long has she been infected?" I asked.

The omega tested the water with her hand and proceeded to adjust the temperature.

"I don't have the number," she admitted. "It was hidden from most of us until it could no longer be hidden."

She paused then looked at me.

"What I do know is that her condition is not getting better. Chances are she won't make it. It feels like it's terminal."

Terminal. The word hit me hard. Harder than it should have.

"My mother had it too," I said quietly.

The omega's eyes widened slightly. "She was an omega, wasn't she?"

I nodded. "There is a reason I am an Omega."

"Our immune systems are weak," the omega said. "So it's no surprise." She turned back to the bath. "But our Grand Luna, as her title suggests, is a Luna. This is supposed to be a one in a million case. Sometimes I wonder... Why her?"

I leaned against the doorframe and watched the steam curl up toward the ceiling.

"Suffering was made for everybody," I said. "No one is exempted because of blood or title."

The omega went very still. Then she turned to look at me. Really look at me. Like she was trying to figure something out.

"I was told to be careful with you," she said slowly. "That you were a horrid person."

I actually laughed. It was bitter and sharp but it was real.

"What do you think?" I asked. "Do I live up to the tales?"

She tilted her head and studied my face.

"It feels like I'm falling into a siren's song," she said.

That surprised me. I blinked.

"Is that a good thing?"

"I hope so." She stopped the water and dipped her hand in again to test it. "You have a presence to you. I've worked with slimy people and you don't seem like them. You seem genuine."

She pulled her hand out and dried it on a towel hanging nearby before grabbing it like she had contaminated it.

"That must be true," she continued. "Or you're damn good at pretending."

The words should have stung. Should have felt like an accusation. But they didn't. They felt honest. Like she was just stating facts.

"Your water is ready, mistress," she said. "I'll give you some privacy to wash while I steam the dress for tonight and get you a new towel."

She started to leave but I stopped her.

"Wait."

She turned back and waited. "Yes?"

"May I know your name?"

Something shifted in her expression and her features softened even more.

"Bo," she said. "Your grace."

Bo. I repeated it in my head. Committed it to memory.

She bowed again and left. The door clicked shut behind her.

I stood alone in the bathroom with steam filling the air and making everything hazy. My reflection in the mirror was barely visible through the fog. Maybe that was better. I didn't want to see myself right now. I didn't want to see what I'd become.

I stripped off my clothes. Everything went into a pile on the floor.

The water was hot when I stepped in. Almost too hot. But I didn't adjust it. I just sank down until it covered my shoulders and closed my eyes.

Bo seemed different from the others. She'd looked at me like I was a person. Not a monster. Not a liar. Just someone who existed.

That felt like something. Something small but real.

I stayed in the bath until the water started to cool. Until my skin was pink and wrinkled. Until I couldn't put off getting out anymore.

There was a second towel on the rack. I wrapped it around myself and walked back into the bedroom.

Bo was there. She'd set out the blue dress on the bed. Laid out shoes beneath it. There was jewelry too. Simple but elegant. A necklace. Earrings.

"I took the liberty," Bo said when she saw me. "I hope that's alright."

"It's fine."

She helped me into the dress. Her hands were quick and efficient. She zipped up the back and smoothed down the fabric.

"Sit," she said. Gestured to the vanity.

I sat.

Bo picked up a brush and started working through my hair. It was still damp. Still tangled from everything that had happened today.

"You have beautiful hair," she said.

I didn't know what to say to that. So I said nothing.

She worked in silence for a while. Just brushing. Untangling. Making me look like someone who had their life together.

"Luna Morrigan will like you," Bo said eventually.

I met her eyes in the mirror. "What makes you think that?"

"She sees people clearly," Bo said. "She always has. Even now. Even with the rot claiming her."

She set down the brush and picked up the necklace. Fastened it around my neck.

"There," she said. "You look presentable."

Presentable. Like that was all that mattered. Like looking the part was enough.

But maybe it was. Maybe that's all anyone ever saw anyway.

Bo stepped back and looked me over one more time.

"You'll do fine," she said.

Then she left me alone again.

I sat at the vanity and stared at my reflection. At this version of myself that looked put together. That looked like a Luna.

But inside I was still falling apart.

Milo was dead. Hazel had won. And I was about to have dinner with a dying woman who would probably believe I was as terrible as everyone else did.

I took a breath. Then another.

I could do this. I had to do this.

Because there was nothing else left to do.

I took a deep breath and summoned a strength from somewhere I did not even know existed.

It was a gamble that I was willing to take though.

"Bo," I said quietly. "Do you have a phone?"

She blinked. "Yes."

"May I borrow it? After dinner."

Her voice was soft. "Of course."

"Thank you," I managed.

She might not have known it. But her positive response returned hope to my soul. Because I was dying to know if my father truly hated me now.

Chapter 47: Fault lines

CIAN

My phone buzzed in my pocket as I straightened my collar in the mirror. I pulled it out and saw Ronan's name flash across the screen.

"Miss me already?" he said when I answered.

I grabbed my tie and started looping it around my neck. "I have dinner soon and my mood needs to be cherry as fuck. Don't piss me off. Why did you call?"

"I called about Milo."

My hands stilled on the fabric. "What about him?"

"My intel tells me that he was tried for sexual assault and beheaded early this morning."

The tie slipped through my fingers. I caught it before it could fall completely loose. "Sexual assault?"

"He tried to get off on the Alpha's daughter. He figured she owed him her body for helping her."

I stared at my reflection. The words hung in the air like smoke I couldn't wave away.

"Really."

"That's what I'm hearing," Ronan said. "Multiple sources confirmed it."

"Thank you, Ronan."

He made an exasperated sound. "I'm going on a fucking date I am not interested in and I'm currently in a crappy hotel because of you. I deserve more than thank you."

"You are so lucky I tolerate you."

"You could just say you love me."

I ended the call, chuckling despite myself. But the humor faded fast. I went back to the tie, fingers moving on autopilot while my mind churned.

Hazel had seemed put together when she came earlier today. Sure, she had been crying. But it was easy to see that it was nothing about being sexually assaulted. The grief had looked practiced. Rehearsed, even. Like she knew exactly how much emotion to show and when to show it. And it had been for Fia and the state she was supposed to be in at Skollrend.

This made me wonder if Fia had been right.

If her then mate Milo had betrayed her because he liked Hazel, Fia's point of view made more sense. The pieces slotted together differently when I looked at them through that lens. A man infatuated enough to help someone escape an arranged marriage. A man who expected payment for his loyalty. A woman clever enough to use that infatuation to her advantage.

Had he been used?

Had I?

The tie wouldn't sit right. I yanked it loose and started over, frustration building with each failed attempt.

"I can help with that, Alpha Cian."

I glanced over. One of the omegas stood nearby, hands clasped in front of her, watching me struggle with the damn fabric.

I looked back at the mirror. Realized I had been fixing this tie for far too long. The careful knot I usually managed in seconds had turned into a twisted mess that looked more like a threat than formal wear.

I ripped it off entirely and threw it on the side table.

"It is a family gathering. I don't need a noose on my neck."

A knock sounded at the door. I gave the Omega a gesture to get whoever it was and when she did, Dr. Maren stepped inside, her expression neutral but alert in that way most pack doctors always managed.

I looked at her through the mirror. "Good news, I hope."

"Like I hypothesized, Grand Luna Morrigan is having a good day before another flare up. So she can be out of the cryo chamber tonight. I will be close by just in case."

Relief loosened something in my chest. I nodded.

Maren shifted her weight. "I have also been hearing from the omegas that you do not take precautions when you are with your mother, Alpha Cian."

I raised my hand. "It is a rare disease, is it not?"

"It was rare for even Lunas to get it with their strong immune system, but not impossible. Given the horrible tragedy that befell Skollrend, we shouldn't be testing hell."

"I know the statistics."

"Then you should know better," Maren said quietly.

"She is my mother." My voice came out harder than I meant it to. "I refuse to treat her like a diseased freak."

Maren fixed a strand of hair behind her ear and sighed. She looked tired: worn in a way that spoke to long nights and difficult conversations with stubborn alphas who thought they were invincible.

"I am close with my mother myself, Alpha Cian." She paused. "I know what I am asking for is hard. But you are ruler of this pack. If something happens to you..."

"I will be fine."

"You might." Her gaze sharpened. "Let us say I believe that for a second. But your mate is an omega. And she was not blessed with great genes like you. For her sake at least..."

She did not finish. She did not need to.

I could tell what she was getting at. Fia being an Omega made her vulnerable. If I should by some miracle catch whatever rare strain of the rot my mother carried, it would not just be me at risk. It would be her too. The omega I had tied myself to, who already had enough working against her without adding my carelessness to the list.

"Keep my distance and disinfect," I said flatly.

Maren nodded. "Yes."

"I should head to the dining room now."

"Right." She stepped aside to let me pass, then added, "I have also briefed your mother about the status of your mate, so she will not be bothered by your distance."

I stopped walking. "And how did she react?"

"She was just ecstatic that she was healthy enough to meet her daughter in law without needing to be in the cryo chamber."

I chuckled at that. It sounded exactly like how my mother would react. She had been asking about my mate since the day the marriage vows were exchanged. Asking when she could meet her. Asking if she was pretty. Asking if I had smiled at her yet.

With how insufferable she was with it, I hoped this alleviated her questions and worries.

I headed down the hall toward the dining room. The manor felt quieter than usual tonight. Most of the pack members were either in their quarters or handling evening duties. Only a few servants moved through the corridors, nodding respectfully as I passed.

I wondered if Fia was already there. I made a mental note to tell her to behave regardless of the hostility between us. This dinner was important. My mother had been waiting to be well enough for this, and I would not let whatever issues Fia and I had ruin it for her.

When I reached the entrance, I paused.

The dining room doors were open. Candlelight flickered inside, casting warm shadows across the long table set for three. And standing near the far end, hands folded in front of her, was Fia.

She wore a blue gown. Not the pale, washed out blue that some girls favored. This was deep. Rich. The kind of blue that reminded me of midnight skies before a storm. The fabric clung to her in ways that made my mouth go dry. Her dark hair had been swept up into a braid that wrapped around itself in an intricate bun. It showed the curve of her neck. The sharpness of her jaw. The delicate bone structure of her face that somehow made her look both fragile and striking at the same time.

She looked almost beautiful.

No. Not almost.

She was beautiful.

I could not help but gawk. My feet stopped moving. My brain stuttered over thoughts that suddenly refused to form properly.

Her dark eyes met mine. For a second, neither of us moved. The bond flared hot and immediate, like someone had thrown gasoline on embers I thought I had under control. It surged through my chest and down my spine, demanding that I cross the distance between us. That I touch her. That I say something that was not edged in suspicion or anger.

I shoved it down. Hard.

But my body did not get the message as quickly as my mind did. I stood there like an idiot, staring at this Omega in a blue dress that fit her like it had been made specifically to torment me.

She looked nervous. Her fingers twisted together. Her gaze flickered away, then back, like she was not sure if she should acknowledge me or pretend she had not noticed I was staring.

I forced myself to move. One foot in front of the other. Slow. Controlled. Like I had not just spent the last ten seconds unable to form a coherent thought.

When I got close enough, I stopped and kept a polite distance between us. Enough space that the bond could not trick me into doing something stupid.

"You look..." I started, then caught myself.

What was I about to say? That she looked beautiful? That the dress made her eyes look darker and her skin look softer? That I had not expected her to clean up this well?

No. None of that.

I cleared my throat. "Presentable."

Her expression flickered. Something that might have been disappointment crossed her face before she smoothed it away.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

Silence stretched between us. Awkward. Heavy. I searched for something else to say. Something that would break the tension without making things worse.

"My mother will be here soon," I said. "She has been looking forward to this."

Fia nodded. "I have been told."

"Good." I glanced toward the door. There was still no sign of her. "I expect you to be on your best behavior tonight."

Her jaw tightened. "Of course."

"No matter what happens between us," I continued, "she does not need to know about it. Understood?"

"Oh... I understand."

I looked back at her. She held my gaze steadily now. There was not an ounce of fear behind those eyes. All that remained was just quiet resignation. Like she had already accepted that this was how things would be. That I would always keep her at arm's length. That I would always doubt her.

The bond twisted sharply in my chest. I ignored it. Again.

Then I heard soft and measured footsteps echo down the hall.

I was grateful for the distraction.

I turned and saw Dr. Maren walking beside a figure I would recognize anywhere.

My mother stepped into the dining room, and despite everything I had been told about keeping distance, I stood up smiling as I approached her.

Chapter 48: Unspoken 1

FIA

When I reached the dining room, my hands would not stay still. I had tried to lace them neatly in front of me, but they kept twisting together, restless, betraying me.

The candles along the long oak table flickered, their light throwing gold over polished silver and glass. Everything gleamed. Everything seemed too fine, too proper for someone like me. I should have felt small, out of place, but mostly I just felt like I was standing in the center of a storm waiting to begin.

The moment I heard his steps, my stomach knotted. I knew it was him before I even turned. That particular rhythm, deliberate and confident, always carried a kind of masculine authority.

Cian.

I tried not to look. But I did.

He stopped at the entrance. The shadows caught his features in a way that made him look even taller, sharper. For a heartbeat, neither of us said anything. His eyes were on me, steady and unreadable. I could not breathe properly under that gaze. It dragged over me, slow and assessing, and my pulse stumbled against my ribs.

Why was he staring at me like that?

I smoothed my dress unconsciously, fingers brushing over the dark blue fabric. The gown had been chosen for me by Bo. But now that I looked at it, it seemed like the sheer elegance she put into my look was a bit too much for someone who was wanted nothing more than to blend into the background. I had almost refused it when I laid eyes on it. But now... I really wished I had spoken up against it. His eyes made me feel exposed, like he could see every thought I was trying to bury.

And yet, something in that look... burned.

It was there for a moment, a flicker I could not mistake. A spark that leapt through the bond, hot and sudden, before he crushed it behind walls of iron. I tried to look deeper, to understand what he was feeling, but I hit a barrier. His mind was shut tight. He was shielding.

He did not want me to see.

The rejection stung more than I expected. I dropped my gaze, pretending to study the tablecloth instead of the way his chest rose and fell like he was trying too hard to stay calm. The bond was still there, humming faintly between us, wild and uneven, like a current just beneath the surface of calm water.

He started moving toward me. Every step deliberate. Silent but heavy with something I dared not name. My fingers tightened around themselves again. I told myself not to flinch, not to look away, but when he finally stopped, close enough that I could feel his scent drift through the air—cedar, chill, and faint smoke—I almost forgot how to stand still.

"You look..." he started.

My heart jumped. I did not even know why. He caught himself mid-sentence, eyes flicking over my face and then away, as if the words had betrayed him.

"Presentable," he said finally.

It should have been harmless. Polite, even. But it landed like a slap. My throat tightened, though I forced a small nod. "Thank you," I said softly.

He looked relieved that I had not argued. The silence that followed pressed down between us, thick and awkward. I could feel his uncertainty through the cracks of his shield, faint but there, like static against glass. He wanted to say something, but his pride would not let him.

I should have hated him for it. For making me feel this way. For looking at me as if he wanted something he would never allow himself to have. But I did not hate him. I hated myself for caring at all.

"My mother will be here soon," he said.

I nodded. "I have been told."

"Good." He straightened slightly, voice falling into that clipped, controlled tone again. "I expect you to be on your best behavior tonight."

Of course he did. Of course he saw me as a problem to manage.

"Of course," I replied, keeping my tone even.

"No matter what happens between us," he continued, "she does not need to know about it. Understood?"

A quiet laugh almost escaped me, but I swallowed it before it could sound bitter. "Oh... I understand," I said instead.

When I met his eyes again, I let my shield fall just a little, enough for him to see the exhaustion there. Enough to make him realize that I had already given up hoping for anything else from him. His expression did not change, but the bond trembled, sharp and uneasy, like a pulse pressed against bone.

For a second, I thought he might say something. But then footsteps echoed down the hall. He turned sharply, grateful for the interruption.

I followed his gaze.

A woman entered, moving beside Dr. Maren, and the sight of her stole the air from my lungs.

So this was her. Luna Morrigan.

Her presence filled the room before her words did. She was not tall, yet she carried herself with the grace of someone who had never once been questioned. Her hair, dark as Cian's now has streaks of grey and was swept up beneath a thin silver comb. Her skin was pale, almost too pale, but it gave her a regal sharpness. There was an air of

sickness around her, faint but unmistakable—the fragile sort that clings to someone who has learned to live with pain and refuses to let it show.

I also did not miss the vicious open sore around her throat and her left hand which was heavily bandaged.

I forced my eyes away from it. Because it reminded me of my mother.

I focused instead on her gown, which was a silvery white. A line that caught the candlelight like moonlight on ice. I should have bowed immediately, but I was too busy staring. She was beautiful, in a way that commanded reverence. And yet, behind her eyes, I sensed something colder. Something that reminded me of Cian when he was angry which happened to be all the time.

He smiled at her. A real smile, not the guarded kind he usually reserved for me. It softened him instantly, made him look younger. He moved toward her with an ease I had never seen in him before, as if the weight he always carried had been lifted.

I realized quickly that this was the woman whose approval I was supposed to earn. The one who would look at me and see what I was immediately—an Omega, unworthy of her son. A thief hungry for power.

I straightened my shoulders and lowered my eyes, pretending not to notice the flicker of warmth in Cian's expression. But inside, my thoughts raced. I could already feel the judgment that would come. The polite, cutting words. The subtle reminders of where I belonged in this house.

Before Cian could reach her, Luna Morrigan took a small, deliberate step back. Her movements were graceful, but there was hesitation in them. She lifted a pale hand toward Dr. Maren, her voice gentle but firm.

"Maren here advises that we keep our distance tonight," she said, her gaze flicking briefly to me. "Given that your mate is an Omega."

The light in Cian's eyes dimmed instantly. He froze mid-step, something in his jaw tightening. It was small, barely noticeable unless one was looking closely, but I saw it. The sudden stillness. The way his hand curled slightly at his side. Whatever warmth had been there only seconds ago vanished, replaced by that cold, detached control he wore like armor.

The silence that followed stung more than the words themselves.

I could feel it. The quiet humiliation hanging in the air, pressing down on me like a weight. My throat ached with it. This was somehow going to end up my fault.

I could tell that Cian cared about his mother and I refused to be the reason he had to treat her like a "patient".

So before the moment could stretch too far, before that awkwardness could twist into something wicked and targeted at me, I forced myself to speak.

"Oh, it's no worries," I said, lifting my chin just enough to meet Morrigan's gaze. "The rot is no longer the boogeyman disease people used to think it was."

The room went very still. Dr. Maren blinked at me, startled. Cian's head turned sharply, disbelief flashing in his eyes. For a moment, I thought he might actually tell me to be quiet. That look on his face said it all—he thought I was overstepping, saying too much, too boldly.

But I went on before he could stop me.

"My mother had it," I said quietly.

Something in Morrigan's expression shifted. The faintest crease appeared between her brows. It was curiosity, not pity.

I stepped forward, slow but steady, until I stood near enough to see the fine details of her face. The illness had marked her subtly, in the faint paleness of her skin and the tiredness around her eyes, but it had not taken her grace. She was still beautiful. Still commanding.

I lowered my head in a curt bow. "It is wonderful to finally put a face to the name," I said, keeping my voice even. "I see where your son gets his beauty from."

For a heartbeat, there was silence. Then Luna Morrigan laughed softly, the sound low and musical almost.

"I like you already," she said, a glint of amusement lighting her eyes.

Relief flickered through me. But before it could settle, she tilted her head slightly, studying me in that quiet, assessing way only a Luna with age by her side could.

"However," she continued, "I probably have a strain even more dangerous than what affects Omegas. It is best you keep your distance."

Her tone was calm and it was not unkind, but it carried finality. A reminder that no matter how pleasant her words were, there would always be a wall between us.

Still, she smiled—a real one this time—and said, "It is also nice to see my daughter-in-law."

The words caught me off guard. Daughter-in-law. Not 'the Omega girl', 'deceitful bitch' or something entirely worse. Something in my chest tightened at the sound of it.

"Thank you, Luna Morrigan," I managed.

Her gaze softened. "Welcome to Skollrend."

I bowed again, slower this time, meaning it. "Thank you."

When I straightened, I felt Cian's eyes on me. He was watching me and measuring what was happening.

There was something in his expression I could not quite read. Confusion, maybe. Or disbelief. He looked like he could not decide whether to scold me for speaking so freely or thank me for trying with his mother.

I looked back at him, and for a second, the bond hummed faintly again, that same low, restless energy that had followed us since the second of the ceremony.

Morrigan's voice broke the silence. "You must sit," she said, motioning toward the table. "I have heard much about you, Fia. Some of it nonsense, I suspect."

I moved to take my seat, careful not to look at Cian again, though I could feel him watching still.

As I settled across from him, I caught the faintest sound from Morrigan—a soft sigh that might have been from pain or memory.

Whatever it was, it made Cian's shoulders tense.

Dinner had not yet begun, but I already understood one thing with perfect clarity as the Omegas around began to serve the food.

No matter how polite her smile or gentle her tone, Luna Morrigan was a woman used to power. The kind who could flay someone without ever raising her voice. And Cian—her son, the Alpha—was a mirror of her in every way that mattered.

It was clear with how picky she was with what went on her plate.

The plates were laid with roasted venison, golden potatoes glistening with butter, and a mix of herbs that made the air smell faintly of rosemary and smoke. There was warm bread, still soft from the oven, bowls of glazed carrots, and a pale green soup I couldn't name. Everything looked perfect.

"So, Fia," Cian's mother said with a calm smile, "what do you like most about my son?"

The question hit harder than it should have. My fork froze halfway to my mouth. For a moment, I just stared at my plate, pretending to be fascinated by the food. I could feel both their eyes on me—hers sharp, his unreadable.

I lifted my head slowly, first meeting Morrigan's cool, steady gaze, then Cian's. He wasn't looking at me like he expected me to flatter him. If anything, his eyes dared me to be honest.

I swallowed, feeling my throat tighten. "What I like most?" I repeated, trying to buy time.

"Yes," Morrigan said. "Surely something comes to mind."

Oh... Plenty did come to mind. None were any that I liked however. But... I couldn't be dishonest. There were...moments.

Chapter 49: Unspoken 2

FIA

I opened my mouth to answer when Cian cut in sharply.

"Do not put her on the spot, Mother."

His voice had that protective edge to it, the one that made me wonder if he was defending me or just trying to avoid whatever answer I might give. But I had already started thinking about it. The words were forming before I could stop them.

"He is stubborn," I said.

Morrigan's eyebrows lifted slightly. Cian's fork stopped moving.

I kept going. "Myopic. And he can be borderline cruel."

Cian scoffed, the sound sharp and disbelieving. He set his fork down with more force than necessary. "Borderline?"

I sighed, looking down at my plate. My fingers traced the edge of my napkin. "But he does have good qualities."

The room went quiet. Even the soft clink of silverware seemed to pause. I forced myself to look up, to meet his eyes. They were dark and wary, like he was bracing for another blow.

"He is honest," I said. "Almost brutally so. And he is clearly fiercely loyal to the people he cherishes."

Something flickered across his face. Not quite relief. Not quite gratitude. Something more complicated.

"He used to send letters when he was courting," I said softly, then fell silent.

The memory struck with brutal clarity. He hadn't been courting me. Those letters weren't meant for me at all.

I could still see them, though—the envelopes that arrived at Silver Creek, their wax seals unbroken and their paper faintly scented with pine. His handwriting had been careful, almost reverent, like he'd poured thought into every line. Hazel had barely looked at them. She would hand them to me with an impatient flick of her wrist, muttering about how old-fashioned it was, how he could have just sent a text like everyone else.

But I had read them. Every word. I had studied the loops of his pen, the tenderness in his descriptions of Skollrend, the subtle care behind each question about her favorite things. I had memorized the way he signed his name. And when Hazel couldn't be bothered to reply, I had been the one to summarize his words, to craft her responses so they sounded like someone who cared. So he wouldn't know she didn't.

My throat tightened. The air between us felt heavier. When I looked at Cian, I saw the realization dawn on him. The flicker of warmth in his expression vanished, replaced by something cutting and distant. His jaw clenched. His eyes turned hard, cold as the northern wind.

Of course. After all, those letters were not meant for me. They were for Hazel. And here I was, admitting I had read them. That I knew what was in them. It only proved what he already believed. That I was a deceitful beast who had planned this from the start. Who had studied him through those letters like they were reconnaissance for some elaborate scheme.

I swallowed hard. "I should say something."

"I think not," Cian said. His voice was clipped, each word precise and cutting.

I could see the way his jaw tightened, the muscle jumping beneath his skin. But I could not stop now. If I did not say it, if I let him keep believing the worst of me, then what was the point of any of this? Luna Morrigan had to know I was not the one that Cian had wanted.

"I was not the bride that Cian intended to end up with," I said quietly.

Morrigan chuckled. The sound was light, almost amused. "Oh, I am well aware."

Cian's head snapped toward her. "What?"

I stared at her too, my mind spinning. She knew? She knew and she had still been kind to me? Still called me her daughter-in-law?

Morrigan saw the looks on both our faces and let out a soft laugh. "Goddess, that I am sick does not mean I do not get information." She paused, her smile sharpening just slightly. "I am not a fucking vegetable."

The curse coming from her mouth was so unexpected that I almost laughed. Almost. But my chest was too tight, my thoughts too tangled.

"But it is not how it looks," I said quickly. "I did not plan to steal my sister's future."

Morrigan waved a hand dismissively. "Even if you did, the goddess gave her blessing and gave your chosen match a bond, did she not?"

I blinked. My mouth opened but no sound came out.

"That is all I need to know," Morrigan continued, her tone matter-of-fact. "Because who knows better than the goddess herself?"

I swallowed hard and glanced at Cian. He was staring at his mother with the same shocked expression I probably wore. His mouth was slightly open, his eyes wide. For once, he looked completely blindsided.

Morrigan smiled at me. It was warm and genuine. "It does fill my heart with joy that despite my boy's rough exterior, you do like him."

I opened my mouth to correct that. To explain that I did not like him, that I had simply answered her question honestly, that finding a few good qualities in someone did not mean liking them. But before I could get a single word out, Cian's hand moved.

It reached across the table. Not far enough to touch me, but far enough that I understood. His fingers hovered near my wrist, and his eyes locked onto mine. The look he gave me was sharp and direct. Do not.

My heart skipped. I did not know why. It was just a look. Just a silent command. But something about it made my breath catch in my throat. The bond hummed faintly between us, that restless current that never quite settled.

I looked away quickly. My pulse was racing for no good reason.

"What we should be talking about now," Morrigan said brightly, "is you two's honeymoon. And of course, when we will have pups."

Cian choked. Actually choked. His hand flew to his mouth as he coughed, his face going slightly red. He grabbed his water glass and drank deeply, his eyes watering.

I stared at my plate, heat flooding my cheeks. Pups. She was talking about babies! My mind went blank, then filled with a dozen mortifying images I immediately tried to shove away.

Chapter 50: His Letter 1

FIA

"Mother," Cian said hoarsely, setting his glass down. "That is not..."

"Not what?" Morrigan asked innocently. "You are mated now. Bonded. It is a natural question."

"It is not a natural question," Cian said firmly. "Not right now."

"When would be a better time?" she asked. "A year from now? Two? I would like to meet my grandchildren before I am too frail to hold them. Or worse... Dead!"

The words were light, teasing even, for the darkness that coated it. It was sort of a reminder of her illness. Of the time she might not have.

Cian's jaw worked. He looked at me briefly, then away, like he could not quite bear to hold my gaze. "We have not discussed it much. But of course we will try."

"Well, perhaps you should discuss it a lot more," Morrigan said. She turned her attention to me and her eyes were bright with interest. "What about you, Fia? Do you want children?"

My throat closed. I had not expected the question to be aimed at me so directly. I glanced at Cian, but he was staring at his plate, his expression unreadable.

"I..." I started, then stopped. Did I want children? I had never really thought about it. Not seriously. Not in a way that felt real. "I suppose... eventually."

"Eventually," Morrigan repeated, as if testing the word. "That is a safe answer."

I felt my face heat again. "It is an honest one."

She smiled. "Good. Honesty is important." Her gaze shifted to Cian. "And you? Will you be honest? Marriage is a commitment and it would be disappointing if the only reason you got married is because you fear I am going to die."

Cian finally looked up. His expression was guarded, but there was something vulnerable in his eyes. Something that made my chest ache. "I have not thought about it. And I assure you, your sickness is not why I got married."

That was a lie. Even if he shielded himself from me, I knew it was a lie.

"I hear," Morrigan said after a moment, her tone light but her eyes too sharp for the words to feel casual, "that you two have been staying in separate rooms. And from what I gather, the conjugal night hasn't even happened."

My head snapped up, but she was smiling as if she had merely commented on the weather.

Cian went completely still beside me. The fork in his hand hovered midair, his knuckles pale around it.

"Mother," he said quietly, warning in his voice.

She ignored him. "Why is that?"

I swallowed hard. I could feel Cian's tension rolling off him, thick and suffocating. My palms were damp under the tablecloth. "I got poisoned by mourning moon," I said finally, the words coming out too fast, too defensive.

Morrigan's expression shifted, surprise cutting through her calm facade. "Mourning moon?" she repeated. "But those plants grow deep in our own forest. How on earth did that happen?"

I hesitated. There was no good answer to that, not one that wouldn't unravel too much. "It was my mistake," I said softly, forcing a small, embarrassed smile. "I wasn't careful enough when gathering herbs."

Her eyes lingered on me for a long moment. The air felt heavier again, pressing against my ribs. Then she nodded, the corner of her mouth lifting in something that almost resembled approval. "I see. Well, I hope you are healthy now, my dear."

"Yes," I said quickly. "I am. Completely."

"I also had no idea you practiced healing."

I made a nervous chuckle. "I just try my best."

"Well, you should join Thorne to come treat sometime."

I looked at Cian and then back at her and managed a smile. "Of course."

"Good," Morrigan murmured. She leaned back in her chair, her fingers tracing the rim of her wine glass, and then she smiled again, that same knowing, mischievous smile that made me both fond and deeply uncomfortable. "I also hope that you can have your conjugal night soon."

Cian groaned softly beside me, rubbing a hand over his face.

"This is not—"

"This is no attempt to push," Morrigan interrupted, raising her hand in mock surrender, though amusement flickered in her eyes. "But the weather tonight does feel quite pleasant, doesn't it?"

Silence fell, awkward and charged. The fire crackled in the hearth, its light glinting off the silverware. I stared down at my plate again, unsure whether to laugh, cry, or simply vanish into thin air.

Morrigan took another slow sip of her wine, as if she hadn't just dropped a thunderclap into the middle of dinner. "You know," she said conversationally, "Cian's father and I had our first night on a stormy evening, much like this. The sound of wind on the windows... it makes one feel rather close, don't you think?"

Cian made a strangled sound that might have been a cough or a plea for divine intervention.

"Mother," he said again, his voice tight.

She only smiled, unfazed. "What? I am reminiscing. You two are married, not children hiding from the subject."

"That doesn't mean we need to discuss it over dinner," he muttered.

"On the contrary," she said lightly. "Marriage is built on open conversation. You'll find that avoiding the subject doesn't make it go away. Besides..." She set down her glass and looked between us with that same blend of playfulness and quiet steel. "Life is shorter than we imagine. Why waste the time you're given pretending you have forever?"

The words landed with a weight that pulled the air from my lungs. Beneath her teasing tone was something real and raw, the truth of her fading health lingering behind every syllable.

Cian's face softened. "You should let it rest, Mother," he said gently.

She smiled faintly. "Rest is for the dying, my dear, not for those still meddling in their son's marriage."

"Then perhaps meddle less," he said, though there was a flicker of fondness in his voice that hadn't been there before.

Morrigan looked between us once more, her gaze softer now, less probing. "You remind me of your father, Cian. Stubborn. Always certain time would wait for him. It never does." Her attention shifted to me, her eyes kind but still sharp enough to see through any polite smile. "And you, Fia, have the look of someone still figuring out what she wants. Take it from me, my dear. Love is rarely convenient. But when it comes, you should not let fear make you slow."

I felt my heart twist in my chest. I didn't know what to say, so I nodded, my voice small. "I'll remember that."

"Good," she said, her tone brisk again, as if she hadn't just peeled back the air between us and left my emotions bare. "Now, Cian, you can pour me more wine, and Fia, you can tell me about the remedies you've been studying. The evening is too fine to waste on awkward silences."

The rest of dinner passed in relative quiet. Morrigan asked more polite questions about my family, about Silver Creek, about my mother. I answered as best I could, keeping my voice steady even when the memories stung. Cian ate in silence, his eyes fixed on his plate.

When the meal finally drew to a close, Morrigan rose with slow grace, her hand resting lightly on Dr. Maren's arm for balance. The motion was careful, deliberate, as though every breath cost her strength she could no longer spare. Yet when she turned to me, her smile was soft and alive.

"It was lovely to meet you, Fia," she said, her voice low but warm, carrying the weight of sincerity that made it feel almost like a blessing.

"And you," I replied, rising from my chair. "Thank you for your kindness."

Her pale eyes studied me for a moment, quiet and knowing, before her lips curved again. "Between you and me," she murmured, her tone conspiratorial, "I am glad the universe brought you here in your sister's stead."

She left before I could answer, Dr. Maren steadyng her as they disappeared through the archway. The echo of her words lingered long after her footsteps faded.

Cian and I remained on opposite sides of the long table. The candles had burned low, their light flickering over untouched wine and scattered crumbs. The silence between us felt too full, too alive, pressing against my chest like a held breath.

He was the first to break it. "You did not have to defend me," he said quietly, his eyes fixed somewhere near his glass.

"I was not defending you," I answered. "I was only telling her the truth."

His gaze lifted to mine then, sharp but uncertain. "You were. You made me sound better than I am."

I shook my head. "No. I made you sound like the man you try very hard not to be."

Something shifted in his expression, something almost human flickering behind the usual restraint. The faintest curve of his mouth, then nothing. The silence returned, softer now, almost hesitant.

When he finally spoke again, his voice had changed. It was quieter, stripped of all the practiced calm he wore like armor.

"Tell me," he said, eyes searching mine, "why did you read my letters?"