

To ruin an Omega

#Chapter 51: His Letter 2 - Read To ruin an Omega

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FIA

"You will probably not believe me," I said, meeting his eyes. "But I will be honest."

He waited, his expression neatly unreadable in the candlelight.

"There is no point protecting people who threw me to the wolves." The words tasted bitter on my tongue. "I read the letters because Hazel did not. I was just being a good sister."

"Really?" His voice was flat, skeptical. "And it has nothing to do with the fact that you have been plotting to have me from the very beginning?"

I scoffed, pushing my chair back. The legs scraped against the stone floor. I moved to walk past him, done with this conversation, done with his constant suspicion.

"I was joking."

I stopped, turned and shot him a look that could have frozen water. "Jokes are supposed to be funny."

His frown deepened. "I guess what I am saying is... I believe you."

My heart stuttered. No. It skipped an entire beat before resuming its rhythm. I swallowed hard, trying to keep my face neutral. "Why?"

"I dug into Milo." He said it like he was discussing the weather, not information that could shift everything between us. "You were right. He was killed after being accused and prosecuted for sexual assault against your sister very early this morning." A pause followed. "With how your sister seemed fine... Perhaps there is something fishy about her after all."

I could not believe what I was hearing. Cian, the man who had been so certain of my guilt, so convinced I was nothing but a scheming liar, was actually starting to see reason. My pulse quickened.

"So what happens now?" I asked carefully.

"What is supposed to happen now?"

"This means I am not guilty. It means—"

He raised a finger, cutting me off. The gesture was sharp, final. "I am merely questioning things." His tone shifted back to that controlled, measured cadence he wore like a shield. "Like I said before, you still willingly participated in deceit."

My jaw tightened.

"Since you read my letters," he continued, "and you have been here for over two days now, you should know me."

"Yeah," I said, the word coming out as harsh as I intended it to. "A stubborn, arrogant prick."

He laughed. Actually laughed. The sound was brief, surprised, like it had escaped before he could stop it. He cleared his throat immediately, his face snapping back to that stoic mask he always wore. But I had seen it. That flash of genuine amusement, that crack in his carefully maintained armor.

It was the first time I had seen him show anything close to positive emotion. And I hated that I found it cute.

Goddess, I hated the warmth that spread through my chest at the sound of his laughter, the way my stupid heart did that annoying flutter thing again.

I made a mental note to wash those wicked thoughts out of me in a much needed shower. Preferably a cold one.

"Thank you," he said after a moment, his voice returning to its usual steadiness. "For pacifying my mother."

I blinked. "What?"

"I did not have high hopes for you, but you did deliver." He hesitated, like the next words cost him something. "It is a surprise she likes you. Despite what she knows about you."

The compliment felt backhanded, wrapped in layers of his usual distrust. But it was something. More than he had given me before.

He shifted his weight, glancing toward the archway where Morrigan had disappeared. "I also want to put whatever fear remains in her out of sight. So..."

"So what?" I prompted when he trailed off.

"You will spend the night with me."

My face went hot. Burning. I felt the heat spread from my cheeks down my neck.

"What?"

"It is absolutely not what you think it is." He said it quickly, holding up a hand like he could physically stop my thoughts. "Nothing will be happening. We will just be in the same vicinity. And when those gossiping Omegas see us together and their thoughts go to strange places, my mother will be satisfied. For now, at least."

I stared at him and tried to process what he was actually saying beneath all that careful phrasing. My mind caught on something, a thread I could not quite let go.

"When you were going to force me to sign that slave contract," I said slowly, watching his face, "you wanted me to have your babies. In a clinical and forceful manner." I saw his jaw tighten. "But at dinner, and even now, you seem repulsed by the idea of children."

Understanding flickered across his features. Just for a second. But it was enough. He knew I had clocked what he had tried to do.

I scoffed. "You wanted me to reject that sick thought so it would look like it was my idea and not your own."

His eyes widened fractionally. A tell he could not quite hide.

My own eyes went wide as the full realization hit me. "Goddess, you do not want—"

He moved fast.

He closed the distance between us in two strides, his hand finding my mouth before I could speak. His palm was warm, steady, the weight of it silencing me more than the touch itself.

We stood inches apart. Too close. The scent of cedar clung to him, mixed with something darker, something I couldn't name but felt deep in my chest. Heat rolled off his body, brushing against my skin like a warning. My head tipped back to meet his gaze, and the world seemed to shrink until there was only him.

His eyes caught mine—dark, sharp, alive with something that felt like danger and desire tangled together. My heart stumbled.

"I did not realize it before but I see it now," he said, his voice low, rough, threaded with amusement that didn't reach his eyes. "You talk too much."

I could feel each of his fingers against my face. The slight calluses on his palm. The way his thumb rested just below my cheekbone. My heart was pounding so hard I was sure he could feel it through the thin space between us.

I wanted to pull away. It would have been smart to pull away. But I could not move.

His gaze lowered to where his hand still covered my mouth. For a moment, his expression shifted—something uncertain flickered there, something almost human. Then it vanished, hidden behind the familiar steel of his composure.

Slowly, he dropped his hand. The warmth of his touch lingered on my skin even after it was gone. He stepped back, clearing his throat, his voice rougher than before.

"I apologize," he said, eyes steady on mine though his jaw was tight. "That was... out of line."

Chapter 52: Purification

FIA

"It's no big deal," I said, surprised by how calm my voice sounded. It was steady, almost detached, even though my pulse was anything but. "I don't mind staying in your chambers tonight if it'll bring your mother peace."

His brows lifted, the faintest sign of surprise crossing his otherwise unreadable face.

"But," I added, "I want to go to my suite first and take a shower."

"You can do that in my quarters," he replied without missing a beat. "I'll have your Omega servant bring a change of clothes."

I tilted my head, studying him. There it was again—that quiet, immovable authority. He had a way of turning simple words into commands. If it wasn't his way, it wasn't happening at all. Some things never changed. And this part of him, this need to control everything, was one I'd never learn to stomach.

"What if I refuse?" I asked, watching his jaw tighten.

His eyes narrowed, the faint glow of irritation flickering there. "You should try to be polite when I'm being nice."

"And you should try not to threaten people you need," I shot back.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. The silence between us stretched thin, almost tangible. The candlelight trembled, casting restless shadows across his face. They softened nothing. If anything, they made him look harder, more distant. Yet underneath

it, I could feel it—the strain, the push and pull between restraint and something rawer. It was like standing too close to a storm, feeling the static before the lightning struck.

"Please," he said finally. The word came out low, reluctant, like it cost him something to say it. "See reason."

"I am being reasonable," I murmured. "Enough, at least."

Then I turned and walked away before he could answer. My footsteps echoed against the marble floor, each one sharper than I intended. The air felt thick as I left the dining hall behind.

"I'll be there," I called over my shoulder, not bothering to look back.

The moment I turned the corner, out of sight, the breath I'd been holding rushed out of me. My hands trembled. I pressed one against my cheek and then, without thinking, slapped it lightly. Once. Twice. A third time. Just enough to sting.

"What the hell was that?" I whispered, my voice shaking now when it hadn't before.

My skin still burned where his hand had been. I could feel it, the ghost of his touch, the warmth of his palm against my mouth. The rough scrape of his calluses. The way his thumb had rested, almost tenderly, against my cheekbone. My heart was still betraying me, thudding too fast, too loud, like it hadn't gotten the message that this wasn't supposed to mean anything.

I clenched my fists, willing myself to focus, to breathe, to feel something other than this chaotic mess swelling in my chest.

I needed that cold shower.

Desperately.

When I reached my suite, Bo was standing outside the door. She straightened when she saw me.

"How was dinner?" she asked.

"It was fine if you believe that."

She fell into step beside me. "If you have an ally in the Grand Luna, life in Skollrend will be easier."

"Sure," I said, pushing open the door.

We both entered. The room felt like a sanctuary after everything that had happened tonight. Somewhere I could breathe without feeling like someone was watching or analyzing.

"I need a shower," I said.

Bo moved to help me undress, her fingers working at the buttons down my back. I let her. My arms felt too heavy to do it myself. When she pushed the fabric off my shoulders, her hands paused at my arms.

"The welts are nearly gone," she said.

I looked down. She was right. The raised marks from the mold had faded to pale lines against my skin. In another day or two, they'd be completely invisible. Like they never happened.

"Do you still need my phone?" Bo asked.

"Yes."

She pulled it from her pocket and handed it over. I took it and reached for my own phone. I copied my father's number into Bo's phone with shaking fingers. Then I hit call.

It rang once. Twice.

Then it picked up.

"Hello?"

My father's voice came through the speaker. I could hear him eating. The sound of chewing, the scrape of silverware against a plate. Normal sounds. Like nothing had changed. Like his daughter wasn't trapped in a foreign pack after being thrown to the wolves by his proper wife and legitimate daughter.

My throat closed up.

The realization hit me like a physical blow. I'd been blocked. Actually blocked. Even if Isobel or Hazel were the one who did it, it still meant that he did not know because he hadn't called... Because he'd chosen not to hear from me.

"Father," I said, my voice cracking. "It's Fia."

The chewing stopped. I heard him choke, cough, struggle to swallow whatever was in his mouth.

"Fia." There was a pause. A long one. "How are you? How have you been?"

My voice broke again. "I've been fine."

It was lies. All lies. But what else could I say?

"You didn't call," I said.

"I wanted to give you space."

Space. The word landed wrong, twisted and sharp.

"Space?" I repeated. "After what happened? You didn't even want to know what actually happened?"

"Fia, let's not talk about that."

"Why?"

"You stole your sister's marriage. You almost put this pack in jeopardy."

Each word felt like a slap. I gripped the phone tighter, my knuckles going white.

"But you know me," I said. My voice came out small. Desperate. "Would I do that? Would I ever do that?"

Murmuring in the background. I clocked a woman's voice. It was low yet insistent. I knew that voice. My stepmother was close.

I scoffed. Of course. Of course she was there, right beside him, feeding him poison while he ate his dinner.

"I thought I knew you, Fia," my father finally said. "But how do I analyze this without seeing what you did?"

"I wore Hazel's veil to protect our pack, Father. To protect you. No matter how myopic it was." My vision blurred with tears. "Do you believe that?"

Silence stretched taut. But he did speak.

"What matters is it worked out in the end."

The tears spilled over. I couldn't stop them. They ran hot down my cheeks, dripping off my jaw.

"One day you'll see them both for what they are," I said. My voice shook with the weight of everything I couldn't say, everything he refused to hear. "And I hope I still have it in me to forgive you, Father."

I took a breath. It rattled in my chest.

"But you never called because—" Father started but he did not finish. I knew what he was getting at.

"I never called you because I never could—"

I did not get to finish before the line went dead.

I stared at the phone in my hand. Did he hang up on me? Or did Isobel snatch the phone away before it mattered?

But I didn't care anymore. Why should I?

I wiped at my tears with the back of my hand and gave Bo her phone.

"Thank you," I said.

"Of course."

"I'll take my bath now."

"I'll help you run it," Bo offered.

"There's no need for that." I headed toward the bathroom. "It'll be a cold shower."

I walked into the bathroom still in my underwear. The air felt cooler here, cleaner. I stripped off the rest of my clothes and turned the shower on. Cold water burst from the pipes and I just stepped under the spray.

The shock of it stole my breath. Ice cold water pounded against my skin, raising goosebumps across my arms and chest. But I didn't adjust the temperature. I tilted my head back and let it run over my face, my hair, my shoulders.

I imagined washing Silver Creek off myself completely. Every lie Isobel had whispered into my father's ear. Every cruel word Hazel had said with that perfect smile on her face. Every moment I'd been too naive to see what they really were.

The water ran cold against my closed eyelids. I scrubbed at my skin like I could peel away everything that had happened. Everything I'd lost.

When I finally turned off the water and stepped out, my skin was pink from the cold and my fingers were pruned. But I felt cleaner. Lighter. Like maybe I could actually breathe again.

I dried off and pulled on the simple shift that Bo had left folded on the counter. My hair hung wet and heavy down my back. I didn't bother drying it properly. I just ran my fingers through it to work out the worst of the tangles.

When I came out, Bo was waiting with a small bag.

"A sentinel came while you were in the shower... this is for your night in the Alpha's quarters," she said.

I took it. "Thank you."

"Will you be alright?"

The question caught me off guard. Not because it was strange to ask, but because someone actually cared enough to ask it.

"I'll be fine," I said.

It was another lie. But maybe if I said it enough times, it would become true.

Bo nodded and left. The door clicked shut behind her, leaving me alone in the quiet suite. I looked down at the bag in my hands. Inside was a clean nightgown, a change of clothes for tomorrow, and a few other necessities.

I dropped the bag on the bed and just stared at it for a moment. The quiet in the room felt heavier than it should, like even the air knew I was stalling. My hair was still damp from the shower, water slipping down my neck and soaking into the collar of my towel.

Then a second later, I reached for the bag and pulled out the nightgown.

Now that I felt it, I realized that it wasn't plain cotton or anything simple like I expected. It was soft, pale pink, with lace along the edges and thin straps that looked like they'd snap if I pulled too hard. The fabric shimmered faintly when I moved it, delicate and light, like something meant for a different kind of night.

I turned it over in my hands. Who had picked this? Bo? Cian? The thought made my stomach twist.

Still, it was better than walking into the Alpha's quarters in a towel.

And in hindsight, anything to sell a lie to Luna Morrigan I guess.

So I pulled it on.

The satin slid over my skin like water. Cool at first, then warm. It clung just enough to make me self-conscious. The hem barely reached mid-thigh, and the neckline dipped

lower than I was comfortable with. I adjusted the straps, tugged the fabric higher, but it didn't make much difference.

In the mirror, I looked like someone I didn't know. The soft fabric and lace made me seem smaller, gentler, like I was trying to fit into someone else's idea of beautiful. My hair, still damp and curling around my shoulders, only added to the illusion. I looked like I belonged in one of those photos people posted with filters and fairy lights, not in the middle of this mess.

I sighed and wrapped the sheer robe around me. It matched the gown, thin and light with satin ties at the waist. It didn't hide much, but at least it gave me something to hold onto.

The room was quiet again. The only sound was the faint dripping from the bathroom tap and the slow beat of my heart. I sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing my hands together to shake off the unease crawling up my spine.

I should have felt calm. Clean. Ready. But instead, my thoughts wouldn't stop circling back to him. To the way he'd looked at me earlier, the tension in his voice, the way his hand had felt against my face.

I shut my eyes and exhaled slowly. "Goddess, get it together Fia. It's just one night," I whispered. "That's all."

Chapter 53: The Pervert

CIAN

I leaned against the corridor wall and pressed my palm against my forehead.

What the hell was wrong with me?

The touch of her skin still burned on my fingertips. Her lips had been so soft against my palm, and the warmth of her breath had seeped through my skin like it could reach somewhere deeper. Somewhere I didn't want it to go.

I pushed off the wall and started walking again. My chambers weren't far, but each step felt heavier than it should have been.

She's different than we thought.

The voice came from inside, from the part of me that was the other and same all at once. My wolf had been stirring all evening, restless and insistent.

"Shut up," I muttered under my breath.

Hazel and her mother lied. Fia didn't deceive us. She was just trying to save her pack.

"She still went along with it," I said. "She still stood there and let it happen."

Because she had to. If you were in her shoes, you would have done the same.

I clenched my jaw. The fact that it was true made my blood boil so I just ignored it.

At least I tried to. Desperately.

"That doesn't change anything," I said.

It changes everything. Your mother was right. The goddess knew what she was doing.

"What do you know anyway?" I stopped outside my door and fumbled for the handle.

"You're just the animalistic part of me."

I am you. The voice came softer now, almost gentle. *The part of yourself you should be honest with.*

I ignored that and pushed open the door. The room was exactly as I'd left it this morning. The bed was made and the curtains were drawn. Everything was in its place. Just like I liked it.

"I need a bath," I said to no one in particular.

The wolf didn't respond, but I could feel its presence like a weight of lead in my chest. It was watching and waiting.

I stripped off my shirt and tossed it onto a chair. Then my pants and my socks. Everything until I was standing naked in the middle of my room, skin prickling from the cool air. I rolled my shoulders and headed for the bathroom.

The marble floor was cold under my feet. I turned the tap and water rushed into the tub, steam rising almost immediately. I'd set it hot. Hot enough to scald. Maybe that would clear my head.

While the tub filled, I stared down at my right hand.

The same hand that had covered her mouth. The same hand that had felt her breath ghost across my palm, warm and quick. I could still feel it. The softness of her lips. The heat of her skin. The way she'd frozen when I touched her.

Without thinking, I brought my hand to my face and inhaled.

Her scent hit me like a punch. Sweet and clean with something underneath that was hers and hers alone. Something that made my wolf stir again, more insistent this time.

Pervert.

I jerked my hand away from my face.

"Fuck," I breathed. "I'm losing it."

I shoved my hand under the rushing water, scrubbing at my palm like I could wash away the memory of her. The water was scalding now, but I didn't pull back. I just watched her scent disappear down the drain before I clogged it back.

This was a mistake... Sharing a room with her was a terrible idea.

What would it be like during heat season? The thought slammed into me before I could stop it. Her scent would be everywhere. Thick, heady and impossible to ignore. I'd have to smell her every second of every day, and my wolf would lose whatever control it still had.

I turned off the tap with more force than necessary.

"Don't think about it," I told myself. "Deal with it when it happens."

The tub was full now, steam curling up from the surface. I stepped in and sank down until the water reached my shoulders. The heat bit into my skin, but I welcomed it. Pain was easier to deal with than whatever the hell this feeling was.

I closed my eyes and tried to think about something else. Anything else.

Alpha Julius. The wedding invitation. That was safe. That was work and politics.

Julius's wedding was going to be a spectacle. Every major pack would send representatives, and they'd all be looking for weaknesses and strength to exploit. It was the kind of event where alliances were tested and power dynamics shifted.

I couldn't go alone. That would look weak.

And I couldn't just bring anyone either. Not to something this important.

My mother's face appeared in my mind. The way she'd looked at Fia during dinner. The approval in her eyes. She actually liked the girl. After one meal, my mother had decided Fia was acceptable.

Which meant I'd have to bring Fia to the wedding.

Another event where we'd have to pretend we could stand each other. Another day of playing the perfect Alpha and his equally perfect mate.

I sank lower in the water until it covered my chin.

At least she'd be easy to dismiss. She was plain. Pretty enough, sure, but nothing special. Nothing that would draw too much attention or make anyone look twice.

Except.

The memory of her in that dress pushed its way into my head. The way the blue fabric had clung to her curves. The way her hair had been braided in soft coils that complimented her face. The way the candlelight had caught in her dark doe eyes and made them look like they were glowing.

She'd looked beautiful tonight. Not pretty. Beautiful.

And that had been with minimal effort. No elaborate styling. Just a dress and some attention to her hair.

What would she look like if she was actually trying?

I sat up so fast water sloshed over the edge of the tub.

"Stop," I said out loud. "Stop thinking about her."

My voice echoed off the marble walls, harsh and too loud.

I sounded mad. Maybe I was.

I grabbed the soap and scrubbed at my skin until it turned red. Then I ducked my head under the water and held my breath until my lungs burned. When I came up, I felt slightly more in control.

I could do this. It was one night. That was all it was.

I climbed out of the tub and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around my hips. Water dripped down my chest and back, leaving dark spots on the marble floor. I should probably get dressed before she arrived. That would make things less awkward.

I ran my hand through my wet hair and pushed it back from my face. Then I opened the bathroom door.

And stopped cold.

Fia stood in the middle of my room.

She stared at me and I stared back.

She was wearing a nightgown. Pink and sheer with lace along the edges. The fabric barely reached mid-thigh, and the straps were so thin they looked like they might snap. Over it she'd thrown on a matching robe that did absolutely nothing to hide the outline of her body underneath.

Her hair was still damp from her shower. It fell in dark waves around her shoulders, and a few drops of water clung to her collarbone.

She looked like something out of a dream. The kind of dream I shouldn't be having.

Her eyes went wide, then wider still, tracing a slow path from my face down to my chest, lingering there for a breath too long before dropping to the towel slung low around my hips. Color bloomed across her cheeks, soft and vivid, as her lips parted just slightly, like she'd forgotten to breathe.

Then she turned, quick and flustered, the movement a rush of air and heat, her balance slipping for an instant as if even her body couldn't decide whether to run or stay.

"I'm so sorry," she said, her voice high and rushed. "The sentinel let me in. I didn't think you'd be naked."

I just stood there like an idiot, water still dripping off me onto the floor. My brain had stopped working. All I could process was the image of her in that nightgown. The way the fabric moved when she turned. The curve of her waist. The bare skin of her legs.

Say something, my wolf urged.

But what the hell was I supposed to say?

She kept her back to me, her shoulders tense. "I can wait in the hall. Or the lounge. Just tell me where to go."

"It's fine," I managed. My voice came out rougher than I intended. "Give me a minute."

"Of course. Yes. Take your time."

She didn't move though. She just stood there with her back to me, her hands clutching the edges of her robe like it could protect her from the awkwardness.

I forced myself to move. I crossed to my wardrobe and pulled out sleep pants. I dropped the towel and yanked the pants on as quickly as possible, very aware that she was only a few feet away.

"You can turn around now," I said.

She hesitated. Then slowly turned. Her eyes met mine for half a second before darting away again. The blush on her cheeks had spread down her neck.

"Sorry," she said again. "I should have maybe knocked or made my presence known."

"The sentinel should have waited for me to answer," I said. "It's not your fault."

The silence that followed was thick enough to choke on. Neither of us seemed to know what to do with ourselves. She stood near the door. I stood near the wardrobe. The space between us felt like a canyon.

My wolf stirred again. *She looks good.*

"Shut up," I muttered.

"What?" Fia's eyes snapped to me.

"Nothing," I said quickly. "Just talking to myself."

Her brow furrowed. She looked like she wanted to ask but thought better of it.

I gestured toward the bed. "You can take that side. I'll take the other."

She glanced at the bed. Then back at me. "We're really doing this?"

"You said you would. To put my mother's mind at ease."

"I did say that." She walked toward the bed slowly, like it might bite her. When she reached it, she sat down on the very edge of the mattress, as far from the center as physically possible.

I rounded to the other side and sat down too. The bed was large enough that there was plenty of space between us, but it still felt too small. Too intimate.

I could smell her from here. That same sweet scent that had clung to my hand. It filled the room now, impossible to ignore.

This was going to be a very long *hard* night.

Chapter 54: The Art of being the Victim

HAZEL

The dining room felt smaller than usual. Maybe it was the silence pressing down on everything, or maybe it was just my nerves winding tighter with every bite I took. The

roast chicken sat half-eaten on my plate. I pushed a piece around with my fork, watching the way the candlelight caught on the glaze.

Alpha Julius's wedding was in a few days.

A few days, and I still didn't have a solid plan to get there. My mother had been working on Father for hours now since we returned.

She had dropped hints and reminders about the importance of showing up to these events. About maintaining relationships with other packs. About not letting the scandal define us.

But Father was hesitant. He'd been hesitant since the moment Fia was revealed to be the one wearing my veil. Since that pivotal moment everything went wrong for Fia and she ended up married to Alpha Cian instead of me.

I glanced up from my plate. Father sat at the head of the table, his gaze distant. He wasn't looking at me or Mother. He was looking at the empty chair across from mine. The one where Fia used to sit.

My jaw tightened.

Of course he was thinking about her. He was always thinking about her.

Mother noticed too. Her fingers drummed lightly against the stem of her wine glass, the sharp click of her nails against crystal breaking through the quiet.

"Joseph," she said, her voice light but pointed. "You're staring again."

Father blinked and pulled his attention back to the table. "I wasn't staring."

"You were," Mother said. She took a sip of her wine, her expression barely hiding her irritation but the wine helped. "You've barely touched your food."

"I'm fine."

"Are you?"

Father didn't answer. Instead, he turned to me. His eyes softened in that way they always did when he was about to ask something he knew I didn't want to answer. Because it was always about fucking Fia.

"Hazel," he said. "How was Fia when you visited Skollrend? Were there anything else you noticed aside from her mood?"

My stomach twisted. I set my fork down carefully, forcing my face to stay neutral. "She was fine."

"Fine?" Father repeated. He leaned forward slightly, his brow furrowing. "What does that mean? Did she seem happy? Was she being treated well?"

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. This again. Always this.

"She seemed fine, Father," I said. My voice came out clipped, sharper than I intended. "Alpha Cian wasn't warm, but he wasn't cruel either. She had her own quarters. She wasn't being beaten or starved if that's what you're worried about."

"And she didn't say anything to you?" Father pressed. "Nothing about wanting to come home or—"

"That's enough."

Mother's voice cut through the conversation like a knife. She set her wine glass down with more force than necessary, the sound echoing against the wood.

Father turned to her, startled. "Isobel—"

"I said that's enough," Mother repeated. Her eyes were cold and sharp. "It's bad enough that Fia stole the life that was supposed to belong to Hazel. But you still make it clear she's your favorite."

"That's not what I'm doing," Father said quickly. "I was just worried."

"You've asked Hazel three times now," Mother said. "Three times in one dinner. How many times do you need to hear the same answer before you're satisfied?"

Father opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again. He looked down at his plate, his shoulders sagging slightly.

"You never know," he said quietly. "Maybe she'll remember something she didn't mention before. Something important."

I forced a smile. "After what happened to me yesterday, I don't think I would miss a micro-expression, Father. I was watching Alpha Cian closely. He was indeed callous and cold, but she wasn't maltreated."

Mother leaned back in her chair, her expression smug. "Considering she never called any of us to apologize for her sins, I would say she's doing alright."

The words hung in the air. Father flinched.

"Maybe I should call her," he said.

My stomach turned over. I gripped the edge of the table, my nails digging into the wood.

No. No, no, no.

He looked like he has actually been made of steel the days before. How quickly that had changed.

And it hurt.

Because... despite everything I'd done, despite every move I'd made to alienate Fia, to turn Father against her, to make him see her for the threat she was, he still cared. He was that weak. That pathetically, stubbornly soft when it came to her.

Even blocking her wasn't going to do much if she was a constant in his mind.

Mother must have seen the look on my face because she jumped in before I could say anything.

"You shouldn't do that," she said. Her voice was firm, leaving no room for argument. "I would be so disappointed if you're the first to break."

Father frowned. "Break? What are you talking about?"

"This is clearly a game for her as well," Mother said. She leaned forward, her eyes locked on Father's. "She wants you to call first because it would mean she wouldn't have to beg as much. You're that willing to forgive her. Don't you see? She's manipulating you."

"Isobel—"

"Let Fia be the one to call first," Mother said. "If she's truly sorry, if she truly wants forgiveness, then she'll reach out. But if you call her first, you're just proving that she can do whatever she wants and you'll always come running."

Father hesitated. His jaw worked like he was chewing on the words, trying to decide if they tasted right.

Finally, he nodded. "I guess you're right."

But the doubt didn't leave his face. He looked back down at his plate, his fork idle in his hand.

"Still," he said quietly. "It doesn't sound like Fia to be this way."

Mother's expression hardened. "She stole Hazel's mate, Joseph. There's nothing we shouldn't put past her."

The silence that followed felt heavier than before. Father didn't argue. He just sat there, looking lost.

Then he turned to me again. His expression softened, that same gentle look he always gave me when he thought I needed comfort.

"It's great you're nothing like your mother," he said. "You are not vindictive."

Mother's eyes flashed, but she didn't say anything.

"I know that Fia has wronged you," Father continued. "But I will make it right. I've been getting requests for a marriage alliance from good packs. Strong packs. We'll find you someone worthy, Hazel. Someone who—"

"I don't want an arranged marriage anymore, Father."

The words came out before I could stop them. It was sharp and final.

Father blinked, startled. "What?"

I set my fork down and met his gaze. "The one I did agree to has left a sour taste in my mouth. I'm also still reeling with being sexually assaulted by a sentinel of this pack."

My voice cracked on the last part. I let it. I made myself sound small, broken, pitiful. I even let my eyes water a little.

"I just want love to find me when it wishes," I said softly.

Father's face crumpled. "Hazel, I—"

His phone rang.

The sound cut through the moment like a blade. Father fumbled for it, pulling it from his pocket and glancing at the screen.

"Unknown number," he muttered.

He answered it anyway. "Hello?"

I watched his face change. First confusion, then shock, then something that looked almost like fear.

"Fia," he said.

My blood went cold.

Mother's eyes snapped to Father, her expression sharp and alert.

"How are you?" Father asked. There was a pause. "How have you been?"

I couldn't hear Fia's voice, but I could see the effect it had on Father. His hand tightened around the phone. His face went pale.

"You didn't call," I finally heard her shaky voice speak.

There was a pause from father. Before he finally spoke.

"I wanted to give you space."

Mother's jaw clenched. Fia said something but I didn't quite catch it. Which made father get on the defensive side.

"Fia, let's not talk about that," Father said. His voice was strained now, almost pleading. "You stole your sister's marriage. You almost put this pack in jeopardy."

I felt a surge of satisfaction. Good. Say it. Make her hear it.

Mother stood abruptly. She crossed to Father's side in three quick strides and leaned in close, whispering something I couldn't hear to the next thing that Fia said.

Father's expression twisted. "I thought I knew you, Fia. But how do I analyze this without seeing what you did?"

There was a pause. I felt my heart start to this loudly.

"What matters is it worked out in the end," Father finally said.

Then a taut silence followed.

It was almost like that was the end.

But Fia's voice came through strong this time and I caught it. Her voice was faint but clear enough for me to hear.

"One day you'll see them both for what they are. And I hope I still have it in me to forgive you, Father."

My heart stopped.

Father's face went white. "But you never called—"

Mother snatched the phone from his hand and ended the call.

"Enough of that," she said sharply.

"Isobel!" Father stood, his chair scraping against the floor. "What the hell was that? She sounded—"

"Like she was playing games again," Mother said. She set the phone down on the table, her expression cold and unyielding.

"No," Father said. He shook his head, his hands trembling. "No, something's wrong. She used a strange number. Maybe her phone's been seized. Maybe she's being tortured or—"

I couldn't take it anymore.

I slammed my hands down on the table. The sound echoed through the room, loud enough to make both of them freeze.

"That's enough, Father!"

My voice came out raw, ragged. I stood, my chair nearly tipping over behind me.

"Nothing is up with Fia," I said. "And you refuse to let it go."

"Hazel—"

"After everything that happened, I have had to become the bigger person," I said. My voice shook, but I didn't care. I let it shake. I let the tears well up in my eyes and spill over. "For you. For Mother. For the pack. And even for her. I am her big sister after all."

I wiped at my face with the back of my hand and let the tears fall freely now.

"But it's still Fia," I said. "It is always Fia. I have a scandal over my head. I'm the one whose sister stole her life. I'm the one who almost got assaulted. Fia is currently a powerful Luna of an equally powerful pack. She took a gamble and it worked in her favor."

My voice cracked again. I let it.

"But I have nothing," I whispered. "What would it take for you to look in my direction for once?"

Father's face crumpled. "Hazel, Baby that's not—"

"Look what you've done, Joseph," Mother said. Her voice was sharp, cutting. "You've shown your partiality again."

I didn't wait for Father to respond. I turned and walked away, my footsteps quick and heavy against the floor.

Behind me, I heard Father call my name. I didn't reply and I only walked faster.

Then slowly, a smile crept up my mouth because I realized that he was following.

Chapter 55: A Moment Between Enemies

FIA

The sentinel at the door looked me up and down, then quickly averted his gaze.

My stomach twisted. Was it that bad? I pulled the robe tighter around myself, suddenly very aware of how little the nightgown covered. The fabric felt thinner than it had in my room, and the hallway seemed colder.

"I'm here to see Cian," I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

The sentinel nodded without meeting my eyes. He reached for the door and pushed it open. "You can go in."

"Thank you," I murmured, but he'd already looked away again.

I stepped inside and heard the door click shut behind me. The lounge area stretched before me, all dark wood and leather furniture. Everything was meticulously arranged. Not a cushion out of place. Not a single object that didn't serve a purpose.

It was exactly what I'd expected from Cian.

I moved through the lounge toward what I assumed was the bedroom. My bare feet made no sound on the thick carpet. The robe swished around my thighs with each step.

The bedroom door was open. I walked through and stopped.

The space was bigger than mine. Much bigger. The furniture was the same dark wood as the lounge, heavy and masculine. A massive bed dominated the center of the room, covered in deep gray linens. Bookshelves lined one wall, filled with leather-bound volumes arranged by size. A desk sat near the window, papers stacked in neat piles.

His scent hit me then. Pine and something darker, earthier. It filled the room like it belonged there. Like it had seeped into the walls and furniture until everything carried traces of him.

I took another step inside, taking in the details. The curtains were drawn but not completely closed. Moonlight filtered through the gap, casting silver lines across the floor. A sword hung on the wall above the desk. The blade caught the light and gleamed.

Everything about this room was controlled. Ordered. Like he couldn't stand the idea of chaos in his personal space.

A door opened somewhere to my right.

I turned.

And froze.

Cian stood in the doorway of what had to be the bathroom. Water dripped from his hair and ran in rivulets down his chest. His skin was still flushed from heat. A white towel hung low on his hips, tied loosely at his v line where muscle carved deep shadows.

My eyes betrayed me. They traced down from his face to his shoulders to his chest. Water beaded on his skin and caught the overhead light. His stomach was full of hard lines and definition and that towel sat dangerously low.

Heat flooded my cheeks. I spun around so fast I nearly lost my balance.

"I'm so sorry," I said, the words tumbling out too fast. "The sentinel let me in. I didn't think you'd be naked."

There was silence at first. Then his voice, rough and low spoke. "It's fine."

My heart hammered against my ribs. I stared at the wall in front of me like it held all the answers to the universe.

"Give me a minute," he said.

"Of course. Yes. Take your time."

I heard him move. I heard his footsteps across the floor. The soft sound of fabric sliding against skin. Something dropped with a muffled thump. More movement followed and then I felt the rustle of clothing being pulled on.

It was a hurdle to stay in place. So I kept a mantra close to my heart.

Don't turn around. Don't you dare turn around.

I focused on breathing. In and out. Nice and steady. Like I wasn't standing in Cian's bedroom wearing a scandalous nightgown while he changed behind me.

"You can turn around now." He said, breaking the mess that was my thought process.

I hesitated then slowly turned.

He stood near the wardrobe wearing gray pajama bottoms. Just the bottoms. Nothing else. They hung low on his hips, sitting at that same dangerous v line that had been barely hidden by the towel.

Was that intentional? Did he know what he was doing?

My cheeks burned hotter. I forced my eyes to stay on his face and nowhere else.

"Sorry," I said again. "I should have knocked or made my presence known somehow."

"The sentinel should have waited for me to answer," Cian said. His jaw tightened. "It's not your fault."

My mind went immediately to the sentinel outside. Would Cian lash out at him for this? Would the man blame me? Golly. More hate directed my way because he'd dared to allow me enter when Cian was undressed?

I tried not to linger on the thought. There were more pressing things to worry about. Like being this close to Cian in a bedroom. Like concentrating on hating him even if he looked like that.

Even if he did have a very great body.

Stop it. Stop thinking about his body.

"Shut up," Cian said suddenly.

I blinked. Because it felt like he could read my lewd thoughts. "What?"

"Nothing." He ran a hand through his damp hair. "I was talking to myself."

That was odd. What could he possibly be wrestling with? I could peek into his emotions if I wanted to. Just a quick brush against his mental state to see what was going on inside his head.

But I didn't want to. Not when I was making such a conscious effort to shield my own emotions. I would rather die than let him know how affected I was by his presence. By the sight of him half naked and still dripping wet from his bath.

He gestured toward the bed. "You can take that side. I'll take the other."

I stared at the bed. Then at the lounge visible through the doorway. There was a perfectly comfortable ergonomic chair out there. Big enough for someone to sleep in if they tried.

I looked back at him. "We're really doing this?"

"You said you would," he said. "To put my mother's mind at ease."

I hated that I hadn't been more against the idea. I hated that I'd agreed so easily. Because now I was standing here in a babygirl nightgown that barely covered anything, and he was shirtless with those pants that left very little to the imagination.

I knew better than to look down. I was fairly certain he wasn't wearing briefs.

I walked to the bed slowly. Each step felt heavier than it should have been. When I reached my side, I climbed onto the mattress and moved to the very edge. As far from the center as I could get.

I turned onto my side so I faced the wall. If I couldn't see him, maybe this would be easier. Maybe I could pretend I was alone in my own room instead of sharing a bed with this man.

The mattress dipped behind me. He was getting in.

I went rigid. Every muscle in my body locked up. The sheets rustled as he settled himself. I could feel him there even though we weren't touching. The warmth of his body. The weight of his presence.

He shifted and adjusted his position.

Then he spoke.

"I didn't know your mother had the rot."

My hands clenched into fists under the covers. I kept my eyes on the wall.

"It's been a while," I said. "A long while. Plus, it was Hazel you were interested in, so why would you care about her half sister's mother?"

The words came out sharper than I'd intended. But I didn't take them back. They were true after all.

"When it was clear that it was terminal," Cian said, his voice quieter now, "did she suffer?"

Something twisted in my chest. My nails dug into my palms.

"When Silver Creek's medicine and healers weren't doing much for her, I delved deeper into healing myself," I said. "Plenty of what I learned came from my mother. Some I learned on my own."

I paused. Swallowed hard.

"But it wasn't enough. She suffered. To the bitter end."

Silence fell between us. Heavy and thick.

"I fear what it will be like when that time comes for my mother," Cian said.

The vulnerability in his voice caught me off guard. I turned over without thinking.

Our eyes met.

My breath caught. We were closer than I'd realized. Close enough that I could see the water still clinging to his eyelashes. Close enough to count the drops running down his temple.

I swallowed. "But your mother isn't terminal."

"She is."

My eyebrows furrowed. "Really? It looked like it was just onset stage."

"I give her the best," he said. "Perhaps that's why it feels like that. But she doesn't have long."

That didn't make sense. I'd seen his mother tonight. Yes, there were signs of the rot, but nothing that suggested she was near the end. Nothing that indicated she was beyond help.

But maybe he was right. Skollrend was much richer and bigger than Silver Creek. They had access to treatments and healers we could only dream of. With each passing year, new methods emerged. New ways to slow the rot's progression.

If his mother truly didn't have long despite all that, then the disease must have progressed further than it appeared.

"You should do your best to make use of the time she has left," I said. "So you don't regret it."

He just looked at me.

"There's no point in cooping her up," I continued. "If there's a place you two want to be or see or do, do it now. So you don't regret it when she's gone."

His expression shifted. Softened somehow. Like I'd said something he hadn't expected.

"Thank you," he said.

Those two words hung in the air between us. Simple but weighted with something I couldn't quite name.

I turned back to face the wall. My heart was still racing. The conversation had stirred up too many memories. Too many nights spent watching my mother waste away while I desperately tried everything I could think of to help her.

"Goodnight," I said.

I expected silence. Expected him to just roll over and ignore me like he usually did.

But he didn't.

"Goodnight," he said back.

His voice was soft and almost gentle.

I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the warmth spreading through my chest. Tried to ignore how strange it felt to hear him say that word to me. Like maybe, for just a moment, we weren't enemies forced together by circumstance.

Like maybe we were just two people sharing a bed and wishing each other well.

The thought terrified me more than anything else that had happened tonight.

Because I liked it.

Chapter 56: Girl Power!

HAZEL

I walked fast through the hallway, my footsteps echoing off the walls. My heart pounded in my chest, half from anger, half from the thrill of knowing Father was following me.

I heard him call my name again. "Hazel, wait!"

I didn't slow down. I pushed open my bedroom door and stepped inside, leaving it open just enough to read as an invitation.

He came in a moment later, his face creased with worry. His shoulders sagged like he was carrying something too heavy. Good.

"Hazel," he said softly. "Baby, please look at me."

I turned away from him, moving to the window. I wrapped my arms around myself, making myself look small and vulnerable. The moonlight caught on the glass and I could see his reflection behind mine.

"I don't know what to say anymore, Father," I said. My voice came out quiet, defeated. "I keep trying. I keep being the good daughter. But it's never enough."

"That's not true." He moved closer. I could feel him hovering behind me, uncertain. "Hazel, that's not true at all."

"Then why?" I turned to face him. The tears were still wet on my cheeks. "Why is it always about her? Why do you always look for reasons to defend her? To worry about her? To protect her?"

"Because she's still my daughter," Father said. His voice cracked on the words. "I know what she did was wrong. I know that. But Hazel, you have to understand. Her mother is dead. I am her only rock and what Cian Donlon said that day, in our own territory, standing right in front of me. He promised to torment her."

I watched him struggle with the words. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

"He said it like it was nothing," Father continued. "Like he was discussing the weather. And I'm her father. How am I supposed to react to that? How am I supposed to sleep knowing my daughter is with someone who openly admitted he wants to make her suffer?"

There it was. The guilt I'd been counting on. The weakness I knew was there.

I let my face soften just a little. "I understand that, Father. I do."

"I couldn't even go see her myself," he said. His voice dropped lower, almost ashamed. "Your mother was right about that. I am too emotional. If I'd gone to Skollrend, if I'd seen Fia and seen even a hint that she was being hurt, I would have done something stupid. Something that could have started a war. A war I am well aware I will lose."

I moved closer to him. Slowly. Like I was approaching something fragile that might break.

"Father," I said gently. "I was there. I saw her. And I'm telling you the truth. Alpha Cian wasn't kind, but he wasn't tormenting her. She had her own space. She wasn't being beaten or starved or tortured. She looked fine."

Father's eyes searched my face. He wanted so badly to believe me. I could see it written all over him.

"You're sure?" he asked.

"I'm sure," I said. I reached out and took his hand, squeezing it. "I wouldn't lie to you about something like that. You know I wouldn't."

His shoulders relaxed slightly. "I believe you."

The relief in his voice was almost pathetic. But I didn't let that show on my face. Instead, I looked down at our joined hands and felt the tears well up again.

"What happened to you," Father said suddenly. His free hand came up to cup my cheek. "What Milo did. Hazel, you have to know that wasn't your fault and I do not blame you if that is what it feels like."

The words hit me harder than I expected. Not because they meant anything, but because I could use them.

"It doesn't feel that way," I whispered. I let my voice shake. "It feels like I'm being punished for something. Like the universe decided I deserved this somehow."

"No," Father said firmly. "Absolutely not. Don't you ever think that."

"But I do," I said. The tears spilled over again. "I'm your daughter. I should be strong. Instead I'm here, and I feel like I am being told that I am now damaged. It feels humiliating, because everyone knows it. Why else would you prevent me from going to Alpha Julius's wedding?"

Father pulled me into his arms. I let myself sink into the embrace, pressing my face against his chest.

"I know the wedding is coming up," he said quietly. "And honestly, if it was up to me, even your mother and myself wouldn't go at all."

Fuck! I stiffened in his arms. This wasn't what I wanted to hear.

"But," Father continued, "we got that invitation because of our new affiliation with Skollrend. It's catapulted us into a different level of pack politics. To skip the very first major formal event we're invited to would be seen as disrespectful. It would undo everything we've gained apparently."

I pulled back slightly to look at him. "So why am I not being involved? I am your daughter. Your legitimate daughter."

"I know," Father said. He looked pained. "But Hazel, you know how werewolf society can be. What Fia did is still a scandal hanging over Silver Creek. And your assault doesn't help either."

The words stung. Not because they hurt my feelings, but because they were threatening my plan.

"I can take the biting remarks," Father said. "I've been in this shit long enough. But you, sweetheart, you're still recovering. I don't want to put you in a position where you have to face all those people, all those whispers and judgments."

I could feel my opportunity slipping away. I needed to be at that wedding. I needed to see cement myself in their minds.

I wiped my eyes and straightened my spine. When I spoke, I made sure my voice came out strong. Determined.

"I'm not ashamed," I said. "And I won't be shamed for surviving what happened to me."

Father's expression shifted to surprise.

"Those people can whisper all they want," I continued. "They can judge and gossip and say whatever makes them feel superior. But I won't give Milo that power over me. I won't let what he did dictate how I live my life or where I go or who I face."

I took Father's hand again, holding it tight between both of mine.

"Don't take away my power too," I said. I looked up at him, letting my eyes fill with fresh tears. I tried not to let them be sad tears this time. I managed defiant ones. "Everyone else might try to make me small. To make me hide. To make me feel like I'm the one who did something wrong. Please don't be another person who does that to me."

Father's face crumpled. His eyes got wet and he pulled me close again, this time fiercer. More protective.

"How could I say no to that?" His voice was rough with emotion. "You're right. You're absolutely right."

I felt a surge of victory but I kept it off my face. I just held onto him, letting him think he was comforting me.

"If you want to come with us to the wedding," Father said, "then that's what we'll do. You shouldn't have to hide. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Thank you," I whispered against his chest.

We stood there for a long moment. His hand stroked my hair and I could feel his heartbeat against my cheek. Strong, steady and completely convinced that he was doing the right thing.

Finally, he pulled back and looked down at me. His eyes were still wet but he was smiling. That soft, proud smile he used to give me when I was little and did something easy that impressed him.

"You're stronger than I gave you credit for," he said. "I'm sorry if I made you feel like you weren't important. Like you weren't my priority. That was never my intention."

"I know," I said. I gave him a small smile back. "I know you love us both. I just needed to hear that you see me too."

"I do see you," Father said. "And I'm proud of you. For surviving. For standing up for yourself. For not letting this break you."

The words should have meant something. Maybe to a different daughter they would have. Fia would have definitely enjoyed this.

But all I felt was satisfaction.

I had what I wanted. I was going to that wedding.

Father kissed my forehead and told me to get some rest. He said tomorrow we'd start preparing, that he'd make sure I had everything I needed. A new dress if I wanted one. Whatever would make me feel confident and strong.

I thanked him and watched him leave, closing the door softly behind him.

The moment I was alone, the tears stopped. Just like that. I walked to my mirror and looked at my reflection. My eyes were still red and puffy, my cheeks blotchy. I looked like I'd been through an ordeal.

It looked so good that I couldn't help but smile at myself. A real smile this time.

Chapter 57: Dream a little Dream of me (M)

FIA

The quiet stretched long after he spoke. It filled every corner of the room, heavy and alive. The sound of his breathing, steady and calm, became the only thing I could hear apart from my own heartbeat. It should have made me uneasy, knowing he was right behind me, but instead, it began to settle something restless inside me.

The tension in my shoulders eased little by little. I adjusted my position, tucking the edge of the blanket tighter beneath my chin. The sheets were warm from his body heat, the faint scent of pine stronger now that we shared the same air. My eyelids grew heavier, though I fought the pull of sleep for a while, unwilling to give in. It felt too strange, too intimate.

I told myself not to relax. That this meant nothing. That I couldn't afford to let my guard down, not with him. But the warmth was coaxing. The silence felt safer than it should have, and the exhaustion I'd been holding off all evening finally started to creep through.

I breathed in slowly, then out, listening to the rhythm of his breathing sync with mine. My body began to loosen its hold on wakefulness. My mind drifted, tracing half-formed thoughts.

I thought about my mother again. The smell of herbs and the sound of her voice whispering remedies under her breath. The nights I stayed awake just to make sure she was still breathing. The way the rot had crept across her skin like frost, quiet and merciless.

I had watched her fade, piece by piece, and now someone else's son was about to do the same.

"Cian," I said softly, though I wasn't sure why. My voice was half swallowed by the pillow.

"Hm?"

The hum of his reply vibrated through the space between us.

I hesitated. There were so many things I could have said. Questions I wanted to ask, accusations I could have thrown. But all that came out was a quiet, "Your mother's lucky to have you."

For a long moment, there was nothing. Then, just as my mind began to slip into the edge of dreaming, he said, "I'm not so sure about that."

The weight in his tone pressed against me, thick with something unspoken. Guilt, maybe. Or grief. I wanted to turn over, to look at him, but my body was too heavy now. My breathing was too slow.

"Don't say that," I murmured, not sure if I was still awake.

He didn't answer. I thought I heard him shift, like he wanted to respond but changed his mind.

The silence came back, softer this time. It settled around us like a blanket. My thoughts wandered somewhere far away, slipping between past and present, between memory and the faint awareness of his presence.

His scent stayed close. The quiet sound of his breathing steadied me in a way I couldn't explain. It had been a long time since I'd felt this calm. Even if the reason behind it was wrong.

The edge of sleep blurred everything. The room, the tension, the bitterness.

At some point, I thought I felt the mattress move again. A faint dip near my back, careful and hesitant. His hand didn't touch me, but it hovered there. I could feel the warmth of it, close enough to know he was reaching, far enough that he could pull away without it counting as a mistake.

It lingered there for a few seconds before retreating.

I wasn't sure if I'd imagined it.

The darkness pressed closer. My thoughts tangled into one long thread that stretched between us, thin and quiet.

Maybe it was easier to believe he wasn't as cold as I'd thought. That beneath the command and the discipline and the sharp edges, there was someone who feared losing his mother the same way I'd lost mine.

That maybe he wasn't the monster I wanted him to be.

Sleep caught me before I could think any further.

In the last sliver of awareness, I heard him shift again. A low sigh escaped him, something tired and human.

Then his voice, faint but clear, came through the quiet.

"Goodnight, Fia."

It was softer than before, almost like he didn't mean for me to hear it.

My body relaxed fully at last, my thoughts slipping away into dreams. The tension drained from my chest, replaced by a strange, fragile warmth.

If I had been awake enough to notice, I might have realized that the distance between us had shrunk. That the empty space on the bed wasn't quite so wide anymore.

But by then, I was already gone, adrift in sleep, the scent of pine and rain clinging to the very dream that followed.

The dream opened around me like warm fog, thick and sweet, every edge softened until I could not tell where the real world ended. I felt the bed beneath me, the scent of pine still clinging to my lungs, but the room had shifted. The quiet I had fallen asleep to melted into something charged. My body was heavy, relaxed, ready for something I did not name out loud.

I heard his voice behind me. Low. Certain. It moved through the dimness and curled around my spine.

"Fia. Get on your knees."

My breath caught, a soft hitch that felt hotter than it should have. The command slipped straight through me, easy as breathing. I pushed up, the blanket sliding away from my shoulders, and I knelt on the mattress. The air felt cooler on my skin, enough to make a shiver roll down my arms. I did not turn around. I didn't need to. I felt him there. Felt the weight of his attention settle on me like a hand.

My thighs trembled when his fingers brushed my jaw. Light. Testing. I leaned into it before I could stop myself.

"You listen so well," he said, and the praise hit me low, a pulse that spread warmth through my belly.

He hooked two fingers beneath my chin and tilted my face up. His thumb traced my bottom lip, slow enough that my pulse tried to chase it. When he slipped those fingers into my mouth I closed my lips around them without thinking. I sucked gently, my tongue running along the pads of his fingers. A low sound rumbled from his chest, quiet but full.

"Open wider," he murmured.

I parted my lips more, taking him deeper. He pushed until my mouth stretched around his knuckles. Heat flooded my cheeks and I let out a soft, muffled "mmf," breath mixing with the taste of him. He pulled his fingers free, slick with my saliva, and traced that wetness along my cheek before guiding my head forward.

"Kneel lower."

I sank down obediently, spine bending, palms pressing into the mattress. My mouth was level with the hard line of him beneath his clothes. He unfastened them slowly, like he wanted me to feel every second of his patience. When he pushed them down enough to free himself, the air filled with the warm scent of his skin.

"Take it," he said.

I wrapped my fingers around the base of his cock. My breath trembled. The first brush of my lips against the head sent a jolt straight through me. I licked along the underside, slow, tasting salt and heat. A quiet groan escaped him, deep and rough.

"Good girl. More."

I opened my mouth and slid down over him. My lips stretched, my jaw protesting just enough to feel delicious. I took him deeper, inch by inch, until the tip brushed the back of my throat. My breath hitched again. I swallowed around him and heard him suck in air.

He put his hand on the back of my head. Firm. Guiding. I let him pull me closer. My throat tightened and I let out a choked "gghh," the kind that vibrated around him. He loosened his grip for a moment, then pushed me down again, steady and unhurried.

"That's it. Let me in."

I bobbed my head, hollowing my cheeks, taking him deeper with each motion. His hand tightened in my hair. He began to guide my pace, slow at first, then faster. My eyes watered a little, tears pricking at the corners as he thrust into my mouth. My nails curled into the sheets and I let him use me, my breath coming in needy bursts around the rhythm he set.

My throat opened for him. I felt every inch of him. Felt how his hips jerked slightly when I swallowed hard around the thickest part.

"Fia, look at me."

I lifted my eyes, letting him see the mess he made of me. My lips were slick, my chin wet, my breath uneven. He groaned softly when our eyes met.

"You're beautiful like this."

He pulled out slowly, his cock sliding free with a wet sound that made heat pool between my thighs. I gasped for air, chest rising quickly. He brushed his thumb across my mouth again, smearing the wetness there, then dragged the thumb down my throat.

"Lie back."

I climbed up onto the pillows, heart racing. The dream room felt warmer, darker. My legs parted without him asking. My skin tingled as he settled between them, his weight dipping the mattress. He ran his palm up my thigh, slow and deliberate. I felt my breath stutter again when he reached the soft heat between my legs.

He pressed his fingers into me, sliding through the wetness there. My hips lifted toward his touch.

"So ready," he whispered.

He teased me with two fingers, circling, dipping, never quite giving me enough. I whimpered, a soft "ahh, please," slipping out before I had the sense to bite it back. His smile felt like it burned.

"You beg so sweet."

He pushed one finger inside me. My breath caught. My walls clenched around him instantly. He curled the finger, hitting a spot that made a sharp gasp escape my throat.

"More," I whispered.

He gave me another finger. The stretch made me moan louder. "Nnn, Cian, please." He pumped them inside me, steady, slow, savoring every sound I made. The wet sounds filled the room, slick and obscene.

When he pulled his fingers out I felt cold for a heartbeat. Then he pushed my knees wider and positioned himself at my entrance. The head of his cock brushed against me, hot and slick. I sucked in a breath, ready, needy.

"Look at me," he said again, voice lower.

I lifted my gaze. His eyes were dark. Focused and so goddamn hungry.

He pushed into me in a long, deep thrust. My mouth fell open, a sharp "ohh, fuck," spilling out. My walls tightened around him, the stretch overwhelming me in the best way. He groaned softly when he bottomed out, his hips flush against mine.

He stayed still for a moment, letting me feel every inch of him. Letting me adjust. Letting the heat coil tighter in my belly.

"You feel perfect," he whispered.

He pulled back, slow, then drove into me again. The force of it rocked me. I grabbed the sheets, knuckles white, as he set a steady rhythm. Each thrust melted thought after thought out of my head. My moans spilled out freely.

"Ahh, Cian, harder."

He gave me exactly what I asked for. His pace quickened. His thrusts hit deep. The sound of our bodies meeting filled the room. My legs shook. My back arched off the

bed. He held my hips to keep me from sliding away from him, his grip tight enough to bruise.

"Take it," he growled.

I did. I wanted every inch. Wanted the heat building in my core.

Every thrust sent sparks through me. The coil inside me tightened fast. My breath turned into broken gasps. "I'm close," I panted.

He leaned over me, his lips brushing my ear. "Come for me."

The word dropped into me like a match. My climax hit hard. My body tensed, then shook. A loud cry tore out of my throat. "Ohh, Goddess." My walls clenched around him again and again. I felt him thrust through it, chasing his own release while my orgasm crashed over me in waves.

He groaned and pushed deep. His body shuddered. I felt the hot pulse of him filling me. His breath fanned across my neck, ragged and warm.

He stayed inside me, our bodies pressed together, our breath mixing. I felt every beat of his heart against my chest, steady but fast.

The dream softened around the edges again. My body melted beneath his weight. His hand slid up my thigh with a gentleness that made my eyelids grow heavy.

Before everything faded I heard him murmur one last thing, voice soft against my skin.

"My Fia."

I jerked awake.

My eyes flew open and my breath came fast. I tried to push myself up but strong arms wrapped tight around me from behind. A chest pressed into my back. A hand held my ribs as if trying to keep me from slipping away.

For a moment I could not think. The sex dream still clung to me, hot and confusing. My heart would also not slow down.

I turned my head a little and saw dark curls against my shoulder. It was Cian and he holding me like I was his personal teddy bear.

My thoughts scrambled as shock burned through me.

What in the hell was going on?

Chapter 58: The Grudge

CIAN

I lay there staring at the ceiling. Sleep should have come easy. I was tired enough. But my mind would not shut up.

The room was dark now except for the thin line of moonlight that crept through the curtain. I could hear Fia breathing beside me. Soft. Even. She had fallen asleep quickly once the tension finally drained out of her.

I turned my head slightly and looked at her outline in the darkness. She was curled on her side, facing away from me. The blanket had slipped down her shoulder. I reached over and pulled it back up without thinking.

My hand hovered there for a second longer than it should have. Then I pulled it back and let it fall against the mattress.

I closed my eyes and tried to find sleep again. It did not work.

My thoughts circled back to the same thing. The marriage. The arrangement. The fact that I had bound her to me without giving her a real choice despite the growing chance that perhaps she wasn't the villain in this story.

I exhaled slowly through my nose and turned onto my back again.

"You know why I believe I'm such a piece of shit of a person?" I said quietly.

My voice sounded louder than I meant it to in the silence. I did not expect her to answer. Part of me hoped she was still asleep.

"Even if your sister is this vile monster and was the mastermind behind us getting married, I cannot let you go." The words came out before I could stop them. "And it's not because of love."

I paused. My throat felt tight.

"It's because I'm selfish."

I turned my head toward her again. She did not move. Her breathing stayed steady.

"Especially now that it's clear you make my mother happy." I swallowed hard. "I'll only hold on to you tighter."

The admission sat heavy in my chest. I knew what kind of man that made me. I knew it was not fair to her.

"And I know it's not fair," I said, quieter now.

I sighed and dragged a hand down my face.

"But I promise you, I will make it up to you somehow. Skollrend will owe you for a lifetime."

The silence stretched. I waited for something. A sound. A shift. Anything to tell me she had heard.

Nothing came.

I leaned forward slightly and looked at her face. Her eyes were closed. Her lips were parted just enough to let out those soft breaths. She was completely asleep.

A quiet laugh escaped me. It was more air than sound.

I reached over and fixed the blanket again, tucking it around her shoulders properly this time. Then I leaned back against the headboard.

"My promise still stands," I whispered. "Whether you heard it or not."

My wolf stirred in the back of my mind. Its voice came through low and irritated.

Just because you say it enough doesn't mean you'll believe it.

I ignored it and stared at the ceiling again.

This bond was blessed by the goddess, it continued. You can deny it all you want. That doesn't change what it is.

I clenched my jaw.

"Shut up," I muttered under my breath.

My wolf huffed but went quiet.

I sat there for another moment before I pushed myself off the bed. My feet hit the cold floor and I walked across the room toward the dresser. My hand reached for the second drawer on the right. I pulled it open slowly, careful not to make too much noise.

Inside was a picture frame turned face down.

I stared at it for a few seconds before I picked it up and turned it over.

Even in the dim light, the photo looked back at me. It was me, younger by a few years. My hair was shorter. My face less worn. And next to me was a beautiful blonde woman with bright eyes and a smile that could light up a room.

She was looking at me in the photo. Not at the camera. At me. Like I was the only thing that mattered. Once upon a time, I was.

I felt my chest tighten. I couldn't even say her name.

"I swore off love," I said quietly to the picture. "Nothing will change that."

She moved on a long time ago, my wolf said. Why won't you?

I turned the picture back around and placed it face down in the drawer again. Then I shut it harder than I needed to.

"Me not wanting to hand over my heart to the next warm body has nothing to do with her," I said through my teeth.

Then what do you think it is?

"Skollrend needs a leader that is unshakable." I pressed my palms flat against the top of the dresser. "My claim to the pack is still dissented over by a few of my father's family. I can't afford distractions."

My wolf did not respond. It knew better than to push me when I got like this.

I stood there for a moment longer before the pressure in my head started to build. A dull ache spread from the base of my skull up to my temples.

I rubbed the back of my neck and walked back toward the bed.

Fia was still asleep. She had shifted slightly. One arm was tucked under her pillow now.

I looked at her one last time before I climbed back onto the mattress. I turned onto my side facing the wall and closed my eyes.

The ache in my head started to fade. My breathing slowed. The exhaustion finally began to creep in.

Then I heard it.

A whisper. It was soft if anything and right against my ear.

"But you can have me here."

My eyes snapped open.

The room was gone.

I was sitting in a chair. My wrists were bound to the armrests with thick ropes. My ankles were tied to the legs. I pulled against them instinctively but they did not budge.

"What the fuck?"

The air felt different. It was warmer. And it has a familiar musk. That scent... That sweet scent was stronger now. Almost overwhelming in a good way.

I looked up and saw her.

Fia.

She walked toward me slowly. Her hips swayed with each step. She was still wearing that babygirl nightdress. The fabric was thin. It clung to her body in all the right places. The hem stopped high on her thighs.

My mouth went dry.

She stopped in front of me and placed her right knee on my crotch. The pressure sent a jolt through me. My body reacted before my brain could catch up.

"What the fuck is happening?" I said.

She smiled. It was slow. Teasing.

"You're dreaming, silly."

I blinked hard. My thoughts scrambled to keep up.

"I know that," I said. "But why would I be dreaming about you?"

She leaned forward and slid her hand behind my head. Her fingers tangled in my hair. Then she jerked my head forward hard enough to make my pulse spike.

Her tongue ran along my cheek. It was slow and deliberate enough that it almost counted as sexy.

Heat flooded through me and I hated my body for responding.

"It's your dream," she whispered against my skin. *"You know damn well."*

My breath came faster. I tried to pull back but the ropes held me in place. She kept her knee pressed against me. The friction made my hips shift without meaning to.

"Fia," I said. My voice came out rougher than I wanted.

She pulled back just enough to look at me. Her eyes were dark and hungry.

"What's wrong?" she asked. Her lips curled into a smirk. *"You don't want this?"*

My jaw tightened. My body was screaming yes. But my mind was trying to catch up to what was happening.

"This is fucked up," I muttered.

She laughed softly. The sound was low and sent another wave of heat straight through me.

"You're the one dreaming it," she said.

She leaned in again. Her lips brushed against my ear.

"So maybe you should stop lying to yourself."

Her hand drifted from my hair to my bare chest. Her fingers traced along my skin in a slow, lazy stroke that made my breath catch. She pressed her knee firmer between my legs and the sound that left me was low and raw, pulled out of me before I could hold it back.

"Fuck," I breathed.

She smiled against my neck.

"That's more like it."

Her other hand joined the first. She dragged her nails lightly down my chest. The sensation made my skin prickle. My breathing turned shallow.

She pulled back and looked at me again. Her eyes searched mine.

"You can't control everything, Cian," she said softly.

The words hit harder than they should have.

I stared at her. My chest rose and fell quickly. The ropes bit into my wrists. My body was wound tight. Every nerve was on fire.

She leaned forward one more time. Her lips hovered just above mine.

"So stop trying."

Then she kissed me.

It was not soft. It was not gentle. It was all heat and need and everything I had been trying to keep locked away.

I kissed her back without thinking. My mouth moved against hers. My tongue met hers. I pulled against the ropes again but this time it was not to get away.

It was to get closer.

She pulled back suddenly and I let out a frustrated sound.

"Patience," she whispered.

Her hands moved lower. Her fingers traced the waistband of my pajama bottoms. My hips bucked up toward her touch.

"Fia," I said again. My voice was barely more than a growl.

She smiled.

"I like hearing you say my name like that."

Her hand pressed against me through the fabric. The pressure made my head fall back against the chair. A groan escaped my throat.

"Fuck, Fia."

She leaned in close again. Her breath was hot against my ear.

"Wake up, Cian."

My eyes flew open.

I was staring at the ceiling again. My breathing was ragged. My heart was pounding. I could feel the sweat on my skin.

I turned my head and looked at Fia.

She was still asleep. Still curled on her side. Completely unaware.

I dragged a hand down my face and let out a shaky breath.

"What the hell," I muttered.

My wolf was quiet. For once it had nothing to say.

I lay there for a long time. My body was still wound tight. My thoughts were a mess.

Eventually I turned onto my side facing the wall again. I closed my eyes and tried to push the dream out of my head.

It did not work.

Her voice stayed with me. Her touch stayed with me.

And deep down I knew my wolf was right.

I was lying to myself.

Chapter 59: The Girl in the hidden frame

FIA

I stayed frozen in his arms, my mind spinning with what the hell I should do. Moving seemed like the right answer, but the second I did, he'd wake up. And then what? We'd both lie there pretending this never happened while the awkwardness pressed down on us like a lead weight? Or worse, he'd realize how close we were and think I'd been the one to curl into him.

My eyes fixed on the wall across from me, where moonlight stretched pale and silver against the dark green paint. I watched it for what felt like forever, tracking the slow shift as the light thinned and the color of the room changed. The deep shadows softened. The green turned less hostile. Morning was crawling closer, and I needed to get out of this position before he woke up and made things unbearable.

I shifted my weight carefully, barely breathing. His arm was heavy around my ribs, his hand splayed across my stomach like he'd grabbed hold in his sleep and forgotten to let go. I eased forward, inch by inch, until I felt the grip loosen. My heart beat faster as I slid free, relief flooding through me.

Then his arm shot out and pulled me back.

I gasped softly as he dragged me closer, tighter than before. Now I wasn't just pressed against him. I was right in his face. Our noses nearly touched. His breath warmed my lips with every exhale. My own breath hitched, shallow and unsteady, and I couldn't move without our mouths brushing.

He shifted again, his face dipping until his nose pressed into my hair. A low, sleepy sound rumbled from his throat.

"You smell nice," he murmured.

My heart slammed against my ribs so hard I thought he'd feel it. I stared at him, wide-eyed, my pulse roaring in my ears. He didn't open his eyes. His face stayed relaxed, peaceful, like he had no idea what he'd just done to me.

This was the first time I'd really looked at him without anger or bitterness clouding my vision. Without the need to turn him into something I could hate. It also help that he was scowling at me with those intense eyes. His dark hair fell across his forehead in messy curls, soft and almost boyish. His face had sharp lines, a strong jaw, but there was something gentler about him like this. Unguarded.

My gaze traced the slope of his nose, the kind you'd see on old statues, perfectly straight and somehow elegant. Then my eyes dropped to his mouth. His lips were parted slightly, the lower one fuller than the top. They looked soft. Warm.

The dream crashed back into my mind without warning. The heat of it. The way his voice had sounded when he told me to open wider. The way I'd felt when he pushed into me, deep and steady and overwhelming.

I swallowed hard, my throat tight. Was he really like that? Commanding, confident and hungry? Or was that just my mind inventing things I had no business imagining?

My hand moved before I could stop it. My fingers reached out, hovering over his mouth, then brushed against his lips. Just barely. Just enough to feel how soft they were.

His eyes snapped open.

I shrieked and shoved him hard. He rolled backward, his body tipping toward the edge of the bed, and he caught himself at the last second. He sat up, one hand braced on the mattress, his hair disheveled and his eyes sharp with confusion.

"What the hell?" he said, his voice rough with sleep.

My mind went blank. He'd seen me. He'd woken up to me touching his lips like some kind of creep. Heat flooded my face and I scrambled to sit up, words tumbling out in a mess.

"You hugged me first!"

He blinked at me, still half-awake. "You were the one in my face. Assaulting my lips with your fingers." His eyes narrowed slightly, though there was no real anger in them. Just disbelief. "What were you going to do if I didn't wake up?"

I stood up fast, my legs shaky, and I crossed my arms over my chest like that would somehow protect me from how stupid I felt. "You hugged me twice," I shot back. "You said I smelled nice. I was just..."

I stopped. The next words caught in my throat because there was no way to finish that sentence without sounding even weirder. I glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand. The red numbers glowed back at me. Five in the morning.

"It's morning," I said quickly. "I should go."

I turned toward the door, desperate to escape before this got worse.

"No."

I froze. His voice was firm, not angry, just certain. I looked back at him. He was standing now, his pajama bottoms were wrinkled and his hair still a mess. He crossed the space between us in a few strides, stopping just close enough that I had to tilt my head up to meet his eyes.

"It'll be odd if you leave at this time," he said. "It'll look like we fought or something."

I opened my mouth to argue but he kept going.

"All is forgiven. Just stay."

I stared at him, my heart still hammering. I wanted to say no. I wanted to get out of this room and away from him before my brain short-circuited completely. But then he added, quieter, "I'll stay in the lounge if it makes you more comfortable."

How could I say no to that?

I hesitated, my hands twisting together. "I didn't mean to be weird," I said finally, my voice smaller than I wanted it to be. "You really did snuggle with me and I... I wanted to wake you up. When you suddenly roused, it scared me."

It sounded lame even as I said it. But I hoped he'd just accept it and spare me the embarrassment of trying to explain what I'd actually been thinking.

He looked at me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he nodded. "Yeah. Sure."

Oh, he didn't buy a fucking word.

He grabbed a pillow from the bed and walked toward the lounge area without another word. I stood there, watching him go, and whispered to myself, "He's going to think you're weird. You're not going to get out of this easily."

I paced the room, trying to calm my racing thoughts. I needed a distraction. Something to stop my brain from replaying that stupid moment over and over. I glanced around the room properly for the first time, taking in the space I'd been too tense to notice earlier.

The bed was massive, the sheets a soft grey that looked expensive. The walls were dark green, rich and deep, the kind of color that made the room feel like a forest at dusk. One entire wall was lined with bookshelves, packed tight with spines of every size and color.

I walked over to the shelves, running my finger along the titles. The Art of War sat next to a thick volume on werewolf politics. There were histories, strategy guides, books on leadership and warfare. Nothing light. Nothing for pleasure. It felt like the library of someone who never stopped preparing for the next fight.

Then my eyes caught on something else. A row of picture frames sitting on top of a wooden drawer near the shelves. I moved closer, drawn in by the faces staring back at me.

The first one showed Cian as a child. He couldn't have been more than seven or eight, his hair just as messy then as it was now. His mother stood beside him, her hand on his shoulder, her smile warm and proud. And next to her was a man. Tall. Broad-shouldered. With the same sharp jawline and straight nose as Cian.

His late father.

I picked up the frame carefully, studying the three of them together. They looked happy. Whole. The kind of family portrait you'd expect to see in any home.

I set it down and looked at the others. Four more frames, all with his mother in them. In one, she was laughing, her head tipped back, joy lighting up her face. In another, she stood with Cian at what looked like a ceremony, his hand holding hers tightly. The third one showed her alone, sitting in a garden, the sunlight soft on her features.

Only one of the four had his father in it. The same one I'd just looked at. It was clear which parent Cian cherished more.

I set the last frame down and started to turn away, but something metallic caught my eye. A drawer wasn't fully closed. A sliver of space showed between the top and the frame, and something shiny reflected the dim light filtering into the room.

I hesitated, my hand hovering over the drawer. Then I pulled it open.

Another picture frame lay inside, facedown. I picked it up and turned it over.

Cian stared back at me, older than in the other photos but still younger than he was now. Maybe eighteen or twenty. And beside him, smiling brightly, was a young woman.

She had light hair, long and wavy, and she was staring intently at him. They looked close, the kind of close that said they knew each other well. That they mattered to each other.

I stared at the photo, my chest tightening for reasons I didn't want to name.

Who was she?

Chapter 60: Mending

CIAN

I couldn't sleep after that.

I lay on the lounge, staring up at the ceiling, my arm draped over my eyes like that would somehow block out what just happened. It didn't work. The memory played on repeat. Her fingers brushing my lips. The way her eyes had gone wide when I opened mine. The panic in her voice when she'd scrambled to explain herself.

You hugged me twice.

I groaned softly and turned onto my side, punching the pillow into a better shape. It didn't help. Nothing was going to help because I was stuck replaying the whole thing and realizing just how much of an idiot I'd been.

I'd woken up with her pressed against me. That much was true. But the dream I'd been having right before I opened my eyes? That was the real problem.

I kept trying to blame the dream, but I knew better. Somewhere in the fog between sleep and waking, I had reached for her first. I could feel it now, faint but certain, like a shadow of a memory. My arm pulling her closer. My hand settling around her waist. The warmth of her breathing against my chest before I even opened my eyes.

I hugged her. Twice. That was the truth I kept circling.

The dream had pushed me toward her, but the instinct had been mine. That was the part that made my throat tighten. I remembered the shape of her, the scent of her soap, the way her hair tickled my jaw. Even half asleep, my body had known exactly where she was.

I shut my eyes hard and dragged a hand through my hair. Every time I thought about it, heat crawled up my neck. The worst part was how natural it had felt. Like holding her was something I did all the time. Like I had every right.

She must think I lost my mind.

I rolled onto my back again, staring up at nothing. The room felt too quiet. Too heavy. My chest ached with a strange mix of embarrassment and something I did not want to name.

I kept seeing her face when she pulled away. Wide eyes. Breath caught. Her fingers trembling. Not because she hated it. Not exactly. More like she did not know what to do with it. With me.

And I had made it worse by pretending I did not remember anything. I did remember. Not clearly. Not fully. More like an echo clinging to the edges of my thoughts. Enough to know that I started it, even if I did not mean to.

It bothered me more than it should have. The idea that she sat there thinking she crossed a line when really, I had pulled her over it.

I groaned again and dragged the pillow over my face.

I was an idiot. A complete one. Because the only thing keeping me awake now was the truth I could not avoid.

I did not dream of her by accident.

I reached for her because some part of me wanted to.

And now I had no idea what to do with that.

The dream still lingered at the back of my mind.

Her voice in my ear, her knee between my legs, her mouth on mine. The ropes, the chair, the way she touched me like she already knew every weakness I had. I could still feel her breath, still hear her say my name. It was too real, too sharp, too much.

I dragged a hand over my face.

Then I'd woken up to find her face inches from mine and her fingers on my mouth.

For a split second, I'd thought the dream was still happening. That she was not really there, touching me like that because she wanted to. Then reality crashed in and I realized how close we actually were. How her breath had hitched when our eyes met. How quickly she'd shoved me away.

I sat up on the lounge and scrubbed my hands over my face. This was getting out of control. I couldn't let it spiral into something even more awkward, especially not with Alpha Julius's wedding coming up. We were supposed to go as a couple. A pretend couple. We were supposed to look like we could stand each other for more than five minutes.

Right now, we couldn't even share a bed without one of us doing something weird. And I didn't like weird.

That was dangerous territory for me.

I stood and paced across the room, my bare feet silent on the carpet. The chamber was quiet. Too quiet. I could hear the faint hum of morning traffic far outside, the occasional shots of guns by practicing sentinels at the range, but nothing else. It felt like the world had shrunk down to just me and this restless energy I couldn't shake.

I glanced at the wall clock in the lounge. Five twenty-three. It was still too early to do anything useful. But it was also too late to go back to sleep.

I kept pacing.

The wedding was in days. We needed to look good together. Presentable. Like a real couple who actually liked each other. That meant I needed to fix this mess before it got worse. Before the awkwardness settled in so deep that we couldn't even look at each other without flinching.

An idea started to form. Shopping. I could take her shopping for a dress. Something elegant. Something that would make her feel confident and maybe distract her from whatever the hell had happened this morning. It was practical. It made sense. And it gave us something to do together that wasn't lying in bed trying not to touch each other.

I stopped pacing and nodded to myself. Yeah. That would work.

I turned toward the bedroom door. I'd tell her now. Get it out of the way before either of us could overthink it. Before the silence stretched on so long that neither of us knew how to break it.

I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

She was standing by my drawer. Her back was to me, her head tilted down, and she was holding something in her hands. A picture frame.

My chest tightened.

I knew which one it was before I even saw it properly. The angle she was standing at, the way her shoulders hunched slightly forward like she was studying it closely. There was only one frame she could be holding.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

The words ripped out of me before I could stop them. Too sharp, too loud, too much, but I did not care. She was holding that picture. The one she had no right to touch.

She jerked as if I had struck her. She spun around fast, eyes blown wide. The frame slipped from her hands at the same time.

It hit the floor with a crack that seemed to tear through the whole room. Glass burst across the carpet, small shards catching the morning light like broken stars.

"Oh my goddess," she breathed, her hands covering her mouth. "I am so sorry. I did not see you there."

I barely heard her. My eyes were fixed on the wreckage at her feet. The broken frame, the scattered glass, the photo inside lying open to the world when it was never meant to be seen.

Heat surged through me. It climbed my throat and took over my chest. Anger came fast and wild, choking out everything else.

"Why can't you keep your fucking hands to yourself?" I said, my voice cracking with the rise of it. "Is that so hard for you?"

She flinched like I'd struck her. Her eyes went wide, then narrowed, confusion and hurt flashing across her face.

"It is just a picture frame," she said, her voice shaking slightly. "I can fix it."

"No!" I shouted. "Get out!"

She stared at me for a long moment. I could see the shock written all over her face. The way her mouth parted slightly like she wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. Then she turned and walked quickly toward the door, her footsteps uneven.

The door clicked shut behind her.

I stayed where I was, breathing too fast, my hands curled tight at my sides. The anger still burned through me, sharp and bright, but something heavier dragged beneath it. Something that made my chest feel too tight.

My gaze dropped to the floor.

Madeline's face stared up at me from the shattered frame. Her smile was soft in that picture, her hair catching the light the way it always had. She looked alive, warm, almost glowing. We both did. That was before everything turned cold.

I crouched down, my knees hitting the carpet, and reached for the frame. My fingers shook. A piece of glass cut into my palm as soon as I touched it. The sting came fast. Blood rose in a small bright line then dripped onto the photo, right across Madeline's cheek.

The sight froze me.

Her smile, streaked with red. The crack that split the picture clean down the middle, cutting us apart. The ruin of something I had been trying so hard to hold on to.

My hand throbbed, warm and wet, but I did not move. I stayed there, kneeling among the broken pieces, holding what was left of the only picture I still had of us. It felt wrong to even breathe.

I should have hidden it better. I knew that. I should have put it somewhere no one else could touch. Somewhere her face would not risk being exposed or broken or seen by eyes that did not understand.

But I hadn't because part of me couldn't let go. Part of me still needed to see Madeline's face every now and then, even if it hurt.

Now the frame was broken. The glass was shattered. And Fia had seen it.

I set the frame down carefully, my hand still bleeding, and I pressed my palm against my pants to stop the flow. The fabric darkened immediately.

In a few minutes, it would heal. So it was not really an issue.

I'd overreacted. I knew that. Fia hadn't meant anything by it. She'd just been curious. Maybe a little nosy, but not malicious. She didn't know what that picture meant to me. She didn't know who Madeline was or why seeing that frame in her hands had felt like someone had reached into my chest and squeezed.

But I couldn't take it back now. The damage was done.

I stood slowly, my legs stiff, and I looked toward the door. She was probably out there right now, confused and angry and hurt. And I had no idea what to say to her.

The wedding was in a few days.

We were supposed to be a couple.

And I'd just screamed at her to get out.