

To ruin an Omega

#Chapter 61: Jealousy Jealousy - Read To ruin an Omega

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FIA

I stood outside Cian's chambers, my back pressed against the cold stone wall. Heat crawled up my neck and into my face until I thought my skin might catch fire. My hands shook at my sides. I couldn't stop replaying what just happened. The frame falling from my fingers. The glass exploding across the floor. His face when he saw what I'd done.

'Why can't you keep your fucking hands to yourself?'

My chest squeezed tight. I wrapped my arms around myself like that would somehow hold me together. It was just a picture frame. I hadn't meant to snoop. I was just looking for something, anything, to distract myself from the memory of his arms around me. From the way my fingers had traced his lips while he slept.

The drawer had been open. Just a crack. The frame was sitting right there in plain view. I'd only wanted to see who was in the photo. That was all.

But the way he'd looked at me when he walked in. Like I'd destroyed something precious. Like I'd crossed a line I didn't even know existed.

I pushed off the wall and started walking. My legs felt unsteady. The hallway seemed too long, the walls pressing in on all sides. I'd seen Cian cold before. I'd seen him dismissive and cutting and cruel in that quiet way he had. But this was different. This was raw fury. The kind that came from somewhere deep and painful.

He'd lost his cool completely. The first time I'd ever seen him truly rattled.

Something had happened with whoever was in that picture. You didn't keep a photo hidden in a drawer and then explode like that unless it meant something. Unless it still hurt.

I reached my suite and pushed through the door. The familiar scent of lavender and clean linen wrapped around me. For a second I just stood there, trying to catch my breath.

"Luna Fia."

I jumped. Bo was standing by the window with a steamer in her hands, working on a dress. She set the steamer down and gave me a slight bow.

"How was your night?"

The question hit me like a punch. My mind flashed to waking up in Cian's arms. To his hand on my waist. To the way his eyes had opened and locked with mine before everything fell apart.

"It was fine," I said. The lie tasted bitter on my tongue.

Bo's face lit up. Her eyes went wide and a pleased smile spread across her lips. "So it happened. You and the Alpha did it."

"Goddess, no." The words burst out of me too fast. "That wasn't what happened. We just spent the night together in the same bed. But nothing happened."

Bo's smile didn't fade. She looked almost proud, like I'd accomplished something important just by sleeping in the same room as my husband. It felt weird saying it. Calling Cian my husband. But that was what he was.

I turned my attention to the dress she'd been steaming. The fabric looked crisp now, all the wrinkles smoothed out. "Is something happening today?"

"Not really," Bo said. She picked up another dress from the pile beside her. "I noticed some of the clothes were wrinkled and I took it upon myself to do something about them. Who knows when you will need them?"

"Right."

I moved toward the bathroom. A shower sounded perfect right now. Hot water. Steam. Something to wash away the morning and the mess I'd made of everything.

"Want me to help you run the bath?" Bo dropped the steamer again, already heading toward the bathroom door.

"There's no need for that."

My hand touched the doorknob. I stopped. The question burned in my throat. I shouldn't ask. It wasn't my business. But I couldn't shake the image of that photo. The woman's face. The way Cian had looked at her in the picture, like she was the center of his whole world. The way the woman has also looked at him.

"Can I ask you something?"

Bo turned back to me. "Of course. Anything."

I swallowed hard. "Was Alpha Cian ever in a relationship before marrying into Silver Creek?"

"Oh." Bo's expression shifted. Something careful slid into her eyes. "Madeline."

My heart kicked against my ribs. "Who is Madeline?"

Bo glanced at the door then back at me. Her voice dropped lower. "We're not really supposed to talk about her."

"Why?"

Bo set the steamer down completely now. She moved closer, her hands folding in front of her. "Madeline Blossom was a witch and a family friend of the Donlons since childhood. She was for a while the love of Alpha Cian's life and best friends with Luna Elara Donlon, Alpha Cian's cousin, before she mercilessly broke his heart."

The words hit me one after another. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe properly. A witch? The love of his life?

"Why did she break his heart?"

Bo's mouth pressed into a thin line. "The Blossoms are traditionalists and power hungry. They didn't want Madeline for Cian. Interspecies relationships are still sensitive among many. And then there was the matter of the pack." She paused. Her eyes searched my face. "It was sort of clear then that Alpha Cian wouldn't be the one to get the power of the pack. Madeline's family wanted more for her. They wanted power and influence. Cian couldn't give them that."

My stomach twisted. I thought about the way he'd held that broken frame. The blood on his hand. The look in his eyes like something inside him had shattered along with the glass.

But Cian was Alpha of Skollrend. He has a reputation too. They had been wrong. Or was that him proving a point?

"Did something happen, Luna Fia?" Bo's words broke my train of thoughts.

The question came soft and she really did look concerned. I looked at Bo and saw the worry lines etched across her features.

"I accidentally broke a frame with her picture," I said. My voice cracked as I continued. "And he went berserk."

Bo gasped. She closed the distance between us in three quick steps and took my hand in both of hers. Her skin felt warm against mine. "I'm so sorry. Are you willing to talk about it?"

Something inside me crumbled. Bo's kindness, her concern, the way she held my hand like she actually cared. It was so different from everything else in this place. Most of the people here at Skollrend had treated me like an obligation, a burden or a political tool. But Bo looked at me like I mattered.

My throat tightened. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes and I blinked hard to keep them from falling.

"Yeah," I whispered.

Bo guided me to the bed. We sat down side by side. She kept holding my hand. I stared down at our joined fingers and tried to find the words.

"I didn't mean to touch it," I started. "The drawer was open. Just a little. I saw the frame and I was curious. I picked it up to look at the photo." I swallowed. "Then he walked in. He saw me holding it and he just exploded. I've never seen him like that before. Even when he was mean and he told me to get out."

Bo squeezed my hand. "He's very protective of anything to do with Madeline. Most people in the pack know not to even mention something that reminds him of her. He keeps that part of his life locked away."

"But why keep the photo if it hurts so much?"

"Because he loved her," Bo said simply. "Maybe he still does. And sometimes people hold onto pain because letting go feels like losing the person all over again."

I thought about the way Cian had looked in that picture. He had been young. He had been happy. Like he hadn't learned yet how to build walls around himself. Madeline had been beautiful. With hair like spun gold and bright cornflower blue eyes. Her smile too... That smile that looked genuine and warm.

But she'd also broken his heart and left him in the dust because he hadn't been powerful enough. Because her family wanted more.

"I should apologize," I said.

Bo shook her head. "Give him time. He needs space when it comes to Madeline. Pushing him right now will only make things worse."

I nodded even though every part of me wanted to fix this. To take back what I'd done. To somehow undo the damage.

Bo stood and smoothed down her dress. "Why don't you take that shower? I'll make you some tea for when you're done."

"Thank you," I said. The words felt too small for what she'd given me. For the comfort of having someone in my corner who didn't treat me like garbage.

She smiled and squeezed my shoulder before heading toward the small kitchen area in my suite.

I walked into the bathroom and closed the door behind me. My reflection stared back at me from the mirror. Red eyes. Flushed cheeks. Hair still messy from sleep.

I looked like someone who'd had the worst morning of their life.

The love of his life...

That phrase kept echoing in my head. Cian had loved someone once. Really loved them. And she'd destroyed him.

No wonder he kept everyone at a distance now. No wonder he looked at me like I was just another burden he had to carry.

I turned the tap and let the tub fill, the water rushing out in a steady stream. Steam curled up and warmed the small room. I slipped out of my nightgown and lowered myself into the bath, the heat wrapping around me the moment my skin touched the water. I closed my eyes and let it rise against me, hoping it would quiet the noise in my head.

But no matter how hard I tried, I could not push Madeline Blossom out of my mind. Her name kept circling back, tugging at something I was not ready to look at.

Maybe it was not confusion at all. Maybe I understood this tight pull in my stomach more than I wanted to admit. I just did not want to face what it meant.

Chapter 62: Someone in your corner

BO

I watched the useless Omega disappear into the bathroom. The door clicked shut behind her and I waited. My hands stayed steady at my sides even though my pulse had picked up.

The water turned on. I heard it clearly through the door. A steady rush that filled the silence.

I moved closer. My feet made no sound against the cushioned floor. I pressed my ear to the bathroom door and listened. The water kept running. Then came the quiet splash of someone getting into a full tub. The sound of water sloshing and settling.

Good. She would be in there for a while.

I backed away from the door and crossed the room to where I'd left my bag near the window. My phone sat at the bottom underneath a folded apron and my spare keys of the rooms I looked after. I pulled it out and swiped through my contacts. My thumb hovered over one name.

Alpha Aldric Donlon.

I hit the call button and pressed the phone to my ear. It rang twice before he picked up.

"This better be good news."

His voice came through sharp and impatient. I glanced back at the bathroom door. It was still closed and I could still catch the occasional sound of water sloshing.

"It is," I said quietly.

"Really?" Something shifted in his tone. Interest maybe. But in hindsight, it sounded more like hope. "The bitch is dead already?"

"No." I kept my voice low. "It's about the new Luna. The one move that Alpha Cian made that you didn't calculate."

There was a pause on the line and then he went, "Go on."

I looked at the bathroom door again. It was still shut. There was no sound of movement except the water. I turned my back to it and spoke into the phone.

"Alpha Cian is not over Madeline."

There was silence once again on the other end. I could almost feel him processing that information.

"If anything," I continued, "he's still very much in love with her."

"Are you certain?"

The question came quick. Eager. I smiled even though he couldn't see me.

"I could not lie to you, my Alpha." I let that hang for a second. "He lashed out at the Omega today because she stumbled on a picture he kept of Madeline and ruined it."

Aldric made a noise that sounded like he was satisfied and when he was pleased, it made me happy.

"And we all know how loyal he is to keeping his mother happy," I added. " Which now comes as the sole reason he married. If Madeline is still at the forefront of Alpha Cian's mind, perhaps there is still an open window for the contest for Skollrend's throne."

"I don't need an Omega to tell me that."

The words stung but I kept my face neutral. My grip on the phone tightened.

"I will commend you though," he said after a moment. "I didn't think you would be this useful."

Something warm bloomed in my chest. Part of it was pride and the rest of it was the relief that I'd done well.

"You are the man I see as heir to all of this," I said. My voice came out softer now. "My loyalty to you knows no bounds. I love you."

"Keep me in the loop."

Then the line went dead.

I stared at my phone screen for a second. He hadn't said it back. He never did. But that was fine. Aldric wasn't the type to waste words on sentimentality. He was focused. Driven. That was what I loved about him. He knew what he wanted and he took it.

And I was helping him get it.

I felt good about this. Really good. I'd been worried at first that I had not been useful enough. That Aldric would see me as just another servant. Another nobody. But this information about Cian and Madeline was solid. It was exactly the kind of thing Aldric could use.

I wondered how he would play it. Would he reach out to Madeline? Try to get her back into Cian's life somehow? Or would he use this knowledge to undermine Cian's position? Show the pack that their Alpha was still hung up on a witch who'd abandoned him?

Either way, it was brilliant. And I'd been the one to give him the opening.

The bathroom door handle turned.

I jumped. My phone nearly slipped from my hand. I fumbled with it and shoved it back into my bag. My heart hammered against my ribs as I ran and grabbed the kettle from

the small kitchen counter and filled it with water. My hands shook slightly as I turned on the stove.

The bathroom door fully opened and steam rolled out in a thick cloud.

The Omega stepped through it wrapped in a towel. Her hair hung damp around her shoulders. Her face looked a little less red now. A little calmer.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yeah. A little."

"Good." I set the kettle on the burner and turned to face her. "I'm making chamomile tea. It'll help settle your nerves."

"Thank you, Bo."

She said it with real gratitude. Like I'd done something special for her instead of just making tea. It made me feel strange. Guilty almost. But I pushed that feeling down where it belonged.

Fia wasn't a bad person. She was actually kind of sweet in that naive way some people were. But she was in the way. She'd married into a position that should have gone to someone else. Someone better. Someone who actually belonged in the Donlon family. And to the wrong Alpha too.

Aldric belonged here as ruler. He was Cian's uncle. He'd grown up in this pack and he led it in many ways than one. He understood power and politics in a way that Cian never would. Cian was too soft. Too hung up on honor and doing the right thing. Too broken over some witch who'd left him years ago.

Aldric would be different. He would make Skollrend even stronger. More feared. Far respected.

And I would be right there beside him when he did.

"Do you want anything else?" I asked Fia. "Something to eat maybe?"

She shook her head. "Just the tea is fine."

"Alright."

I pulled two mugs from the cabinet and dropped a tea bag in each one. The kettle started to whistle. I poured the hot water and watched it turn pale gold as the tea steeped.

Fia sat down on the edge of her bed. She looked tired. Worn out. Like the weight of everything that had happened was finally catching up to her.

Part of me felt bad for her. She really hadn't asked for any of this. She'd been forced into staying in a marriage with someone who clearly didn't want her. Who would probably never want her because he was still in love with someone else.

But that wasn't my problem. My problem was making sure Aldric got what he deserved. What we both deserved.

I carried the mugs over and handed one to Fia. She took it with both hands and held it close to her chest. The steam rose up and curled around her face.

"Thank you," she said again.

"Of course." I sat down in the chair near the window. "That's what I'm here for."

She took a small sip and winced. It was too hot. She blew on it gently before trying again.

We sat in silence for a while. I drank my tea and watched her. She stared down into her mug like she might find answers there. Like the tea leaves would tell her what to do next.

I wondered what she was thinking. If she was still upset about Cian. If she was wondering how to fix things with him.

It didn't matter. She couldn't fix this. Cian's heart belonged to someone else. It always had. And unless Madeline came back and shattered it even worse all over again, that wasn't going to change.

Which meant Fia would always be on the outside. Always trying to earn something she could never have. Always wondering why she wasn't enough.

It was sad really. But it was also necessary.

My phone buzzed in my bag. I glanced at it but didn't move to check. It was probably Aldric. He always had follow up questions after our calls. Things he wanted clarified or expanded on.

I'd check it later when Fia wasn't around.

For now I just sat and drank my tea and played the part of the concerned acquaintance slowly growing into more. The loyal servant. The helpful confidant.

It was a role I was starting to get good at.

Chapter 63: Be a dear and die 1

FIA

I was still holding my tea when the knock came.

Bo stood and crossed the room. She opened the door just wide enough to see who was there.

An Omega stood in the hallway. She wore the standard servant's uniform and her hands were clasped in front of her. When she saw me sitting on the bed, she dipped into a polite bow.

"I apologize for disturbing you this early morning."

I set my mug down on the nightstand. "It's fine. What is it?"

"I was given instructions by Elder Thorne, the healer of the pack to get you." She kept her head lowered. "The Grand Luna, Luna Morrigan, requests your presence at her quarters."

I stood. "Oh. What for?"

The Omega bowed again. "I do not know."

"I'll be there."

She turned and left. Bo shut the door and looked at me. I could feel the tension climbing up my spine and settling in my shoulders.

"Don't worry," Bo said.

I rubbed my arm. "Easy for you to say."

"It's a known secret that you spent the night at the Alpha's quarters." Bo walked over to me. "Perhaps the Grand Luna just wants to know what happened."

I let out a long breath. "That has to be it."

"So tell her."

"I'd probably have to lie to her." I looked down at my hands. "I don't like lying."

"You can be honest. Mostly." Bo picked up my empty mug and carried it to the small kitchen. "You did spend the night together. You two were probably on the same bed. That's something. I'm sure that's more than enough to make the Grand Luna happy."

Maybe. Maybe she was right. But the thought of sitting there and trying to navigate what I could say and what I couldn't made my stomach turn.

I was still unnerved by what happened with Cian.

"I need something to wear," I said.

Bo smiled. "Let me handle that."

She pulled open the closet and rifled through the clothes hanging there. Most of them were formal. Too formal for an early morning summons. She pushed past a few dresses before pulling out a simple blouse and a skirt that fell just below my knees.

"This will work."

I changed quickly while Bo gathered my damp hair and twisted it into something presentable. She worked fast and her fingers were gentle. When she was done, she stepped back and looked me over.

"You look fine," she said. "Just breathe. You'll be okay."

I nodded even though I wasn't sure I believed her.

I left the room and made my way down the hall. The corridors were quiet this early. Most of the pack was probably still asleep or just waking up. I passed a sentinel standing near one of the side doors and stopped.

"Excuse me," I said. "Can you tell me how to get to the Grand Luna's quarters?"

He pointed down the hall. "Take the stairs at the end. Go up two levels. Her quarters are on the left. You'll see the guards."

"Thank you."

I followed his directions. The stairs were narrow and dimly lit. My footsteps echoed against the stone walls. When I reached the second level, I saw two sentinels standing outside a set of double doors. They didn't move as I approached but their eyes tracked me the entire way.

I stopped in front of the doors and one of them knocked twice. The door opened from the inside and Elder Thorne stepped out.

He looked me over. His expression was flat but something about the way his mouth pressed into a thin line made me think he wasn't thrilled to see me.

"The Grand Luna will not let me see her unless..." He paused. "You were inside as well."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I hear you call yourself a healer as well. Even bragged about it with the Grand Luna. Perhaps she wants to see you work your 'magic'." His tone was sharp. Belittling. "You should know, *Luna*, this is the rot. And your title is just honorary. You are still an Omega."

Heat rushed to my face. I clenched my jaw and forced myself to stay calm.

He flicked his fingers toward one of the sentinels. "Get her a hazmat suit."

"That will not be necessary." I retorted.

Thorne raised an eyebrow.

"You have to know it is only when you are extremely careless that you can get it." I kept my voice steady. "As a healer yourself, you should know. Or do I have to school you like I schooled you with the mourning moon poisoning?"

His jaw clenched. The muscle in his cheek twitched. For a second, I thought he might snap at me. But then he exhaled through his nose and reached into a bag near the door.

"I was just looking out for you."

He pulled out a mask and a pair of gloves. He put the mask on himself first and then handed a pair of gloves to me. I took them and slipped them on.

He held out a mask.

I shook my head. "It's not airborne, you know."

He scoffed. "No wonder Doctor Maren likes you. You're reckless just like her."

"I'm careful where it counts."

"Better safe than sorry." He adjusted his mask. "It's a fungus, after all."

I didn't argue. There was no point. He was set in his ways and nothing I said was going to change that.

He pushed open the door and I followed him inside.

The room was dark. Heavy curtains covered the windows and blocked out every bit of sunlight. It made sense. The sun made things worse for people with the rot. But even with that explanation, the room felt wrong. Old. Like it had been kept this way for years.

The walls were cracked in places. Some of the wallpaper had faded to a dull gray. The air was thick and stale despite the faint herbal scent that clung to everything.

I noticed something in the corner. A cryopod. It was tall and sleek and completely out of place in a room that looked like it belonged to a different century. The glass was clear and I could see inside. It was empty.

I wondered if Luna Morrigan was usually in there.

"Don't touch anything," Thorne said.

I pulled my eyes away from the pod and followed him deeper into the room. We passed through a narrow hallway and into what looked like a lounge. It was just as dark as the rest of the quarters. Candles flickered on low tables and cast long shadows against the walls. The air smelled stronger here. Herbal and bitter.

Luna Morrigan sat in a high-backed chair near the far wall. She wore a robe that covered most of her body but her neck was exposed.

I winced.

The rot had spread. It crawled up from her collarbone and covered the even the upper half of her neck in thick, reddish patches. It looked angry. Inflamed. Worse than it had been last night at dinner.

But when she saw me, she smiled.

"It is so wonderful to see you, Fia." Her voice was warm and genuine. "How are you?"

"I'm good."

I moved closer but kept some distance. Not because I was afraid of catching it but because I didn't want to crowd her.

"It looks like you're having a bad flare-up," I said.

Thorne made a noise behind me. "It's Maren and her western medicine. This is why we stick to herbs like the good ole days."

I thought about my mother. About the way her rot had progressed slowly. Steadily. This looked different. Faster. Angrier.

The idea of the rot flaring on and off sounded insane to me.

Morrigan waved a hand to Thorne. "Don't be like that. Both you and Maren are good, which is why I alternate between your medicines."

I straightened. "Whose medicine did you use last night before your flare-up?"

"Thorne's."

Thorne shot me a look. "You're not trying to imply that my medicine is—"

"Do not antagonize the girl." Morrigan's voice cut through his protest. "She is just worried about me."

Thorne went quiet. He turned back to a small table where a mortar and pestle sat next to a row of glass bottles.

Morrigan looked at me again. Her smile softened. "Forget about healer business. How was last night?"

I swallowed. "It was good."

"Define good on a scale of one to ten." She leaned forward slightly. "Did it happen?"

My throat tightened. "No."

"Where are these herbs, by the way?" I added quickly, hoping to change the topic.

Morrigan pointed to the table near Thorne. "Over there."

I moved toward the table. Thorne was already pounding something fresh in the mortar. The sound of stone grinding against stone filled the silence.

Then Luna Morrigan continued.

"Why not?" Her voice followed me. "Did you not want to? Or did he not want to?"

I reached for the first bottle. The label was handwritten in tight script. I opened it and sniffed. Chamomile. Maybe some lavender. Plenty of honey and willow bark.

"I think it will happen naturally," I said. "Don't you think?"

Morrigan sighed. "I don't know. Heat season is so far away. What is to say I will be there at the time?"

Thorne stopped pounding. "You cannot be negative, Grand Luna."

"I'm just being a realist."

I moved to the second bottle. This one smelled like peppermint and something sharper. Eucalyptus, maybe. But it was clear that was to hide the main ingredient which was hollow berry stems. I closed it and reached for the third.

The moment I opened it, the smell hit me.

My nostrils burned. My eyes watered. The world tilted for half a second and I saw red.

I blinked hard and forced myself back into the present.

"Elder Thorne," I said. My voice came out sharper than I meant it to because I was trying not to choke. "What is this?"

He didn't look up. "It's a soothing balm made of—"

"This is poison."

The room went silent.

Thorne's hands stilled over the mortar. He turned slowly and looked at me. His eyes narrowed behind his mask.

"Excuse me?"

I held up the bottle. My hand shook. "This is poison. I can smell it. Hemlock root. Plenty of nightshade. I don't know what else is in here but this is not medicine."

Morrigan sat forward in her chair. "Fia—"

"Luna Morrigan, you have to believe me!"

Chapter 64: Be a dear and die 2

FIA

The silence stretched between us like something alive and breathing.

Thorne turned to face me fully. His hands were still. His shoulders squared. When he spoke, his voice was cold.

"Are you accusing me of treason?"

I held the bottle tighter. My knuckles went white around the glass.

"I'm not accusing you of anything. I'm telling you what's in this bottle."

Morrigan stood from her chair. She didn't move closer. She stayed where she was and her hand gripped the armrest like it was the only thing keeping her upright.

"Do not antagonize her, Thorne."

"I have no choice, Grand Luna." He took a step toward me. His eyes burned behind his mask. "She is a manipulative woman who is known for trickery. I have no idea what you are trying to pull here but it will not be here. Not with the Grand Luna."

My chest tightened. Heat rushed through my veins and I wanted to throw the bottle at his head. But I forced myself to stay calm. To keep my voice steady.

"I'm not trying to pull anything."

Morrigan looked between us. Her face was pale. Her breathing had gone shallow.

"Perhaps you made a mistake," she said. Her voice was softer now. Almost pleading. One of the stages of grief I knew too well. "Perhaps you smelled something else and—"

"No." I cut her off. I hated how sharp my voice sounded but I couldn't stop it. "Hemlock is poison to Lycans and werewolves. Nightshade is just as bad. But together, they can..."

I stopped. The words caught in my throat because the full weight of what I was saying finally hit me.

"Someone is trying to kill you, Luna Morrigan." My voice shook. "And they're ensuring nobody will notice it while blaming it on the rot."

Her hand flew to her mouth.

I looked at the bottle again. At the dark liquid inside. My mother's face flashed in my mind. The way the rot had crawled across her skin. The way it had eaten away at her until there was nothing left.

But this wasn't the same.

"I don't think..." I swallowed hard. "I don't think you have the rot. I believe that you were misdiagnosed while you were being poisoned."

"Ridiculous!" Thorne's voice exploded through the room. He crossed the space between us in two strides and grabbed the bottle from my hand.

I stepped back. My heart hammered in my chest.

He yanked off his mask and brought the bottle to his nose. He inhaled sharply.

Then he dropped it.

The bottle hit the stone floor and shattered. Glass scattered across the ground and the liquid spread in a dark pool. Thorne stumbled back. His face had gone white. He pressed a hand to his mouth and shuddered.

"Goddess," he whispered. "She's right. I smelled hemlock."

The room tilted.

I stared at him. At the way his hands shook. At the way his eyes went wide with horror.

He hadn't known.

He hadn't known what was in the bottle.

Morrigan's breathing grew faster. She gripped the armrest harder and her knuckles turned white.

"Someone is poisoning me?"

Her voice broke on the last word.

Thorne spun toward the door. "Sentinels! Get in here!"

The doors burst open. Two sentinels rushed inside. Their hands went to the weapons at their sides.

"Get word to Alpha Cian that there was an attempt of treason on the Grand Luna's life!" Thorne's voice was raw. Desperate. "Now!"

The sentinels didn't hesitate. They turned and ran.

The sound of their footsteps echoed down the hall and then faded into nothing.

Morrigan stood frozen in place. Her eyes were distant. Unfocused. She stared at the broken bottle on the floor and the dark liquid seeping into the cracks between the stones.

"Cian is now Alpha of Skollrend," she said. Her voice was barely a whisper. "And that is still not enough to make them stop?"

Thorne rushed toward her. He reached out like he was going to touch her shoulder. To comfort her. But he stopped at the last moment. His hand hovered in the air and then fell back to his side.

He was afraid to touch her.

Afraid that it might not be poison on her skin but the rot. For him, there was still a possibility. Even when he has a glove and a mask on.

I watched them; watched the way Morrigan's face crumpled; the way her hands trembled.

"You think this was political?" I asked.

Morrigan nodded slowly. She didn't look at me. She kept her eyes on the floor.

"My late husband's brother."

My breath caught. I only got to know of him recently but I had to know. "Alpha Aldric?"

"Goddess, no." She shook her head. "Aldric is a saint. His other brother. Gabriel."

I blinked. The name meant nothing to me. Bo had only ever mentioned one uncle. Aldric. I hadn't even known there was another.

"Does this mean I am not actually sick? I don't..."

She didn't finish.

Her legs buckled.

She fell forward and I lunged. My hands caught her shoulders before she hit the ground. Her weight was heavier than I expected and I staggered under it. But I held on.

"Luna Morrigan!"

Thorne dropped to his knees beside us. His hands hovered over her but he still didn't touch. His face was a mess of panic and guilt.

I lowered her to the floor. Her head lolled to the side and her eyes were closed. Her breathing was shallow. Too shallow.

"Help me get her on her side," I said.

Thorne finally moved. He grabbed her arm and we rolled her onto her side. Her robe fell open and I could see the red patches on her neck and collarbone. They looked angrier now. More inflamed.

But I saw them for what they were now. They weren't the rot.

They were burns.

Violent reactions from whatever cocktail of poison had been in that bottle.

"We need to get this off her skin," I said. "Now."

"With what?" Thorne's voice cracked. "We don't have—"

"Water. Soap. Anything."

He scrambled to his feet and ran to the small washbasin near the corner of the room. He grabbed a pitcher and a cloth and ran back. His hands shook so badly that water sloshed over the sides.

I took the cloth from him and dunked it in the water. I wrung it out and pressed it gently against the red patches on her neck.

She didn't stir.

"Is she breathing?" Thorne leaned closer. His face was pale.

"Yes."

I worked quickly. I wiped away as much of the residue as I could. The cloth turned dark and I rinsed it and started again. My hands moved on instinct. On training. On everything my mother had ever taught me.

Thorne knelt beside me. He watched my every move.

"I didn't know," he said. His voice was hollow. "I swear I didn't know."

"I believe you."

And I did. The way he had reacted. The way his face had gone white. The way his hands still shook. He hadn't known what was in that bottle.

But someone had.

If it was made by Thorne, someone has maliciously swapped it.

What was clear that that someone had made it... Someone had planned this.

I pressed the cloth to Morrigan's collarbone and she let out a soft groan. Her eyelids fluttered but didn't open.

"Stay with us," I whispered. "Stay with us, Luna Morrigan."

Thorne stood and paced. He ran a hand through his hair and muttered something under his breath. Then he stopped.

"Gabriel," he said. "It has to be Gabriel."

I looked up at him. "Who exactly is this Gabriel and why are you so certain?"

"Cian's uncle. The younger brother of the late Alpha." Thorne's jaw clenched. "He was supposed to be next in line after Aldric. But Aldric passed on ruling Skollrend. Gabriel thought he would get it all. But when the pack council chose Cian instead due to popular vote, he left. He said he wouldn't serve under his nephew."

My stomach turned. "And now he's trying to kill the Grand Luna?"

"If she dies, the pack destabilizes. Alpha Cian destabilizes. If the pack is compromised and trouble starts to brew, the council might reconsider their choice." Thorne's voice was bitter. "Gabriel could challenge Cian for the title. And if he wins, he becomes Alpha."

I looked down at Morrigan. At her pale face and the shallow rise and fall of her chest.

This wasn't just about her.

This was about Cian.

This was about power.

I rinsed the cloth again and pressed it to her skin. The red patches were starting to fade. Just a shade lighter. But it was something.

Footsteps echoed in the hallway. Heavy and fast.

The doors slammed open.

Cian stood in the doorway. His chest heaved like he had run the entire way. His eyes swept the room and landed on his mother.

"What happened?"

His voice was low and full of rage.

Thorne stepped forward. "There was poison in the medicine. Someone has been poisoning the Grand Luna."

Cian's face went dark. His hands curled into fists at his sides.

"Who?"

"We don't know for certain," Thorne said. "But we believe it's Gabriel and he must be using someone on the inside. An Omega or Sentinel."

Cian didn't respond. He crossed the room in three strides and dropped to his knees beside his mother. His hand hovered over her shoulder. Then he touched her. Gently. Like he was afraid she might break.

"Mum," he whispered.

Her eyes fluttered open. Just barely. She looked up at him and her lips moved.

"Cian."

"I'm here."

She reached up and her hand found his. She squeezed weakly.

"Don't let them win," she said.

"I won't."

Her eyes closed again. Her hand went limp in his.

Cian looked at me. His face was hard. Unreadable. But his eyes burned.

"Is she going to be okay?"

"I do not know."

Chapter 65: The Poisoned Truth

CIAN

I grabbed a wet wipe from the nightstand and knelt back down beside the broken frame. The blood had already started to dry on Madeline's face in the photograph. A dark red streak across her cheek that made my stomach turn.

I pressed the wipe against the picture carefully. The blood came away in small patches, brown now instead of red. I wiped again, gentler this time, trying not to press too hard. But the more I cleaned, the worse it got. The blood began to smudge across her face. It blurred her features. Her smile started to fade under the brown stain spreading across the photo.

So I stopped.

My hand hovered over the picture. I stared at what I'd done. At the way Madeline's face looked now. Distorted. Ruined in a different way than before.

I tried not to think about Fia as I set the wipe down and sat back on my heels.

You know how stubborn she can be. My wolf's voice drifted through my mind. Low and knowing. Like it had been waiting for the right moment to speak.

I sighed and rubbed my face with my clean hand.

"I fucking know."

How will you make it up to her then? he asked. *You know practically nothing about her.*

I stood up fast. Too fast. The movement made my head spin for half a second before I steadied myself.

"Goddess, do you ever shut up?"

It didn't answer. It didn't need to. We both knew he was right.

I looked down at the picture again. At Madeline's smudged face staring up at me from the broken frame. Then I looked toward the door where Fia had disappeared through just minutes ago.

"I do know she appreciates honesty," I said. My voice came out quieter than I meant it to. "So I'll apologize. Honestly."

And if she asks about Mads, you'll tell her?

My jaw tightened. I didn't want to answer that. Didn't even want to think about what I would say if Fia asked who Madeline was. What she meant to me. Why I'd reacted the way I did.

The silence stretched between me and my wolf.

"She has parts of her life she'll never tell me," I said finally. "I don't have to tell her everything about mine."

If you shield from her, she'll be able to tell. It's voice was firm now. Not asking. It was more like it was just stating. *She'll most likely feel you're hiding something from her. That's far from honest.*

I ignored it. I bent down and picked up the frame. The glass was still jagged around the edges. I held it carefully and walked to the drawer where I'd kept it. I placed it back inside. Face down as always. So I wouldn't have to look at it. So no one else would either.

Out of sight. Out of mind.

I closed the drawer harder than I needed to.

Then I turned and walked to the door. I opened it and called out to the nearest sentinel in the hallway.

"Get an Omega in here to clean this mess."

The sentinel nodded and disappeared down the corridor.

I shut the door and headed toward the bathroom. My hand had stopped bleeding but the dried blood still clung to my palm. Brown now. Flaking at the edges.

I turned on the tap and shoved my hand under the water. The blood washed away in thin streams. Pink at first. Then clear. The wound was already gone. Healed over like it had never been there at all.

I reached for the shower knobs next and twisted them on. Steam began to rise as the water warmed. I pushed off my clothes one piece at a time and let them fall to the tiles. When the temperature felt right, I stepped under the spray and let the heat sink into my skin.

I grabbed the soap and scrubbed. Hard enough that my skin turned red.

I tried not to think about the dream. About the way Fia had looked in it. About the way her voice had sounded in my ear. About the way my body had responded.

Again... Out of sight. Out of mind.

I scrubbed harder.

When my hands were clean, I dried them and walked back into the bedroom. The Omega had already arrived. She was on her knees near the broken glass, carefully picking up the pieces and placing them into a small bag.

"Good morning, Alpha," she said without looking up.

I didn't respond. I just pointed at the blood stain on the carpet near where the frame had fallen.

She nodded and got to work immediately.

I moved to the wardrobe and pulled out a clean shirt. I buttoned it quickly and reached for my tie. My fingers fumbled with the knot. I couldn't focus. My mind kept drifting back to Fia. To the look on her face when I'd shouted at her. To the way she'd flinched.

I pulled the tie tighter.

And that was when the door burst open.

Two sentinels stood in the doorway. Their faces were pale. Their breathing was uneven, like they had been running.

My brows pulled together. "You do not knock anymore?"

They both flinched. One stepped forward. "Forgive us, Alpha Cian. Elder Healer Thorne sent us. It has been discovered that someone is poisoning the Grand Luna."

The words hit me like a fist to the chest.

I froze. My hands still on my tie. My mind trying to catch up with what I'd just heard.

"What?"

My voice came out low.

"Someone has been poisoning the Grand Luna," the sentinel repeated. "Elder Thorne requests your presence immediately."

I saw red.

The tie slipped from my fingers. I didn't bother fixing it. I just moved. Fast. Out the door. Down the hallway. The sentinels struggled to keep up.

My mother's chambers weren't far but the distance felt endless. My boots pounded against the stone floor. My heart hammered in my chest. My mind raced through a dozen scenarios. Each one worse than the last.

I reached the doors and slammed them open with both hands.

The room came into focus all at once.

Thorne was standing near the center. His face was pale. His hands were shaking.

And Fia.

Fia was kneeling on the floor. She was holding my mother. Her arms were wrapped around her shoulders. Her hands were steady. She had a wet rag in one hand and she was pressing it against my mother's neck. My mother's face looked damp. Her skin was red and inflamed from another flare up but Fia didn't pull away. She didn't hesitate. She held her like she didn't care about the rot at all.

My chest tightened. Because while I was horrified for her, my mother took precedence first and she did have gloves on.

"What happened?" I asked.

Thorne stepped forward. His voice was shaking when he spoke.

"There was poison in the medicine. Someone has been poisoning the Grand Luna."

"Who?"

"We don't know for certain," Thorne said. "But I believe it has to be Alpha Gabriel. He must be using someone on the inside. An Omega or Sentinel."

Gabriel.

The name burned in my mind. My uncle. My father's younger brother. The one who'd left Skollrend in anger when the council chose me over him.

I didn't respond. I just moved.

I crossed the room in three strides and dropped to my knees beside my mother. My hand hovered over her shoulder for half a second before I touched her. Gently. Like she might break if I pressed too hard.

"Mum."

Her eyes fluttered open. Just barely. She looked up at me. Her lips moved but no sound came out at first.

"Cian."

"I'm here."

She reached up. Her hand found mine. Her grip was weak but it was there.

"Don't let them win," she whispered.

"I won't."

Her eyes closed again. Her hand went limp in mine.

I looked at Fia. Her face stayed calm but her eyes were too sharp for this to be luck. She was studying my mother like she was reading something hidden beneath the skin. I did not need a mate bond to understand she had a hand in this discovery. She had a history in healing. She had proved it the day she mixed something together in seconds to pull me out of the Mourning Moon poison. Seeing her made everything click into place.

"Is she going to be okay?"

My heart broke when she said it.

"I don't know."

The words hung in the air.

I heard movement behind me. Footsteps. The sound of equipment being dragged across the floor.

I turned my head.

Four sentinels entered the room. They were wearing full hazmat suits. Gloves. Masks. Face shields. They carried a stretcher between them.

Fia stood up fast.

"She doesn't have the rot," she said. Her voice was firm. "It was the poison in her system. She doesn't have to be treated like she's diseased."

I looked at her. Really looked at her. At the certainty in her eyes. At the way she stood between my mother and the sentinels like she was ready to fight them if she had to.

I stood and turned to the sentinels.

"Hold."

They stopped immediately.

I walked toward Fia. I stopped just in front of her. Close enough that I could see the flecks of brown in her dark eyes.

"What makes you so certain?" I asked.

"She was misdiagnosed," Fia said. "Whenever you believed she had the rot was the moment she started getting poisoned."

I stared at her.

"Whoever did this has healer expertise," she continued. "Or at least some knowledge of poison. They knew the effect they wanted and they made it happen."

I believed her.

I didn't know why. Maybe it was the way she spoke. Maybe it was the way she'd held my mother without fear. Maybe it was something deeper than that. Something I didn't want to name.

I turned back to the sentinels.

"Lose the fucking hazmat suit."

They hesitated.

"Did I fucking stutter?"

They moved immediately. The suits came off in seconds. They set the stretcher down and carefully lifted my mother onto it. Fia stepped back but she didn't take her eyes off them. Like she was making sure they handled her gently.

I looked at the two sentinels who had brought me the news.

"Lock down Skollrend," I said. My voice was cold. "Bring to me every Omega and sentinel that was charged to take care of my mother since the start of her disease. I want to investigate them myself."

They nodded and disappeared through the door.

I watched them go. Then I looked back at my mother. At the way her chest rose and fell. Shallow but steady.

She was alive.

For now, that was enough.

Chapter 66: The Burden of An Alpha

CIAN

The sentinels carried my mother out on the stretcher. I watched them disappear through the door. My chest felt tight. My hands wouldn't stop clenching and unclenching at my sides.

I turned to Thorne.

He stood there. Silent. His face was pale. His hands were still shaking. He looked like he wanted to say something but the words wouldn't come.

I took a step toward him.

"You are this pack's healer," I said. My voice came out in a dangerous growl. "And you could not tell that my mother wasn't affected by the rot but poison."

Thorne's knees buckled. He dropped to the floor hard. The sound echoed through the chamber.

"I know," he said. His voice cracked. "I know I have failed you, Alpha."

"No."

He looked up at me. Confused.

"You didn't just fail me," I said. Each word felt like it was being dragged out of my throat. "You and Maren's incompetence would have killed my mother."

Thorne's face went even paler. If that was possible.

I looked toward the door. Two sentinels were still standing there. Waiting.

"Are there guards around?" I asked.

One of them nodded and stepped out into the hallway. Seconds later, four more sentinels filed into the room. They stood at attention. Their eyes locked on me.

I looked back at Thorne.

"Arrest Elder Thorne," I said. "He could be an accomplice for all I know."

Thorne's eyes went wide. He slammed his head against the floor. Once. Twice. The sound made me flinch.

"Please, Alpha Cian," he said. His voice was desperate. "I am loyal to you and only you. I swear it on my life. On my family. On everything I hold sacred."

I stared down at him. At the way his shoulders shook. At the blood starting to seep from where his forehead had hit the stone.

"The investigation and torture will bring the truth out," I said. "Whatever it is."

I nodded to the sentinels. They moved forward.

And that was when Fia stepped between them.

She didn't hesitate. She just moved. Fast. Her body blocked their path to Thorne. Her hands were raised. Not in defense exactly. More like she was trying to calm the situation.

"I know I cannot begin to understand just what you might be feeling right now," she said to me. Her voice was steady. Calm. Like she was talking someone down from a ledge. "But I think arresting Thorne is a mistake."

I scoffed. "A mistake?"

"He is innocent," she said.

"And you know this, how?"

Fia didn't back down. She looked me straight in the eye.

"Before today and the events that are just coming to light, you trusted Elder Thorne," she said. "And you trusted Maren."

I didn't respond. Because she was right.

"If one of them was the culprit," she continued, "with the joint work they did on Luna Morrigan, the one who wasn't privy would have figured the other out and exposed them."

I opened my mouth to argue but she kept going.

"And if they were indeed working together," she said, "Luna Morrigan would, forgive me for the lack of better word, she would already be dead."

The words hit me harder than I wanted to admit.

"Most were already convinced it was the rot," Fia said. "Even you. And you said it yourself that it was bordering on terminal. If she died even today before I revealed this, you wouldn't have suspected a thing."

I clenched my jaw. My hands balled into fists at my sides.

I hated that she was right.

"But how could you figure it out when they couldn't?" I asked. The question came out harsher than I meant it to.

I didn't mean to hurt. But I had a traditional healer and a fucking pack doctor and they didn't know what was going on?

Fia didn't flinch.

"Elder Thorne is a great healer," she said. "But his methods are set in stone. And while Doctor Maren is a bit more contemporary, the reason why they probably misdiagnosed her is because the poison that was put in her medicine was a cocktail of three or more."

"Three or more," I repeated.

She nodded.

"They haven't had a real life experience with the rot before," she said. "The smell of the rot is usually earthy. I had my suspicions when Luna Morrigan smelled more like copper."

I thought back to the times I'd been in my mother's chambers. To the way the air had smelled. Metallic. Sharp. Not like what Fia was now telling me the rot was supposed to be like.

"And before that," Fia continued, "after dinner with your mother, you told me she was terminal. But that is not how a terminal wolf with the rot should look."

I stared at her.

"Even though I don't know all the specifics," she said, "I know what happens when Nightshade and Hemlock root are put together."

"Go on."

"The hemlock root slows the heartbeat and drains strength," she said. "The nightshade twists the nerves and makes the skin mottled. Together, I can see why they could create patches that mimic the affliction marks of the Rot."

My mind raced. I tried to find a hole in her logic. Something I could use to argue. But there was nothing.

"And what if he is guilty?" I asked nonetheless. "What then?"

"I know he is not," she said.

"Maybe you just like seeing the best in people," I said. The words came out cold. Cruel. "It is how you were tricked into marrying me in the first place."

Her face didn't change. But something flickered in her eyes. Something I couldn't quite read because she was shielding now.

I knew it was cruel. But I needed her to see that she had a flaw. That blindly trusting people could get her hurt. Could get her killed.

"Just like you see the worst in people," she said. Her voice was quiet but firm. "Even supposed allies."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut.

I swallowed. My pride stung. My throat felt tight.

"I might be good at detecting poison," she said, "but Doctor Maren and Elder Thorne might be needed to make an antidote for the Grand Luna if the poison has already eaten her deep. Who would you trust if not them?"

I didn't have an answer.

We stared at each other. The silence stretched. I could hear my own heartbeat in my ears. Could feel my wolf pacing in my chest. Restless. Uncertain.

She was right.

Goddess, she was right.

If I arrested Thorne now, I would lose one of the only people who could save my mother. And if Maren was innocent too, I would alienate the only two healers in Skollrend who had been working on her case.

My mother was sort of a secret. I didn't want a lot of people to know what happened to her. So there was plenty of logic in the things that Fia had said.

But if I let Thorne go and he was guilty, I would look like a fool. I would look weak. It wouldn't be lost on majority that I couldn't protect my pack or my own mother.

The door burst open again.

Another sentinel rushed in. His face was flushed. His breathing was uneven.

"Alpha," he said. "We have gathered all ten of them."

I looked back at Thorne. He was still on his knees. Still staring at the floor. His forehead was bleeding. The blood dripped onto the stone in small drops.

I turned to Fia.

"I hope you are right," I said.

Then I looked at Thorne.

"Make sure my mother wakes up if you wish to keep your head."

Thorne's head snapped up. His eyes were wide. Terrified. But he nodded.

"Yes, Alpha."

I looked at the sentinels who had moved to arrest him.

"Let him go," I said.

They stepped back immediately.

I walked past Fia without looking at her. I couldn't. Because if I did, I would see that she had won. That she had made me question myself. That she had made me second guess my own judgment.

There was also the fact that I was horrible to her this morning.

And I couldn't afford that right now.

I reached the door and stopped. I looked back over my shoulder. Just once.

Fia was still standing there. Her arms were crossed. Her expression was unreadable.

"I hope you are right," I said again.

Then I left.

The hallway outside was crowded with sentinels. They parted as I walked through. Their eyes followed me but no one spoke.

I followed the sentinel who had brought the news. He led me down three flights of stairs. Through a narrow corridor. Past the kitchens. Past the servants' quarters.

We reached a large chamber near the base of the fortress. The door was open. I could see inside.

Ten people stood in a line. Six Omegas. Four sentinels. They were all wearing their uniforms. Their hands were clasped in front of them. Their heads were bowed.

They looked terrified.

Good.

I stepped inside. The door closed behind me with a heavy thud.

The room went silent.

I walked slowly down the line. My boots clicked against the stone. I stopped in front of the first Omega. A young woman. She couldn't have been older than twenty. Her hands were shaking.

"Do you know why you are here?" I asked.

She nodded quickly.

"Yes, Alpha."

"Good."

I moved to the next one. A male sentinel. Older. His jaw was tight but his eyes were steady.

"How long have you been serving the Grand Luna?" I asked.

"Three months, Alpha."

"And in those three months, have you noticed anything unusual?"

"No, Alpha."

I studied his face. Looking for any sign of deception. Any flicker of guilt.

Nothing.

I moved on.

One by one, I questioned them. Their answers were all the same. They hadn't noticed anything. They had only followed orders. They had been loyal.

I wanted to believe them.

But someone in this room was lying.

Someone had been poisoning my mother.

And I was going to find out who.

Even if I had to tear this entire fortress apart to do it.

"Get me heavy duty rubber gloves and a barrel of wolfsbane juice. Torture is now the way forward."

Chapter 67: What Remains

FIA

The door slammed shut behind Cian. The sound echoed through the chamber. My heart was still pounding from the confrontation.

I stood there, breathing slowly, trying to process everything that had just happened.

Behind me, I heard movement. The soft scrape of fabric against stone. I turned.

Thorne was getting to his feet. Slowly. His legs looked unsteady. He put one hand against the floor to push himself up. The other pressed against his forehead. When he pulled it away, his palm was smeared with blood.

He stood there for a moment. Just staring at the floor. His shoulders were hunched. His breathing was ragged.

Then he looked at me.

"Why would you step in and save me?" His voice was rough. Tired. "I have been nothing short of antagonizing to you since you entered this territory."

I held his gaze. I didn't look away.

"I knew your reason," I said.

His eyebrows drew together. He was somehow confused.

"You had this idea of me," I continued. "And you simply wanted to protect your Alpha from the scheming woman."

Thorne's jaw tightened. He didn't deny it.

"I saved you because I know in my heart that you are not guilty," I said.

For a long moment, he just stared at me. Then he let out a sound. Something between a laugh and a scoff. It was bitter.

"I don't want to owe you any favors," he said.

I shook my head. "I am not asking you to owe me a favor or favors."

He opened his mouth to respond. I kept talking before he could.

"But there is more than just Nightshade and Hemlock root in the poison you just smashed to the ground."

That got his attention. His eyes widened slightly. His hand lowered from his forehead.

I walked toward the examination table. My boots made soft sounds against the stone. The shattered glass from the medicine bottle was still scattered across the floor. The liquid had pooled in the crevices between the stones. Some of it had started to dry.

I picked up another bottle from the table. This one was empty. It had a cork stopper and a narrow neck. The glass was thick. Good for storing liquids.

I knelt down beside the broken glass. Carefully, I unstopped the empty vial. Then I tilted it. Let the opening rest against one of the larger pools of the spilled medicine.

The liquid flowed into the bottle slowly. It was thick. Viscous. Not like water or even honey. Something darker.

I scooped as much as I could and then tilted the vial at different angles to catch the medicine that had settled in the grooves of the floor. When I was done, the bottle was about a third full. Not much. But it would have to be enough.

I stood up. Corked the vial. Turned to face Thorne.

He was watching me. His expression had changed. The bitterness was gone. Now he just looked focused.

"You know that is poison right? And you are still an Omega."

I ignored that. There was more pressing things to focus on than my weakened immune system being the death of me.

"We need to find what more is in it," I said. I held up the vial so he could see it. "If it can help us find out who did it or help the Grand Luna."

Thorne was still standing in the same spot. Still looking like he wanted to collapse again.

"So get up your ass and stop feeling sorry for yourself," I said. My voice came out as sharp as I intended it to be. "You are alive."

He blinked. Like I had slapped him.

Then something shifted in his face. His jaw set. His shoulders straightened slightly.

"You are right," he said.

I waited.

"I need to redeem myself," he continued. His voice was stronger now. "Be useful to my Alpha."

He walked toward me. His steps were more steady than before. When he reached me, he held out his hand.

I placed the vial in his palm.

He looked down at it. Studied the dark liquid inside. Then he looked back at me.

"Thank you," he said. "I owe you two."

There was something different in his voice. Something genuine. I could feel it. The sincerity. The weight of what he was saying.

Most people said thank you without meaning it. Just words they threw out because it was expected. But Elder Thorne meant it. I could tell.

"Like I said before," I replied, "it is not necessary."

He shook his head. "No."

I waited for him to explain.

"I know when to swallow my pride and be grateful," he said. He held the vial up slightly. Like he was making a point. "We would have never known the Luna was poisoned if it was not because of you. And I would be in a cell now if not for you."

I didn't know what to say to that. So I just stood there. Listening.

"I see it now," he continued. His eyes never left mine. "I always wondered why the goddess would bless a union born from deceit. It felt like a cruel joke at the time and I pitied Alpha Cian."

My chest tightened. I knew what he meant.

"But her ways are beyond man," Thorne said. "You were chosen for a reason. I would be a fool not to acknowledge it, Luna Fia."

Something in his tone made my throat feel tight. I wasn't used to this. To people who had put me in a box see me as anything other than an outsider. A problem. A mistake.

Thorne turned. He set the vial down on the examination table carefully. Then he started gathering the other bottles. The tools. He was organizing them. Getting ready for something.

"You are knowledgeable in poison, aren't you?" he asked. He didn't look at me as he spoke. He just kept working.

"Yes," I said. "Why?"

He paused and turned to face me again.

"You should join me and Maren in the lab," he said. "We need you."

He picked up the vial again. Held it up to the light. The liquid inside looked almost black in the dim chamber.

"Skollrend needs you," he added.

I stared at him. At the way his hands had stopped shaking. At the determination in his eyes. This was a different man than the one who had been on his knees minutes ago. Begging for his life.

"Really?" I asked.

"Of course," Thorne said. "If you are willing."

I thought about it. About what Cian was doing right now. Interrogating the servants. Probably preparing to torture them if he didn't get what he wanted from them.

I thought about the Grand Luna. Lying unconscious somewhere in this fortress. With more than two poisons eating away at her from the inside.

I thought about the person who had done this. Who was still out there. Still free.

"I am willing," I said.

Thorne nodded. He grabbed a leather satchel from under the table. Started loading it with bottles and tools. His movements were quick now. Efficient.

"The lab is in the north wing," he said. "Maren should already be there."

I watched him work. "What do you need me to do?"

"Help us identify every component in this poison," Thorne said. He secured the vial in a special compartment in the satchel. Padded so it wouldn't break. "Every single ingredient. No matter how small."

"And then?"

"Then we figure out who could have made it," he said. "Not everyone has access to these kinds of materials. Especially if there are more than three components. The more complex the poison, the shorter the list of suspects we will have. Because accusing Alpha Gabriel is not enough, we need definitive proof. An added bonus is we can make an antidote."

I nodded. That made sense.

Thorne finished packing the satchel. He slung it over his shoulder. Then he looked at me again.

"I need to ask you something," he said.

"What?"

"How did you know?" His voice was quieter now. "How did you figure it out when Maren and I could not?"

I thought about how to explain it. It wasn't one thing. It was a lot of small details. A lot of things that didn't quite add up.

"I have seen victims of the rot before," I said. "Hell, my mother was one. But I also knew poison well. My mother sort of taught me plenty of what I know."

Thorne waited for me to continue.

"One time, there was a woman," I said. The memory was old. Faded around the edges. "She had been poisoned by her rival. A slow acting poison. Something that mimicked a wasting disease."

"What happened to her?"

"My mother figured it out," I said. "He saved her. But it took weeks to identify all the components. And by then, she was barely alive."

I looked at the satchel Thorne was holding. At the vial inside it.

"I learned to notice the small things," I said. "The smell. The color of the skin. The way the body reacts. Poison is different than disease. Always. You just have to know what to look for."

Thorne was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Your mother taught you well."

"She did."

"And you still remember."

"I remember everything she taught me," I said. My voice came out softer than I meant it to. "It is all I have left of her."

Thorne's expression shifted. Something like understanding passed across his face. Like he knew what it was like to lose someone. To hold onto the things they taught you because it was the only way to keep them close.

"Come on," he said. He turned toward the door. "We have work to do."

I followed him out of the chamber. Into the hallway. The sentinels who had been standing guard outside were gone now. Probably following Cian to wherever he was conducting his interrogations.

We walked in silence. Through corridors I didn't recognize. Past tapestries and windows that overlooked the mountains. The fortress was massive. I was still learning my way around.

"How long have you been Skollrend's healer?" I asked.

"Twenty years," Thorne said. "I took over from my mentor when I was young. Too young, some said."

"But you proved them wrong."

"Eventually." He glanced at me. "But there is always someone who doubts. Who thinks you are not good enough."

I knew that feeling. I had been living it since before I even arrived here.

"Did the Grand Luna trust you?" I asked.

Thorne's face softened. "She did. She was one of the few who believed in me from the start."

Having someone in your corner, I knew how important that was.

"Then we will save her," I said. "We have to."

"Yes," Thorne said. "We will."

We turned a corner. The hallway opened up into a wider corridor. At the end of it was a heavy wooden door. Reinforced with iron. The kind of door that was meant to keep people out.

Or keep something in.

Thorne pulled out a key. Unlocked the door. It swung open with a low creak.

Beyond it was a laboratory. Shelves lined the walls. Filled with bottles and jars and containers of every size. In the center of the room was a large table. Covered in equipment. Burners, mortars, scales and even things I didn't recognize.

Doctor Maren was already there. She looked up when we entered. Her face was pale and her eyes were red like she had been crying.

"Thorne," she said. Her voice cracked. "They let you go too."

"Thanks to her," Thorne said. He gestured to me.

Chapter 68: A good man

CIAN

The rubber gloves came first. They were thick and industrial. The kind used for handling the most corrosive substances. I pulled them on slowly. The rubber squeaked against my skin.

Then the sentinels wheeled in the barrel.

It was massive. Wide enough to fit a person's head and shoulders. The liquid inside sloshed as they positioned it in the center of the room. The smell hit me immediately. Sharp. Acrid. It burned the inside of my nose.

Wolfsbane juice.

Concentrated enough to eat through flesh in seconds.

The Omegas started crying.

"Please, Alpha," one of them sobbed. "Please, we don't know anything."

"We're innocent," another one said. Her voice cracked. "We would never hurt the Grand Luna."

The sentinels were quieter. But I could see the fear in their eyes. The way their hands trembled at their sides. The way they kept glancing at the barrel and then back at me.

It was a good start.

They had to be afraid. I knew how quick that shit spread. It was going to make whoever it was cooperative... Hopefully.

I walked down the line again. Slower this time. My eyes moved from face to face. Looking for guilt. Looking for weakness. Looking for anything that would tell me who had done this.

I stopped in front of one of the sentinels. He was tall. Broad shoulders. A scar ran down his left cheek. He'd been in my service for two years.

"Look at me," I said.

He lifted his head. His jaw was tight. His eyes met mine.

"What do you know?" I asked.

"Nothing, Alpha." His voice was steady. Too steady. "I swear my loyalty to you and the Grand Luna."

I stepped closer. So close I could see the sweat beading on his forehead.

"If that's true," I said quietly, "I will spend my life making this up to you."

His eyes widened slightly.

"But if it's not," I continued, "burn in hell."

I grabbed him by the back of the neck. If it weren't for the rubber, my fingers would have dug into his skin. He gasped. His hands came up instinctively but he didn't fight. Not yet.

I pulled him toward the barrel.

"Wait," he said. His voice cracked. "Wait, please."

I didn't stop. I forced his head down. Closer to the liquid. The fumes were stronger here. They made my eyes water even through the distance.

"One time," he said. The words came out in a rush. "One time, I saw something."

I stopped. My hand was still on his neck. His face was inches from the surface of the wolfsbane juice.

"Speak," I said.

He was breathing hard. Fast. Panicked.

"One time," he said again. He lifted his hand. Pointed to another sentinel across from us. "One time while we were on post, he went into the Grand Luna's quarters."

I looked at the other sentinel. He was younger. Maybe twenty two. His face had gone pale.

"I believed then he just wanted to steal jewelry," the first sentinel continued. "But perhaps I had been wrong."

My blood went cold.

I let go of the first sentinel. He stumbled back. Gasping. His hand went to his neck where my fingers had been.

I turned slowly to face him.

"You were an accomplice to stealing my mother's jewels?" My voice came out low and foreboding. "Jewels that hold sentimental value because they were given to her as gifts by my father? My late father?"

"I apologize, Alpha, I didn't think—"

"You're not fucking loyal."

"Alpha Cian—"

I grabbed him again. Faster this time. My fingers dug into his scalp hard enough to tear hair from the roots. He did not even get a breath in before I slammed his head down into the barrel.

The liquid swallowed him whole.

He screamed.

The wolfsbane choked the sound but I still heard it. Thin. Sharp. Almost inhuman. The surface frothed around his skull like it was boiling. His skin reacted at once. Angry red patches rose across the back of his neck, then deepened into blistered purple.

He jerked hard. His nails scraped down my arms. His boots kicked against the floor. His shoulders twisted like he wanted to tear himself free. Each wild thrash only dragged more of the burning liquid up his face. It splashed over his ears, his jaw, his throat.

The smell hit me. Cooked meat. Chemical sweet. Thick enough to cling to my tongue.

I held him down.

His legs buckled. His hands beat against the sides of the barrel then slowed. His body sagged, then snapped back into another violent convulsion that sent another wave of the poison spilling over the rim.

I counted to five.

Slow. One finger at a time.

Then I hauled him out by his hair, forcing his head back until his neck stretched tight. His face was swollen and raw. Strips of skin peeled away with the movement. Steam rolled off him. He tried to suck in air. His breath came out in wet gasps that sounded more like choking than living.

He was barely upright, so I let him drop. His knees hit first. Then his hands. Then his face.

He twitched once as blood and wolfsbane dripped from his nose and mouth.

But he was still alive.

Even if barely.

I stepped over him. My boots sank into the puddle on the floor. The liquid clung to the soles and left dark streaks behind me.

The other sentinel was already shaking. His gaze stayed locked on the ruined body twitching at my feet.

"Alpha Cian," he said. His voice squeaked like it could barely make it out of his throat. "I swear. All I did was steal jewelry to gamble. I would never poison the Grand Luna."

"A thief is just as bad."

I walked toward him. Slow. Deliberate. He kept backing away until he hit the wall with a small thud. His breath hitched.

"Please," he said. "Please, I didn't—"

I grabbed his head with both hands. My fingers curled into his scalp until he whimpered.

He panicked.

He lunged at me, teeth clenched like he was ready to bite if he had to. His fist shot toward my jaw. I blocked it with one arm and felt the bones in his wrist shift under the pressure. His other hand clawed at my neck. I caught that wrist too, twisted hard, and heard a crack. His grunt sounded more like an animal than a man.

The other sentinels moved. I heard guns slide from holsters. Metal clicking. Fear building in the air.

I raised my free hand without looking at them. They froze.

The sentinel threw a knee at my ribs, desperate enough to fight dirty. I shifted aside. His leg cut through empty air. I used the motion to slam him into the wall again. His skull hit the stone with a sickening smack. His knees buckled for a moment, then he forced himself up, dizzy, still swinging.

He was skilled.

But I had patience. I had purpose.

He rushed me again, throwing wild punches. Each one slower than the last. I watched his eyes start to dull as exhaustion crept in. He tried to back up. Tried to angle his body like he might slip past me.

I let him think he could escape. Let the hope rise just enough to make the fall hurt.

Then I hit him.

My fist cracked into his jaw. The snap echoed. His head whipped to the side. Before he could even register the pain, I drove another punch into his ribs. Something gave under my knuckles. He sucked in a sharp breath. I hit his stomach. Hard. Deep. He folded, coughing spit and blood onto the floor.

I grabbed a handful of his hair. Not to hold him. To control him. To own him.

His face lifted because I forced it to. His cheek was already swelling. His lip split wider when he tried to speak. Blood dripped down his chin and onto my hand.

He whimpered something. I did not care what it was.

I dragged him across the floor. His boots scraped uselessly. He grabbed at my wrist, at the ground, at anything he could find. My grip did not loosen.

The barrel waited.

And he knew exactly where I was taking him.

"No," he said. The word came out slurred. "No, please, no—"

I shoved his head into the liquid without mercy. I forced him down until the liquid swallowed everything above his shoulders.

He screamed.

The sound tore out of him. It shook the inside of the barrel. It rose higher when the wolfsbane started eating through his skin. The liquid hissed as it worked. Violent bubbles clawed at the surface like they wanted to drag him deeper.

He thrashed. His hands slapped the metal rim hard enough to leave blood smears. His boots slipped on the floor as he kicked behind him. His whole body fought to get away from the burn crawling over his face.

I held him down. My grip did not move. Not even when his fingers found my arm and tried to dig in deep enough to break skin.

I counted to seven.

Slow.

Then I let go.

He collapsed onto the floor like a dead weight. His body jerked in sharp bursts. His breath came out in wet rattles. His face was destroyed. Red. Shiny. Strips of skin hanging loose. Blisters torn open. Patches where the liquid had eaten straight into the flesh beneath. I saw raw muscle twitching with every weak gasp he made.

He lifted a hand like he meant to crawl.

I drove my boot into his stomach.

Hard.

The breath punched out of him. His whole body folded around the impact. A broken sound spilled from his throat. It did not sound human. It sounded like something dying slow. His hands curled toward his chest. His back arched. His legs kicked once, then twice, before they gave out.

He tried to suck in air.

I watched him choke on it.

The room was silent except for his gasping and the soft crying of the Omegas.

I turned to face them.

They were all pressed against the far wall. Trying to make themselves as small as possible. Their faces were streaked with tears.

"I can go all day," I said. My voice echoed in the chamber. "Who is it?"

But all I got was more crying and more begging.

"Please, Alpha."

"We don't know anything."

"Have mercy."

I walked toward one of the Omegas. A young woman with dark hair. She was shaking so hard her teeth were chattering.

I grabbed her arm. She screamed.

"No! No, please! Please, I haven't done anything!"

I pulled her toward the barrel. She fought. Tried to dig her heels in. Tried to pull away. But she was small and weak. So it didn't matter.

"Look at it," I said. I forced her to stand in front of the barrel. Made her look down at the liquid. At the way it still bubbled slightly from the heat of the sentinel's burning flesh.

"Look at the others," I said.

She turned her head. Saw the two sentinels on the floor. One was still conscious. Barely. His eyes were unfocused. His breathing was shallow and ragged.

"If you're allied with my uncle," I said, "are you willing to die for him?"

She sobbed. Her whole body shook. Then I turned momentarily to the rest.

"Gabriel is good at using people he deems lesser for his crimes," I continued. "Because that's all he sees you Omegas and sentinels as. A means to an end."

When I was done with my speech, I grabbed her by the back of the neck. She screamed again. Louder.

"Have anything to tell me, darling?" I asked.

"I don't, Alpha—"

I closed my eyes.

And shoved her head into the wolfsbane.

The scream was instant. Piercing. It cut through the air like a blade. The liquid hissed and bubbled. Her hands came up. Clawing at my arms. At the edges of the barrel. Her nails raked across the rubber gloves.

The smell was worse now. Burning hair mixed with burning flesh.

I held her there.

My jaw was clenched so tight it hurt. My wolf was howling in my chest. Raging at my cruelty. But I couldn't stop. I couldn't show weakness. Not now.

Not when my mother's life hung in the balance.

The Omega's struggles were getting weaker.

Only then did I pull her out.

She collapsed. Gasping. Choking. Her face was a mess of red and white. Blisters were already forming. Her hair was singed at the ends.

But she was breathing.

I turned back to the others.

"Next," I said.

Chapter 69: The Alchemy

FIA

Maren's eyes moved from Thorne to me. Her gaze lingered on my face for a moment. She looked exhausted. Her hair was pulled back but strands had fallen loose. There were dark circles under her eyes.

"Then you are probably also the reason I am not in a cell right now," she said.

I opened my mouth to respond but she kept talking.

"Thank you," Maren said. Her voice was thick with emotion. "I thought I was going to die today. I thought Cian was going to execute us both. Being the way he is."

Oh. Oh.

"How is the Grand Luna?" I asked. I needed to change the subject. To focus on what mattered.

Maren's expression crumpled. She looked down at her hands. They were clasped together so tightly her knuckles had gone white.

"Not good," she said quietly.

I waited for her to continue.

Maren took a breath and let it out slowly. "When Luna Morrigan was first affected with what they thought was the rot, she was tested for poison. We ran every test we had. Every single one."

"And?" I prompted.

"The results came out empty," Maren said. She looked up at me. Her eyes were red and watery. "Nothing. No trace of poison at all."

I frowned. "That is odd."

"It is worse than odd," Maren said. Her voice was rising now. She was getting more agitated. "Even now, as I tested her again this morning, nothing came up. Nothing. The tests show she is clean of poison. But we all know she is not."

She stood up from where she had been sitting and started pacing. Her boots made soft sounds against the stone floor.

"I am stumped," she said. "And I am worried. I do not know what to do. I do not know how to help her."

Thorne set the satchel down on the table. "What is her condition now?"

Maren stopped pacing and turned to face him. "The Grand Luna is stabilized. Her breathing is steady. Her heart rate is normal. But for some reason she is not conscious. She should have woken up by now. She should be awake."

The desperation in her voice made my chest ache. This woman had been working herself to exhaustion trying to save her patient. Trying to solve a puzzle that made no sense.

"Well that is why we are here," Thorne said. His voice was calm now. Steady. Like he was trying to ground Maren. Trying to remind her that she was not alone in this. "Three bright minds. We will figure this out."

I was a bit taken aback. By how quick he added me to the equation.

He reached into the satchel. Pulled out the vial carefully. The dark liquid inside caught the light from the candles scattered around the lab.

"We have the poison right here," he said.

Maren walked over to him. He held out the vial. She took it and held it up to examine it. Her eyes narrowed as she studied the contents.

Then she looked at Thorne. A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. It was tired but genuine.

"It is nice seeing you not being a total bitch," she said.

Thorne huffed out a laugh. "I am still a bitch. Just a productive one now."

That broke some of the tension in the room. Maren's shoulders relaxed slightly. She set the vial down on the table and started gathering equipment.

"Alright," she said. "Let us get to work."

I stepped forward. "What do you need me to do?"

Maren glanced at me. "Can you prepare the reagents? We need to test for alkaloids first. You... do know how to do that... Right?"

I nodded, then immediately moved to the shelves along the wall. The bottles were labeled but the handwriting was cramped and hard to read in the dim light. I ran my fingers along the glass until I found what I was looking for.

Behind me, I heard Thorne and Maren talking. Their voices were low but focused. They were discussing testing protocols. Which methods to use first. How to isolate the components.

I brought the reagents back to the table and set them down carefully. Maren was already setting up a series of small glass dishes. Each one was perfectly clean. She poured a tiny amount of the poison into the first dish.

"Start with the standard acid test," Thorne said. He was lighting a burner. The flame caught and turned blue.

Maren nodded and reached for one of the bottles I had brought over. She added a single drop to the poison sample. We all leaned in to watch.

The liquid hissed. Bubbled slightly. Then changed color. From dark brown to a sickly green.

"Nightshade," Maren said. "Confirmed."

Thorne made a note on a piece of parchment. His handwriting was surprisingly neat.

"Next test," he said.

We worked like that for what felt like hours. Test after test. Sample after sample. The process was methodical. Careful. Each time we confirmed an ingredient, Thorne would write it down. We would move on to the next test.

I watched them work together. The way Maren would hand Thorne a tool before he asked for it. The way Thorne would adjust the flame on the burner without Maren having to say anything. They had done this before. Many times. Their movements were synchronized. Practiced.

They had great synergy. I could see it in every gesture. Every unspoken communication.

"Hemlock root," Maren announced after another test. "That is two."

"Keep going," Thorne said.

More tests. More samples. The candles burned lower. My feet started to ache from standing so long.

Then Maren paused. She was staring at a sample that had turned a pale yellow color. Her brow furrowed.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Embermint," she said.

Thorne looked up sharply. "Are you sure?"

Maren ran the test again. Same result. She nodded. "Positive for Embermint."

I found that odd. Very odd. I moved closer to the table and looked at the sample myself.

Embermint had a distinct smell. Sort of sweet but with an underlying bitterness. It grew in the southern territories. In warm climates. I had only seen it a few times in my life.

"That makes no sense," Thorne said. He set down his quill and walked over to look at the sample. "Embermint is not a poison."

"No," I agreed. "It is not."

Maren looked between us. "Could it be a binding agent? Something to help the other ingredients work together?"

Thorne shook his head. "Embermint does not work that way. It has no properties that would make it useful as a binding agent."

I thought about it. Turned the problem over in my mind. Why would someone add Embermint to a poison? What purpose would it serve?

"Maybe it was there to hide the stench of poison," I said. "Embermint has a strong smell. It could mask other odors."

Thorne considered that. "Possible. But it seems like an unnecessary step. Most poisons do not have a strong enough odor for most wolves to detect them in food or drink anyway."

"You are right. My nose was trained as a healer," I said. "I can smell things most wolves cannot. You probably can too. But the average wolf would not know what was what. They would just smell what they could smell."

Maren was quiet. She was staring at the sample again. Her fingers drummed against the table.

"Perhaps there is another ingredient we are not seeing," she said. "Something that requires Embermint to work properly."

Thorne picked up his notes. Reviewed everything we had found so far. Nightshade. Hemlock root. Embermint.

"No," he said finally. "We have been thorough. If there was another ingredient, we would have found it by now."

He set the parchment down and looked at the vial of poison again.

"Embermint has no use to us," he said. His voice was frustrated now. "We see no reason for it to be in the cocktail of poison."

He paused. Something shifted in his expression.

"But that is us," he said slowly.

I felt something click in my brain. A connection I had not made before.

"Witches," I said.

Thorne looked at me. His eyes widened slightly.

"Witches use this all the time," he said.

It was like fog lifting. Like suddenly I could see clearly what had been hidden before.

"Alchemy," Maren and I said at the same time.

The word hung in the air between us. Heavy with meaning.

I turned to Thorne. "It is not just poison."

He was already nodding. Already following the same train of thought. "That is why the tests came back empty. That is why it looked like the rot but was not the rot."

Maren put her hand over her mouth. "Goddess. It was alchemized."

My mind was racing now. Putting all the pieces together. Alchemy was not common. Most wolves did not know anything about it. Neither could they even perform it. It was witch magic after all. The art of transforming substances. Changing their very nature.

If this poison had been alchemized, that explained everything. Why it did not show up on standard poison tests. Why it mimicked the symptoms of the rot almost perfectly.

"We cannot just whip up a cure," I said. The realization hit me like a blow. "Normal antidotes will not work on alchemized poison."

Thorne's face had gone pale. "We need a witch."

"Not just any witch," Maren said. Her voice was tight. "Preferably the witch who did it. They would know exactly what was done to the poison. How it was transformed."

I was already moving. Already heading for the door.

"Where are you going?" Maren called after me.

"I have to tell Cian," I said. I did not stop walking. I did not look back.

This changed everything. The person who had poisoned the Grand Luna was not just some servant with access to the kitchens. It confirmed it was someone who had connections to a witch. Someone who had the resources and knowledge to commission alchemized poison.

Perhaps Thorne's guess had been right and this had been the work of this 'Alpha Gabriel'.

If that was the case, whoever was being used by the Alpha... their financial statements would expose them.

That narrowed the suspect list considerably.

Because in a game of kings, the elephants never sullied their hands.

Chances are they would never be able to pin it on the Alpha responsible for this. But their lapdog would know enough. Enough to reveal who the witch who did the work was. So they could commission an antidote.

I burst out of the lab. Into the hallway. My boots pounded against the stone as I ran. I did not know exactly where Cian was. But I knew he would be somewhere conducting interrogations. Probably in the lower levels of the estate.

I turned a corner. Nearly collided with a sentinel.

"Luna," he said. He stepped back and steadied me with one hand on my arm. "Are you alright?"

"Where is the Alpha?" I asked. I was breathing hard. "I need to find him. Now."

The sentinel's expression grew serious. He could probably tell from my face that this was important. That it could not wait.

"He is not far," the sentinel said. "The interrogation rooms. I can take you there."

"No," I said. "Just point me in the right direction. I can find it."

He hesitated for a moment. Then nodded. "Down this hall. Take the third left. Then the stairs going down. You will see the guards at the entrance."

"Thank you," I said.

I was already running again before he could respond. My lungs burned. My legs ached. But I did not slow down.

This was too important. Cian needed to know. He needed to understand what we were dealing with. That torturing servants was not going to get him much.

I reached the stairs. Took them two at a time going down. My hand gripped the railing to keep my balance. The stone was cold under my palm.

At the bottom, I saw the guards. Two of them. Standing on either side of a heavy door. They straightened when they saw me approaching.

"I need to see the Alpha," I said. I was still breathing hard. "It is urgent."

One of the guards opened his mouth. Probably to tell me I could not enter. That the Alpha was busy.

But then the door opened from the inside.

Cian stood there. His face was hard. Unreadable. There was blood on his knuckles. Fresh blood.

He looked at me. His eyes narrowed slightly.

"Fia," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"We figured it out," I said. "The poison. We know why it did not show up on tests. Why it looked like the rot."

Cian's expression changed. The hardness melted away. He stepped out into the hallway. Let the door close behind him.

"Tell me," he said.

I took a breath. Let it out slowly. "It is alchemized. The poison was alchemized by a witch. That is why nothing showed up on the tests and Maren and Thorne believed it was the rot. That was the goal."

Cian went very still. I watched his jaw tighten. Watched his hands curl into fists at his sides.

"A witch," he said. His voice was low. Dangerous.

"Yes," I said. "Which means we need to find the witch who did it. Or at least a witch who can undo what was done. A normal antidote will not work."

"Finding the witch who did it will not be easy," Cian said. "I have been torturing the sentinels and Omegas who should know something for hours and no one has confessed."

"There is no need for that. Their bank accounts will expose them."

Chapter 70: Godlight

CIAN

I stood there looking at Fia. She was still breathing hard from running. Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes were bright with urgency.

Bank accounts. Of course. Why had I not thought of that? If Gabriel was behind this, he would have paid someone. And payments left trails. Even the most careful criminals made mistakes with money.

I felt something shift in my chest. Something uncomfortable. Fia was helping me. She was actively working to save my mother. After I had screamed at her. After I had blamed her for breaking Madeline's picture frame. After I had treated her like she was nothing.

I looked at her face. Really looked at it. There was no calculation there. No hidden agenda. Just genuine concern. Just a woman who wanted to help save a life.

I could not even let myself think she had ulterior motives. It would be insulting. To her. To myself. To everything I was supposed to stand for as an Alpha of this pack and her... mate

"That is smart," I said. My voice came out rougher than I intended.

Fia tilted her head slightly. Waiting for me to continue.

I cleared my throat. "I will get their phones then."

A small smile touched her lips. Just the corners lifting slightly. It was tired but real. My heart did something strange. A flutter. Quick and unexpected. Like something inside me had woken up without permission.

I killed the feeling immediately. Shoved it down deep where it could not bother me. This was not the time. This would never be the time.

I turned back to the door. Pushed it open. The smell hit me first. Blood. Sweat. Fear. The acrid bite of wolfsbane still hanging in the air.

Being inside for so long, I had not realized it was this bad.

Fia followed me inside. I heard her footsteps behind me. Soft against the stone floor.

I was about to tell her to stay back. To wait outside. She did not need to see this. She did not need to witness what I had done.

But when I turned to speak, the words died in my throat.

Her face had gone pale. Her eyes were wide. Her hand came up to cover her mouth.

"Goddess," she whispered.

I followed her gaze. Saw what she was seeing.

The bodies on the floor. The two sentinels I had tortured earlier. One was now semi-conscious. His face was destroyed. Raw meat where skin should have been. The other was conscious but barely. His eyes were unfocused. His breathing shallow and wet.

The Omega I had dunked was curled on her side. She was whimpering. Her hands pressed to her face where the blisters had formed. Where the skin had peeled away.

Others has suffered the same fate and the ones who still has their faces on were pressed against the walls. Trying to make themselves small. Their faces were tear streaked. Their eyes hollow with terror.

I turned back to face them fully and look away from Fia. She has seen it. My cruelty. So there was no use crying over spilled milk now.

"It is clear we are not going to be getting any answers from you guys," I said. My voice echoed in the chamber. Cold and final.

Some of them flinched. Others just stared at the floor.

"I also understand that some of you are innocent," I continued. "So there is no point suffering needlessly."

A few heads lifted. Hope flickered in their eyes. But it was a cautious and fragile thing.

"I will be taking your phones."

The reaction was immediate. The ones who could still move reached for their pockets. Pulled out their phones with shaking hands. They tossed them forward. The devices clattered against the stone. A sentinel stepped forward to gather them.

One of the Omegas tried to speak. Her voice came out garbled. Broken. Her face was too swollen for her mouth to form proper words.

"Thank you, Alpha," another one managed. The words were slurred but I understood them. "Thank you for your kindness."

Kindness. The word tasted bitter in my mouth.

I counted the phones. Seven. But there had been ten suspects brought in for questioning.

"Three of you do not have your phones here," I said.

The three who had not produced devices shrank back. Their eyes went wide with fresh panic.

"If you do not want more time in wolfsbane juice," I said slowly. "You better start producing one."

"They are in our quarters," one of them said quickly. His words tumbled over each other. "Please. Please, Alpha. They are just in our rooms. We can get them."

"I will get them," I said.

I turned to one of the sentinels standing guard. One who had not been accused of anything. Who had remained loyal.

"Get their keys," I said. "Get into their rooms and get the phones."

The sentinel nodded. He walked over to the three suspects. They fumbled with their key rings and handed them over with trembling fingers.

The sentinel left. The door closed behind him with a heavy thud.

I looked at the group again. At the broken bodies. At the terrified faces. At the blood and wolfsbane pooled on the floor.

"For the meantime," I said. "All of you will be imprisoned while the phones are thoroughly searched for all things strange."

I paused and let the words sink in.

"And to whoever did it," I continued. My voice dropped lower and became something darker. "When I do find you, you will pay for the people you made suffer. You will pay for the audacity you had to make this difficult for me."

I took a step forward. Several of them pressed themselves harder against the wall.

"I promise you," I said. "You will beg for the sweet release of death. And it will simply not find you."

The silence that followed was thick. Heavy. No one dared to breathe too loudly.

I turned to another sentinel. "Take them all and throw them in a cell."

The sentinels moved forward and started pulling the suspects to their feet. The ones who could not stand were dragged. Their bodies left smears of blood across the stone.

I heard footsteps behind me. Turned to see Fia approaching. Her face was still pale. Her eyes still wide with horror.

"Is that not a bit much?" she asked. Her voice was quiet but steady. "They have wolfsbane burns."

My heart broke a little. I could feel it through the mate bond. The horror radiating from her. The disgust at what I had done. At what I was capable of.

But this was about sending a message. About making sure everyone in this territory, my territory, knew that attacking my mother came with consequences. Severe ones.

"We are wolves," I said. "We will heal."

I walked past her and headed for the door. I needed to get to the technical department. Needed to start going through those phones with the technical team immediately.

Fia followed me. Her footsteps quick behind mine.

"Omegas are not that strong," she said.

I kept walking.

"Their immune system will be compromised," she continued. "And healing is extremely slow as well."

I pushed open the door to the hallway. The cooler air hit my face. I sucked in a breath.

"The unlucky bunch will die," Fia said.

"No," I said. "They will not."

I heard her footsteps speed up. Then she was in front of me. Blocking my path. Her hands came up like she might push against my chest if I tried to move past her.

"No," she said. "You do not know that."

I stopped. Looked down at her.

"You do not have the lived experiences of an Omega," she said. Her voice was rising now. Getting stronger. "You do not know what it feels like to be like this."

Her eyes were blazing. There was fire there. Conviction.

"I know you have every right to be angry about your mother," she continued. "But there are good people there. Good people who got caught in the crossfire."

She paused and then swallowed hard.

"People who will die because their ranks are not important enough."

The words hit me like a physical blow.

"Are you that kind of man?" she asked.

The question hung between us. Heavy. Impossible to ignore.

Those words resonated inside me. Bounced around in my skull. Was I that kind of man?

Was I? Was I the kind of Alpha who let innocent people die because they happened to be Omegas and Sentinels? Because someone in that bunch wronged me, was I going to view the rest as collateral damage and not important enough to save?

"No," I said quietly.

Fia's expression softened slightly. "Give Maren and Thorne access to treat them. You have no concrete proof against them yet. So you cannot treat them as sub-wolves."

She was right. I hated that she was right. But she was.

"Fire away," I said. "I will be in technical. And I will find something."

Fia nodded. "Okay."

I started to walk past her. To head up the stairs. To get to work on those phones.

But the guilt ate at me. Gnawed at my insides like a living thing. I stopped and turned back around.

"Fia," I said.

She had already started walking away. Back toward the interrogation room. Back to help the people I had hurt. She stopped and turned to face me.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I am sorry for lashing out at you," I said.

She looked at me for a moment. Her expression was unreadable. "I understand."

"No," I said. I took a step toward her. "I was rash. I was rude and I took out an unhealed part of myself on you."

The words felt heavy coming out. Like pulling splinters from a wound. I didn't like apologizing.

"And for that I am sorry," I finished.

Fia nodded slowly. Her eyes met mine and held my gaze for a long moment before looking away.

"I am also grateful," I added. The words came easier now. Like a dam breaking. "If it was not for you, none of this would have come to light."

Fia reached up. Tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. The gesture was small. Almost shy.

"Someone would have figured it out eventually," she said.

I crossed over to her. Closed the distance between us. Her scent hit me. That familiar combination of sweet and the musk that was just her. It made something in my chest tighten.

I knew I should not do this. I knew it was crossing a line I had drawn for myself. But I could not stop.

I wrapped my arms around her. Pulled her against my chest. She was small in my embrace. Warm.

"You should do less self deprecation and just take the praise," I said quietly. My voice rumbled in my chest.

I felt her tense for a moment. Then slowly relax. Her arms came up. Not quite hugging me back but not pulling away either.

"Thank you, Fia," I said.

We stood like that for several heartbeats. Her face pressed against my chest. My chin resting on the top of her head. The hallway was quiet around us. Just our breathing. Just the steady thump of my heart.

Then I pulled back and let her go. She looked up at me. Her cheeks were flushed again. Her eyes were softer now. Less horrified. Less angry.

"Go help them," I said. "I will find who did this."