

To ruin an Omega

#Chapter 81: Under Running Water 2 - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 81: Under Running Water 2

Chapter 81: Under Running Water 2

FIA

Goosebumps spread across his chest and down his abdomen. His muscles went rigid under my touch. Like he was holding himself very still.

I looked up.

He was staring at me.

His eyes were dark. Darker than I had ever seen them. His jaw was tight. A muscle jumped in his cheek.

I withdrew my hand.

"Sorry."

The word came out barely above a whisper.

"It is fine."

His voice was restrained. Too restrained. Like he was forcing the words through clenched teeth.

We stood there.

Neither of us moved. Neither of us spoke. The water kept running. Steam filled the shower. My heart hammered against my ribs so hard I was sure he could hear it.

One minute passed.

Maybe two.

Time felt strange. Like it was stretched thin and yet still heavy at the same time.

"You look clean," Cian said finally as he sprayed my lathered hands before he lowered the shower head.

The water stopped.

"I should get you a towel."

He stepped out before I could respond. Water dripped from his body onto the tile. I watched him cross to the cabinet and pull out a large white towel.

He came back.

The towel wrapped around me. It was soft and even better, it was warm. He tucked it carefully around my shoulders and made sure it covered me completely.

"You still have lather on you," I said.

He looked down at himself. At the soap still clinging to his chest and arms.

"Right. Right."

He ran a hand through his wet hair.

"I will help you out first. Then get clean."

I nodded.

He guided me out of the shower. His hand was firm on my elbow. Steadying me as I stepped over the threshold and onto the bathroom rug.

"Can you stand?" he asked.

"Yes."

My legs felt more solid now. Less likely to give out without warning.

"Good."

He released my elbow and stepped back into the shower. The glass door closed between us.

I stood there.

Dripping onto the rug. Clutching the towel around myself. Staring at nothing in particular.

What was that?

The question echoed in my head. Over and over. What was that tension in the shower? That moment when our eyes met and everything felt heavy and charged? That second when I touched his chest and felt him react?

What was it?

The water turned back on behind the glass. I could see Cian's silhouette through the frosted panels. Could see him moving. Rinsing off the soap. Running his hands through his hair.

I needed to leave.

Standing here watching him shower was not helping anything. Was not making this situation any less weird or complicated or confusing.

I turned toward the door.

My reflection caught my eye in the mirror above the sink.

I looked terrible.

My hair was plastered to my head. My face was pale. Dark circles shadowed my eyes. The bruises on my cheek and jaw stood out like ink stains against my skin.

But I was clean.

No more blood. No more dirt. Just me. Battered and exhausted and wrapped in an oversized towel in Cian's bathroom.

The shower turned off.

I heard the door open. Heard his footsteps on the tile.

I did not turn around.

"You should rest," he said.

His voice came from somewhere behind me. Close but not too close.

"You can stay here. I will sleep somewhere else tonight, if I can. I have a lot of work to do."

I finally turned to look at him.

He had wrapped a towel around his waist. Water still dripped from his hair and ran down his chest in thin rivulets. He was not looking at me. His eyes were focused on something past my shoulder.

"Thank you," I said.

The words felt inadequate. But they were all I had.

He nodded once.

"Get some sleep."

Then he was moving past me. Out of the bathroom. Into the bedroom beyond.

I followed slowly.

My legs cooperated better now. The dizziness had faded, enough for me to take a few careful steps into the bedroom.

Cian was already moving toward the wardrobe. He opened it without a word and pulled out a soft looking shirt and a pair of loose cotton shorts. He placed them at the foot of the bed, his movements quiet, almost cautious.

"These should fit well enough," he said.

His voice was steady, but something in it tugged at me. Not pity. Something gentler.

I walked to the bed and picked up the clothes. The shirt smelled like clean fabric and a hint of cedar. I slipped it over my head. The hem brushed my thighs. The shorts were loose around my waist, but they stayed up. They felt warm, warmer than the towel that clung to my skin.

The sheets were still tangled from my nightmare. I straightened them as best I could and climbed in.

The mattress was soft. The pillows were perfect. Everything smelled like Cian. That scent that I was starting to associate with safety even though I did not want to.

Then he returned to the wardrobe and grabbed another set of clothes and pulled them on.

As quickly as he put them on, he moved toward the door.

I was turned to the other side of the bed at that time but I just couldn't help myself when the thought nudged itself at the back of my mind.

"Cian," I said.

He stopped.

I could not see him from where I was lying. But I heard him turn back toward the bed.

"Yes?"

"Are you alright?"

The question surprised me as much as it probably surprised him. But once it was out I could not take it back.

Silence stretched between us.

"I am fine," he said finally.

His voice was neutral. Carefully neutral. Like he was putting effort into keeping it that way.

"Get some rest, Fia."

The door opened. Then closed.

I was alone.

I lay there in the dim lights. Staring at the wall and trying not to think about what had just happened. Trying not to replay every moment of that shower in my head.

Trying not to wonder what it meant.

If it meant anything at all. Because what Bo had said before Cian took her life was also lodged in my head.

"Now that Luna Morrigan does not have the rot, and Alpha Cian does not have to fear that the Goddess will punish him for defying her hand in your marriage... do you think he will stay with you?"

I hadn't really understood why those words cut so deep but I was starting to realize it now.

I liked Cian. I wasn't even sure when that happened. But it was clear as day to me now that I did.

Chapter 82: Under Running Water 3

CIAN

I stood behind Fia. My eyes traced the line of her spine through the ruined dress. Blood had dried in dark streaks across the fabric. Across her skin beneath.

My fingers reached for the zipper.

She went rigid.

Every muscle in her body locked up like I had touched her with a live wire. I could see the tension in her shoulders. Could see the way she held herself too still.

"Relax," I said.

The word came out quieter than I intended.

She tried. I watched her shoulders shift slightly. But the tension remained. She could not shake it off.

I pulled the zipper down slowly. The teeth separated one by one. The fabric parted to reveal pale skin marked with bruises and dried blood. My knuckles brushed against her spine.

Her skin was soft.

Too soft.

A shiver ran through her. I felt it under my fingertips. Felt the way her body reacted to the simple touch.

I dropped my hand and stepped back.

Put distance between us before I did something stupid.

"There," I said.

My voice sounded rough. Like I had swallowed gravel.

I stripped off my own clothes without looking at her. Shirt. Pants. Everything went onto the floor in a heap. I kept my boxers on. That was the only concession to decency I was willing to make right now.

The sound of fabric hitting tile reached my ears.

I kept my eyes forward. Stared at the shower controls like they held the secrets of the universe. Did not let myself turn around. Did not let myself look at her.

Footsteps crossed the bathroom.

The shower door opened.

Closed.

I waited. Counted to ten. Then twenty. Gave her enough time to settle before I had to follow her in there.

This was a bad idea.

Every instinct I had screamed that this was a terrible idea. That getting naked and stepping into a confined space with Fia was going to end badly for both of us.

But she needed help.

She was hurt. Exhausted. Barely able to stand on her own. And I had put her in that position. Had let her stay so close to danger because I had been too focused on finding traitors to see the one standing right in front of me.

I owed her this much.

I pulled off my boxers and tossed them aside. Then I opened the shower door and stepped inside.

The space was large but it felt small with both of us in it.

Fia stood with her back to me. Her arms were wrapped around herself. Her head was bowed slightly. Like she was trying to make herself smaller.

I reached past her and turned on the water.

Warm. Not hot. Just enough to wash away the blood without scalding her bruised skin.

"Tilt your head back," I said.

She obeyed.

Water hit her hair first. Ran down in pink rivulets that spiraled toward the drain. I grabbed the shampoo and squeezed some into my palm. Then I stepped closer.

Close enough to touch.

Close enough to smell the blood and sweat clinging to her.

My hands moved to her hair. Fingers worked through the tangled strands. Scrubbing. Massaging. Getting rid of every trace of blood.

The soap foamed white against the dark mess. Bubbles slid down the sides of her face and dripped off her chin. I watched them fall. Watched the water turn clearer as the blood washed away.

She was so still.

So quiet.

Like she was holding her breath.

"Turn around," I said.

She turned.

Her eyes stayed closed. Lashes dark against her pale cheeks. Bruises stood out stark against her skin. Purple and blue and angry red.

My chest tightened.

I had done this. Not directly. But I had put her in the position where this could happen.

I made a soft sound without meaning to.

A quiet laugh.

Because this situation was absurd. Because I was standing naked in a shower with my figurehead bride, washing blood off her face like it was the most normal thing in the world. Because my wolf was howling at me to touch her more. To pull her closer. To forget about the blood, what was at stake, reality and everything else.

I bit it back and focused on the task.

Soap. Water. Rinse. Repeat.

That was the only mantra I needed currently.

My hands moved to her face. Gentle around the bruises. Careful not to press too hard. The water followed. Washing away the soap and blood until her skin was clean again.

Then her arms.

I took her wrist in my hand. Her pulse jumped under my fingers. Fast. Too fast.

Was she afraid?

Or was it something else?

I scrubbed at her forearms. Her wrists. Each finger individually. The blood flaked away under my touch and revealed clean skin beneath.

Then her eyes opened.

I felt it before I saw it. I felt the weight of her gaze on me.

I looked up. Our eyes met and everything stopped.

The water kept running but I could not hear it anymore. I could not hear anything except the blood rushing in my ears. I could not feel anything except the heat building in my chest.

She was looking at me.

Really looking.

Not the careful glances she usually gave me. Not the wary once overs. This was different. It was open wide as she was unguarded.

Like she was seeing me for the first time.

My wolf surged forward.

There was want present . No. That would be lying. This was need. I wanted to take her. I wanted to claim her. I needed to make her... Mine.

The thoughts slammed into me with enough force to steal my breath.

Her cheeks flushed.

Pink spread across her skin like watercolor bleeding through paper.

She looked away quickly.

Too quickly.

I forced myself to breathe.

"Turn around," I managed to whisper.

Yet, my voice came out rougher than before. Like something had scraped it raw.

She turned.

I grabbed more soap and worked it over her back. My palms slid across her shoulders. Down her spine. Then up to her clavicle. Over the space between where Bo's shard had broken skin.

The wound was already healing. Shallow enough that it would be gone in a day or two. But the sight of it made something dark twist in my gut.

Bo had hurt her.

The bitch had stood there and smiled while she hurt Fia.

And I had killed her for it.

I would kill her again if I could.

"Did you retrieve Bo's phone?"

Fia's voice cut through my thoughts.

I paused. Water ran over my hands. Over her skin.

"No."

The word tasted bitter.

"I was busy with you."

True. But it was also an excuse. I should have thought about the phone. Should have made sure it was secured before I carried Fia out of there.

But... She was all that was on my mind. The fear I had felt had been full and as real as breathing.

Why?

I shook the thought off. I needed to focus on what was at hand. Her question. I could feel something else brewing at the back of her mind. And while I couldn't read her thoughts, I could surmise she wanted to ask another question.

So I chipped in quickly; "It will be kept though... I am sure even if my uncle has more spies and double agents, they would be walking on eggshells at the moment."

Fia turned to face me.

"But they could delete stuff off the phone."

Water dripped down her face. Down her neck. Over her collarbone.

I dragged my eyes back to hers despite knowing it was a big mistake. But a part of me just wanted to look. There was no harm in looking.

"I have a competent team of technicians. Nothing would be hidden enough."

She did not look convinced.

"Now just stay still and let me wash you."

I raised the shower head and aimed it at her face.

Water hit her full on. She sputtered and blinked and wiped at her eyes with one hand.

It was because I needed to break the spell. If she didn't stop looking, I doubt I would have been able to.

Then she pointed at my chest.

"Look. You have blood too."

I glanced down. A dark streak marked my ribs. Bo's blood. Or maybe Fia's. I could not tell which.

"It is not important." I said.

But her retort was even sharper. "It is."

She reached for the soap.

My body went taut.

Every muscle locked up as I watched her lather the soap between her palms. White foam covered her hands. Then she pressed them against my chest.

My skin burned where she touched me.

Goosebumps spread across my chest and down my abdomen. My muscles went rigid. I held myself absolutely still because if I moved I was going to do something I could not take back.

Like pull her closer.

Like pin her against the fucking wall.

Like kiss her until neither of us could breathe.

The memory slammed into me.

Madeline.

Standing in a shower just like this one. Washing blood off my chest after a particularly brutal training session. Her hands moving across my skin with the same careful attention.

I had kissed her then.

I had pulled her close and kissed her like my life depended on it.

And she had kissed me back.

But that memory didn't protrude out of nowhere. It came because... It came because... I wanted to kiss Fia.

I wanted it so badly, my hands shook with the effort of holding back. I wanted to taste her. To feel her pressed against me. To bury my face in her neck and breathe her in until I could not tell where I ended and she began.

But I could not.

I could not do that to her.

I could not pretend this was something it was not.

Chapter 83: Under Running Water 4

CIAN

Fia looked up at me.

Her eyes were wide and dark. Something flickered in them that I could not name.

I withdrew my hand which has been so close to grabbing hers.

"Sorry."

The word came out barely above a whisper.

"It is fine."

My voice was restrained. Too restrained. I was forcing the words through clenched teeth. Fighting every instinct that screamed at me to close the distance between us.

We stood there.

Neither of us moved. Neither of us spoke. The water kept running. Steam filled the shower until I could barely see her through it.

My heart hammered against my ribs.

One minute passed.

Maybe two.

Time felt strange. Stretched thin and heavy at the same time.

"You look clean," I said finally because this needed to end before it got even further. There was not much I could take.

I sprayed her lathered hands before lowering the shower head.

The water stopped.

"I should get you a towel."

I stepped out before I did something stupid.

Water dripped from my body onto the tile. I crossed to the cabinet and pulled out a large white towel. It was warm from the heated rack.

I came back.

Wrapped the towel around her carefully. Made sure it covered her completely. Then I tucked it around her shoulders.

"You still have lather on you," she said.

I looked down at myself. At the soap still clinging to my chest and arms.

"Right. Right."

I ran a hand through my wet hair.

"I will help you out first. Then get clean."

She nodded.

I guided her out of the shower. My hand was firm on her elbow. Steadying her as she stepped over the threshold.

"Can you stand?" I asked.

"Yes."

Her voice was stronger now.

"Good."

I released her elbow and stepped back into the shower and closed the glass door between us and turned the water back on.

I needed cold water.

Ice cold.

I kept my hand on the handle for a moment longer than I needed to, knuckles tight, because letting go meant letting her out of my immediate focus and letting the reality of what my body was doing hit me full-force.

The second I turned back to the showerhead I twisted the knob all the way to cold. The pipes groaned and then the water hit me in a brutal silver sheet, a shock that punched the heat right out of my skin. I leaned forward, palms braced on the tile, shoulders hunched as the cold drilled into the back of my neck.

It was necessary. Goddess, it was necessary.

Because the moment my hand left her elbow, the moment her weight wasn't against me anymore, everything I'd tried to bury while steadying her surged up, thick and unforgiving, my cock already straining, the pulse in it beating with each echo of her voice in my head. That simple yes she'd given me—steady, breathy, recovering—had curled low and hot inside me like a brand.

Cold. Focus on cold. Nothing else.

The water knifed down my spine and I forced myself to breathe through it, long and slow, letting the icy sting smother every image of her bare skin slick from the shower, the way her chest rose when she steadied herself, the faint tremble in her thighs when I'd guided her out. That tremble lived in my hands now, phantom-soft, and it took everything not to shudder at the memory.

I pressed my forehead to the tile. Stayed there. Let the chill crawl over me until my teeth almost clicked.

Anything to hide the hard, urgent pressure beneath my stomach, anything to make sure she didn't see it when she glanced back even if it was fucking frosted glass, anything to burn the heat out of me before it turned into something reckless and obvious. The cold wasn't comfort. It was discipline, a bracing plunge meant to drag me out of the molten undertow she left in her wake.

Ice water hammered me in relentless sheets and I pulled it closer to my skin, shoulders shifting under the frigid spray, letting the shock swallow every lingering thought of how her voice had sounded so close to my ear, how small her waist felt under my hand, how easy it would've been to—

No. Cold. Only cold.

I stood there until the burn in my muscles replaced the one she'd put under my skin, the cold a shield I clung to, breathing steadier, heartbeat easing, desire forced down into a tight, painful knot that at least no longer threatened to give me away the moment I stepped back out.

My wolf prowled in the back of my mind.

Restless and just as frustrated.

I ignored it.

I had to. I then turned off the water. Grabbed a towel and wrapped it around my waist before stepping out.

Fia was still standing there. Dripping onto the rug. Clutching the towel around herself. Staring at nothing.

"You should rest," I said as I kept my distance. "You can stay here. I will sleep somewhere else tonight, if I can. I have a lot of work to do."

She turned to look at me.

Her eyes met mine for a brief moment before I glanced away.

"Thank you," she said.

I nodded. There was nothing else to offer.

"Get some sleep."

I walked past her. Into the bedroom. I opened the wardrobe and pulled out a soft shirt and loose cotton shorts. I placed them at the foot of the bed.

"These should fit well enough," I said.

She crossed the room, picked up the clothes, and slipped the shirt over her head. It fell to her thighs. The shorts were loose but stayed in place.

She climbed into the bed without another word.

I turned back to the wardrobe, grabbed something for myself, and dressed fast. Jeans. A plain shirt. Simple.

I headed for the door.

"Cian," she said.

I stopped.

Turned.

"Yes?"

"Are you alright?"

The question hit me in a way I did not expect.

I stood still. Let the silence stretch while I searched for the right answer.

"I am fine," I said at last.

My voice stayed steady. Too steady. A safe wall between us.

"Get some rest, Fia."

I opened the door and stepped out. Closed it behind me.

The hallway waited, quiet and empty.

I leaned my back against the wall and let out a slow breath that felt like it dragged something out of my chest.

My wolf rose inside me, sharp and angry. The word echoed through me, low and certain, like teeth against bone.

Coward.

Maybe.

But kissing her would have been worse.

It would have been taking advantage of her when she was vulnerable. When she was hurt and exhausted and had just survived an attack.

I pushed off the wall and headed toward Fia's suite.

The blood had been cleaned. The floor gleamed. The air smelled like disinfectant and lemon cleaner. No trace remained of what had happened here.

A sentinel stood at the end of the hallway.

I walked toward him.

"Where are the Omegas that cleaned this room?" I asked.

"In their quarters, Alpha."

"Get them."

The sentinel nodded and left.

I turned and headed to my study. My feet carried me there on autopilot. Through familiar hallways. Past familiar doors.

The study was dark when I stepped inside. I turned on the light. Closed the door.

A cupcake sat on my desk.

Pink frosting. White sprinkles.

I stared at it.

Who would bring this here?

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. Soft. Careful.

The door opened.

Three Omegas walked in and bowed.

"Alpha," the first one said.

"You did good work cleaning that room," I said. "You were quick and thorough."

"Thank you, Alpha."

"There was a phone there. Did any of you take it?"

They shared a look, unsure who should answer.

The second one spoke. "Beta Ronan arrived while we were finishing. We felt it was safer to give it to him since he is your right hand."

Of course.

Ronan.

I looked at the cupcake again. A note hid under the wrapper.

I still got you a gift. The depth of my kindness.

A scoff slipped out. Almost a laugh. Almost.

"You can go," I said. "I will get it from him."

They bowed again and left.

I sat at the desk and reached for my phone.

Three missed calls from Ronan.

I had not heard a single one. My head had been full of Fia. Her voice. Her face. The way her body leaned into mine for the briefest moment. The way I tried not to think about any of it.

My wolf stirred.

How long can you pretend you do not want what I want?

"It is not fair on her," I said. "I cannot love her."

My wolf growled, low and stubborn.

"All I feel is lust," I said. "That is what happens when someone avoids everyone for years."

The words felt thin and false.

"Maybe I only need someone random. A warm body. Something simple."

My wolf went quiet.

Too quiet.

I stared at the cupcake. At the neat swirl of pink frosting. At the note tucked beneath it.

Then I called Ronan.

He picked up fast.

"Well. My Alpha finally remembers me."

"I was busy," I said.

"You mean busy on the business you sent me to handle," he said. "A lot went down."

"I know. The Grand Luna."

"And the Luna in your bed. That part is my favorite. I hear you two got very close. Want to tell me how close?"

My jaw locked.

"Bring the phone to technical."

I ended the call.

Dropped my phone on the desk.

Looked at the cupcake again.

And tried not to picture Fia sleeping in my sheets, soft and warm and far too close to the part of me I kept chained.

Chapter 84: The Architect

ALDRIC

The strawberry touched my tongue and the sourness struck me in a way that felt rude. A small violation. A reminder that the world had corners I had not smoothed yet. I let it fall from my mouth and watched it hit the marble with a soft wet slap. The red spread across the floor, lively and wild. A little chaos staining a perfect room.

"Who picked this."

The sentinel behind me shifted. I heard the slow tension in his leather boots. Fear always had a sound if you were patient enough to listen.

"I am not sure, Alpha."

"Well find them. Bring them."

He left without hesitation, which pleased me. I always admired people who knew how to leave a room at the right moment, like good background music fading when the scene demands quiet.

I took another strawberry from the bowl. It was beautiful. Red like a secret. Glossy like a lie. It reminded me of half the people I had known. Perfect on the surface and disappointing where it mattered.

My phone buzzed.

It was an unknown number.

Yet the vibration had a certain pace, a certain timing. Trouble always announced itself with unmistakable rhythm.

I answered.

"If you are calling me, then things are worse than expected. Did Bo fail?"

A stretched silence followed. The kind that tried to hide something but failed because silence itself becomes a confession.

"Bo is dead. Alpha Cian killed her."

A small laugh escaped me. Not sharp. Not cold. Just honest. The kind of sound only pure amusement can draw from a man. My nephew had taken a life. Not by accident. Not in desperation. Out of decision. That was beautiful. A man is most honest when he kills with intention. It reveals the spine of his soul.

"I did not think he would step into violence so quickly, but he has always had the seed. It is good to see him watering it."

I rolled the strawberry between my fingers. The seeds pressed lightly against my skin. A simple touch. Yet I felt more truth in that texture than in most conversations I had ever had.

"There is a problem," the voice said. "Her phone. It is incriminating."

I stopped rolling the berry. Not in fear. In calculation. I enjoyed calculations. They felt like a private game the world could not interrupt.

"I was careful."

"Yes. But your number is saved. I wanted to remove it. I feared it would give you away."

I placed the strawberry down on the desk. Slowly. Ritual is important. Even small rituals. People underestimate how much control small movements offer.

"What number do you think they will find."

There was silence again. Awkward this time. Hesitant. So I continued.

"They will see it and doubt. Cian knows the version of me I built for him. He trusts that illusion. If they dig deeper, they will find the number is actually Gabe's. That will comfort him. People always choose the explanation that lets them sleep."

I moved to the window and studied the gardens below. Order. Geometry. A world shaped by my hands into something predictable. That was how life should be. Controlled. Observed. Contained. Like a creature in a glass bowl.

"Luna Morrigan living is the real problem," I said. "Her presence ruins more than timing. It ruins architecture. And I hate when someone ruins architecture."

I picked up the strawberry again, took a bite, and felt a warm burst of sweetness flood my mouth. Pure. Clean. Honest. This was how things should be. Predictable pleasures.

"Good thing I enjoy redesigning things. Even disasters can be shaped."

I let the sweetness linger. There are not many moments in life worth slowing down for, but this one was. The simple joy of something doing exactly what it was meant to do.

"Do something for me."

"What."

"Collect some poisons from the witch. Ophelia."

"Yes."

"Use them and kill the fucking witch."

There was a pause. A breath caught between fear and logic.

"That will be suicide. She is in her place of power when she is in her shop. Protected."

I smiled. A small smile. The kind I gave to animals that thought they understood the hunter.

"You cannot die for this cause?"

"I am being rational."

"Then I will send someone else. You on the other hand should at least stay useful and keep me informed."

"Yes."

I ended the call and scrolled through my contacts until I reached a name that carried a familiar sting.

Madeline.

She had beauty that wilted the moment she felt unwanted. She had anger that settled into her bones when she was ignored. She had a soul that bruised easily which made her useful.

The sentinel returned then. He pushed a young Omega into the room. She collapsed to her knees and shook as if her bones had turned to water.

"Please Alpha I did not know one was bad, I tried my best, sometimes these things happen, I—"

I raised a hand and she fell silent as if the air had vanished from her lungs.

"I dislike that idea."

I walked toward her. Each step slow. Measured. Honest. I believed that how a man walked said more about him than his words ever could.

"That idea that the world does things behind your back. That ruin just arrives. That failure is something outside you."

She trembled harder. Her body seemed to try to shrink into itself.

"If something happened under your watch, it is because you did not look close enough. Weak eyes encourage disasters."

I stopped in front of her.

"Right now, you know what I will do. It is why you are so terrified. To expect mercy would be an insult to common sense, is that not true?"

Her mouth opened and closed like a dying fish, but no sound came.

"That was a question."

She nodded fast. Almost violent in her fear.

"So you agree you must die?"

She shook her head even faster. "Please Alpha, I have a family, I have—"

"How dishonest. To expect reality to warp for you."

My claws extended. Smooth. Familiar. Like slipping into warm water.

I raised my hand. She pulled in a breath to scream.

I cut across her throat. It was clean. Perfect. A line of red that opened like a flower. She fell forward. Her fingers pressed to the wound with desperate instinct but blood still poured through. Her eyes went wide. Then empty. A simple piece of truth.

I wiped my claws with a white cloth and dropped it on her back.

"Clean this," I said.

"Yes Alpha."

I walked back to my desk and hit call on Madeline's contact.

The phone rang once. Twice.

She picked up on the third ring.

"What the fuck do you want?"

Her voice was sharp. Angry. Good. Anger was useful.

I smiled and sat down in my chair. Leaned back and relaxed.

"How would you like to re-enter Cian's life again?"

There was silence.

I could hear her breathing on the other end. Could almost picture the expression on her face. The way her eyes would narrow. The way her mouth would twist.

"I'm listening."

Those two words held everything I needed. Curiosity. Interest. Hunger.

I picked up the sweet strawberry and took another bite. Juice ran down my chin and I wiped it with the back of my hand.

"There's a witch. Name's Ophelia. She's might help Cian with something important. Very important."

"And?"

"I don't want her to. In addition, if something were to happen to her, Cian would need someone. Someone he could trust. Someone who knew him well."

"He has people."

"He has subordinates. He doesn't have someone who understands him. Someone who was close to him once. Like you were."

I let the words settle. Let her chew on them.

Behind me the sentinel dragged the Omega's body across the floor. The sound of fabric on marble was soft. Rhythmic. Almost soothing.

"What do I get out of this?"

"Access. A way back into his inner circle. A chance to be relevant to him again."

"I don't need to be relevant. I'm doing just fine."

She was lying. I could hear it in the tightness of her voice. The way the words came out too quick. Too defensive.

"Of course you are."

I let the sarcasm drip through.

"But you want more. You've always wanted more. That's why you tried to keep him in the first place even after my stern warning. That's why losing him hurt so much."

"Fuck you Aldric."

"Probably. But first you're going to do this job."

"Why should I?"

"Because you must hate her. The new Luna. The one who took your place. And because you still love him. Even if you pretend you don't. I also know he feels the same way."

There was more silence.

Longer this time.

I waited. Patience was a skill most people lacked. But I had it in abundance.

"What exactly do you want me to do?"

There it was. The crack in her armor. The opening I needed.

"Visit Ophelia. Ask for her services. Perhaps something poisoned. Then give her gift of your own. Blossom witches are insanely powerful. So I know you will disappoint. Though, I have to chime this in. Justin case. It has to be something that will kill swiftly. Make it look unnatural. Make it look intentional."

"That's it?"

"That's it. Simple and clean."

"And then?"

"And then, I help you. With everything in my arsenal so that you become his Luna."

I heard her exhale. Slow and deliberate.

"What about Skollrend?"

"Not your problem. Do not set me off, Maddy."

"I'll think about it."

"Don't think too long. Opportunities like this don't wait."

I then ended the call.

The room was quiet again. Clean. The faint metal scent of blood still lingered but even that would fade.

I walked back to the window.

The gardens were perfect again. The lines. The colors. The stillness.

Cian believed he was winning. He believed he had caught up to me. Well... Actually... He believed he has caught up to Gabriel.

But he forgot one thing.

I had shaped this story before he ever entered it.

I took another strawberry and bit into it. It was sweet, calm and predictable.

Exactly how things would stay soon enough.

Chapter 85: Sprinkle Sprinkle

CIAN

The study door opened. No knock. Just the sound of wood scraping against frame and then Ronan walked in waving a phone like he was holding a trophy.

I looked up from the cupcake. My eyes tracked the device in his hand. Black. Standard issue. Nothing special about it from the outside.

"Got what you asked for," Ronan said. He crossed the room in three strides and placed the phone on my desk. Right next to the cupcake.

I picked it up. Turned it over in my hands. The screen was dark. The case was worn at the edges. The evil witch had used this phone a lot. Carried it everywhere.

"Did you check it out?" I asked.

"It was passworded," Ronan said. He leaned against the desk. Arms crossed. "Could not get in without risking a wipe."

I nodded. That made sense. Anyone smart enough to be a traitor would be smart enough to lock their device.

"To technical it is."

I stood. Pushed my chair back. The wheels scraped against the floor.

That was when Ronan's hand came down on my shoulder. It was not a hard push. It was just firm enough to stop me.

"So," he said. His voice had that edge to it. The one that meant he was about to say something I did not want to hear. "Are you flipped now or something?"

I brushed his hand off.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"You forced me to find something for the girl," he said. He was not looking at me now. He was looking at the cupcake. At the pink frosting and white sprinkles. "I heard you shared beds twice now. Surely you would know that it would become a silent topic of conversation."

My jaw tightened.

"Nothing like that is going on," I said. Each word came out measured. Controlled. "I sent you to Silver Creek because I wanted to know if she was being honest about the claim

she made. Which she was. And nothing happened. Neither will it happen just because we share beds. I can control myself."

Ronan was quiet for a moment. He pushed off from the desk and turned to face me fully.

"You know it would not be a bad thing," he said. "If you were, you know, flipped."

I stared at him.

"It would be a good thing actually," he continued. "People have been worried about you, Cian. Years without anyone. Years of just work and duty and nothing else. If you found someone, if you let yourself feel something again, that would be—"

"Can we please end this," I cut in. My voice was harder now. Sharper. "There are more pressing conversations we should be having. Like spies in the pack."

Ronan held my gaze for another beat. Then he sighed.

"We will just have them swear an oath again," he said. "The dishonest one will be outed."

"Maren said the same thing," I said.

"Well, she is right."

I picked up the phone again. Looked at the dark screen. At my reflection staring back at me.

"But maybe this device can let us find that fucker Gabriel and end this once and for all," I said.

"I agree," Ronan said. His tone had shifted. Back to business. Back to the work that mattered.

We left the study together. The hallways were quiet. Most of the pack was asleep by now. Only sentinels remained awake. Standing at their posts. Watching the shadows.

Technical was still lit when we walked in. The same three technicians from earlier were still at their stations. Roth looked up when we entered. His glasses had slid down his nose again.

"Alpha," he said. "Beta."

I crossed the room and placed the phone on the table in front of him.

"This device belonged to Bo," I said. "She was one of them. She was a traitor."

Roth picked up the phone. Turned it over in his hands the same way I had.

"But it is passworded," I continued. "And I want to know everything that you can dig."

"Understood," Roth said. He plugged the phone into his computer. The screen lit up. Lines of code began scrolling across his monitor.

The red haired woman leaned over to help. Her fingers flew across her keyboard. The younger technician pulled up another window on the main screen.

I stood behind them. Watching. My arms crossed over my chest. Ronan stood next to me. His posture was relaxed but his eyes were sharp. Focused.

Minutes passed. The technicians worked in silence. Only the sound of typing filled the room. Rapid fire clicks. The hum of computers running hot.

"Got access," the red haired woman said finally. "Bypassed the lock."

The phone's home screen appeared on the main monitor. Apps lined the display in neat rows. There was nothing unusual. Nothing that screamed traitor at first glance.

"Pull everything," I said. "Financial history. Messages. Call logs. All of it."

They got to work.

More minutes passed. Data started populating across the screens. Bank statements. Transaction records. Lists of contacts.

"Financial history is clean," Roth said. He scrolled through the records. "Nothing out of the ordinary. Standard purchases. Normal spending patterns."

I watched the numbers scroll past. Grocery stores. Gas stations. Coffee shops. All normal.

"Wait," the younger technician said. He leaned closer to his screen. "There is something here."

"Talk," I said.

"She patronized someone," he said. He pulled up the transaction on the main screen. "Multiple times over the past six months."

The name appeared.

Ophelia Cottonwood.

My hands clenched into fists.

"I was filled in. That is the witch, right?" Ronan said. His voice was low. Dangerous.

"The same one Kayden paid," I said. "She is connected to both of them."

The red haired woman was already moving. Her fingers typed faster. Pulling up more information. Cross referencing data.

"Checking contacts now," she said.

The main screen shifted. A list of names and numbers appeared. Most of them were pack members. People I recognized. But two names stood out.

"She has been talking singularly to two people a lot," Roth said. He highlighted the names. "One is Kayden."

I already knew that. Expected that. But the second name made my blood run cold.

"The other is," Roth paused. His face went pale. "Alpha Aldric."

The room went silent.

I stared at the screen. At that name. At the letters that spelled out my uncle's title and name. The man who had stood beside my mother. Who had helped raise me after my father died. Who had been like a second father to me.

"What?" The word came out broken. Strangled. "That is not possible."

Ronan stepped closer to the screen. His eyes were wide.

"There has to be a mistake," he said. "Check it. Check it again."

One of the technicians was already typing. His hands moved so fast they blurred.

"There was a name change a year back," he said. His voice was tight. Controlled. "It was originally Alpha Gabriel."

The other technician was working her own keyboard now. Pulling up different records.

"I checked the number," she said. "It belongs to Gabriel Donlon."

The relief that flooded through me was sharp and immediate. My legs felt weak for a moment. My uncle was not a traitor. Gabriel had just tried to frame him.

"They are playing mental games too," I said. My voice came out rough. Angry. "Did they really think we would buy that hook line and sinker and go with it?"

Ronan let out a breath beside me. He ran a hand through his hair.

"I know Uncle Aldric," I continued. "He would never. He has been loyal since before I was born."

But the anger was building now. Hot and vicious. Gabriel had tried to frame his own brother. Had tried to make me doubt someone I trusted. Someone who had been there for me through everything.

"Can you track the number somehow?" I asked.

"The last call was yesterday," Roth said. His fingers were already moving. "So we can try."

They worked. All three of them. Typing and clicking and pulling up screens I could not begin to understand. Code scrolled past. Maps appeared. Numbers flashed.

"He is transmitting himself to thirty different places," the red haired woman said after several minutes. "Changing every ten seconds."

"So we cannot find anything," I said. It was not a question. I already knew the answer.

"We will keep checking," Roth said. "But right now, no. We cannot pin down his location."

I swore. The word came out harsh and ugly. My fist slammed down on the table. The phones in their evidence bags jumped.

"Cian," Ronan said. His hand was on my shoulder again. Firm. Steady. "We can get him later."

I took a breath. Then another. Forced myself to calm down. To think clearly.

"Your mother is priority," Ronan continued. "And at the first crack of dawn, we go get the witch and get an antidote. We will even force information out of her if we must."

I looked at the time displayed on one of the screens. Almost three in the morning. Dawn was only a few hours away.

"Okay then," I said. "That is achievable."

Ronan nodded. "Get some rest if you can. We will need to be sharp for this."

Rest. As if I could sleep knowing my mother was still dying. Knowing Gabriel was out there somewhere. Laughing at us. Playing his games.

But Ronan was right. I needed to be sharp. Needed to be focused. For my mother. For the pack.

"Keep working," I told the technicians. "If you find anything else, anything at all, I want to know immediately."

"Yes, Alpha," they said in unison.

I turned and walked toward the door. Ronan followed. The hallway felt colder than before. Darker.

"You should actually try to sleep," Ronan said. "Even just a few hours."

I did not answer. We walked in silence back toward the main wing. Past sentinels standing guard. Past empty rooms and closed doors.

When we reached the corridor that led to my quarters, Ronan stopped.

"She is in your bed, is she not?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"And you are planning to sleep where exactly?"

"My quarters are big. I can be in the lounge."

Ronan shook his head. "That thing is terrible for your back. You have said so yourself many times."

"I will manage."

"Or," Ronan said. His voice had that teasing edge again. "You could just sleep in your own bed. With appropriate space between you of course. Like a gentleman. You said it yourself. You have self control."

"Goodnight, Ronan," I said.

He laughed. It was soft and low. Then he clapped me on the shoulder and walked away. His footsteps faded down the hallway until I was alone.

I stood there for a moment. Looking at the door to my quarters. Knowing Fia was inside. Probably awake. I could reach out through the bond and check. But that would probably rattle her if she was indeed awake.

My wolf stirred.

Go to her.

"No," I said quietly.

She is ours to protect. To be near.

"She needs rest. Not me lurking around her."

The wolf growled. It disagreed. But I ignored it and turned away. Headed back toward my study. Toward the uncomfortable chair and another sleepless night.

But at least I had a plan now. At dawn we would go to the neutral zone. We would find the witch. We would get answers.

And we would save my mother.

That needed to be what was at the forefront of my mind.

Chapter 86: Suga Talking

HAZEL

I sat at my vanity in my babygirl pyjamas, the loose fabric hanging off one shoulder while I tried to coax my hair into something presentable. The strands kept slipping through my fingers. I huffed and started over, gathering the sections again.

The door opened without warning. Mother swept in with that particular grace she always carried, like she was floating rather than walking. She came up behind me and took the brush from my hand.

"Let me help you with that."

Her fingers worked through my hair with practiced ease. I watched her face in the mirror. She had that look. The one that meant she was about to disappoint me.

"I apologize," she said, her voice soft. "I will not be able to go shopping with you tomorrow."

I waited. There was always more.

"Your father has business and I have to be in his arms."

She leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. The gesture felt automatic. Rehearsed.

"You understand, right?"

"I do."

Of course I understood. I always understood. That was what good daughters did. They understood when their mothers chose their fathers over them. They understood when plans changed. They understood everything except why it still stung.

Mother set down the brush. "You can postpone. So we can go together another time."

"No." The word came out firmer than I intended. "I will not be postponing."

She didn't look surprised. She knew me better than that.

"I can go alone," I added.

"I thought so." Mother smiled that knowing smile of hers. "So I asked your father to give you a sentinel he trusted. Someone to keep you safe."

I laughed. The sound bounced off the walls of my room. "When am I ever in danger?"

"Well, your father believes you are very fragile at the moment."

Fragile. The word tasted sweet on my tongue. I could work with fragile.

Mother brushed the last few strands into place and rested her hands on my shoulders. Then her expression shifted. A shadow of something older and sharper slid across her eyes.

"And Hazel," she said quietly. "Do not get cozy with this one. I do not want another Milo situation."

I froze. She rarely brought Milo up. It was usually the unspoken thing between us, the thing neither of us acknowledged because acknowledging it made it too real.

She continued. "Your father trusts this sentinel. I trust him too. Do not make things complicated. Do not tease him into doing something foolish."

I stared at her reflection. "Mother, not everybody has an incredible cock."

Her lips parted in a small gasp. She swatted my shoulder lightly. "Hazel. Do not speak that way."

"You opened the door for it."

"I did not." She tried to glare but she was holding back a smile. "Behave yourself. I mean it. I cannot mediate between you and your father again."

I smiled sweetly. "I will be good."

"No, you will be yourself. You never have changed for any reason, which is exactly why I am saying this." She tapped my cheek with two fingers. "Do not make trouble where none is needed."

She pressed one last kiss to my head. "Just stay fragile. Relish and lean into that," she said. She touched my shoulder once more, a brief pressure, then headed for the door.

I chuckled. "You know me, Mother. If it makes my life easier, I will."

"I will go now."

I nodded and she left, closing the door behind her with a soft click. The room felt larger without her in it. I picked up the bottle of hair oil and poured some into my palm. The scent of argan and vanilla filled my nose. I worked it through my hair, massaging it into my scalp with slow, deliberate movements. The oil made my fingers slick.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Come in."

The door opened. I kept my attention on my reflection, watching through the mirror as a figure stepped into the doorway. He froze. Then he spun around so fast I heard his boots scrape against the floor.

"I apologize, Luna Hazel. I had no idea you were in a state of undress."

I chuckled and stood up from the vanity. My pyjamas were perfectly modest, really. The loose fabric covered everything it needed to cover. But I suppose to someone easily flustered, the casual intimacy of sleepwear might seem scandalous.

I walked toward him, my bare feet silent on the floor. "Who are you?"

He kept his back to me. His shoulders were tense beneath his uniform. "I got into the ranks of sentinel recently so you might not have seen my face."

Fresh meat. Even better.

"Your father put me in charge of protecting you tomorrow when you go shopping."

I circled around to look at him properly. He was younger than I expected. His face had that clean, unmarked quality of someone who hadn't seen real trouble yet. His jaw was sharp but his eyes were soft. Too soft.

"You don't look that big or strong."

His expression flickered. Hurt, maybe. Or embarrassment. "I apologize."

"At least you should be able to take a good beating."

"Oh."

The single syllable came out uncertain. Confused. I tilted my head and studied him. He was still avoiding eye contact, his gaze fixed somewhere over my shoulder.

"You should keep your eyes trained on me, you know. If you are going to protect me."

He hesitated. I could see the war happening behind his eyes. Duty versus propriety. Training versus whatever his mother had taught him about respecting young women. Finally, slowly, his gaze lowered to meet mine.

The moment our eyes locked, I saw it. That naive quality bleeding out of him like watercolor on wet paper. He was innocent. Genuinely, painfully innocent. The kind of person who still believed in honor, righteousness and doing the right thing.

How delicious.

"You are easy on the eye," I said.

His cheeks flushed red. The color spread from his face down his neck, disappearing beneath his collar. I wondered how far down it went. I wondered what else was flush with blood.

"Thank you," he managed.

Such good manners. Someone had raised him well. I took a step closer. He didn't move. Good boy. Another step. The space between us shrank. I could see the pulse jumping in his throat now.

"Take care of me, will you?"

I closed the remaining distance. Just an inch separated us. Maybe less. I could feel the heat radiating off his body. He smelled like soap and leather and something earthy I couldn't quite place. His breath hitched.

He started to take a step back, his body's instinct overriding whatever his training told him about holding his ground. But he was too slow. I was already there, invading his space, my face tilted up toward his.

"And you're not going to try to rape me, are you?"

The word hit him like a physical blow. His eyes went wide. "What?"

He stumbled backward, nearly tripping over his own feet. The careful composure shattered completely. "No. No, I would never..."

"You must have heard what I faced."

His expression changed. Understanding dawned there, mixed with something that might have been pity or horror or both. "I did not."

"Please don't lie to me."

He swallowed hard. I watched his throat work. "I'm not lying. I did not hear anything like that and I would never do something like that. I'm here to protect you, Luna Hazel. That's all."

The earnestness in his voice was almost endearing. Almost. I let the silence stretch between us. Let him squirm in it. His hands were clenched at his sides. His breathing had quickened.

I thought about Milo. The one who had gotten too comfortable. Too confident. Who thought that being alone with me and taking me multiple times meant he could take liberties and try to betray me. Of course, he had learned very painfully that I was not the fragile little Luna everyone believed me to be.

"I really liked him, you know."

The new sentinel's face paled. He understood who I meant.

"But he took it too far."

I let those words hang in the air. Let them settle into whatever dark corners of imagination he possessed. Let him wonder exactly what "too far" meant. Let him wonder what happened to men who crossed me.

Then I smiled. Wide and warm and completely unthreatening. The kind of smile that said we were friends. That said everything was fine. That said he had nothing to worry about as long as he behaved himself.

"Take care of me tomorrow."

I reached out and adjusted his collar, my fingers brushing against his neck. He flinched but didn't pull away. The pulse under my fingertips was racing.

"I can tell you and I will be... very close."

He nodded. The movement was jerky. Mechanical. He was operating on pure instinct now, his training the only thing keeping him upright and functional.

"Yes, Luna Hazel."

Such a good boy. So obedient. So determined to do the right thing. I wondered how long that would last. I wondered what it would take to crack that shell of righteousness. Everyone had a breaking point. Everyone had buttons that could be pushed and the goddess had to know how much I liked pushing buttons.

I stepped back, giving him space to breathe. He took it gratefully, his chest expanding as he sucked in air. I had been standing closer than I thought.

"You can go now."

He nodded again. Turned toward the door. His movements were stiff and awkward, like he had forgotten how his limbs worked. His hand found the doorknob and he pulled it open.

I watched him leave. Watched the way his shoulders stayed tense until he was through the threshold. Watched the way he didn't look back. The door closed behind him with a soft thud.

I stood there for a moment in the sudden stillness of my room. My heart was beating faster than normal. There was a warmth in my chest that had nothing to do with the temperature.

Tomorrow was going to be interesting.

I walked back to my vanity and sat down. My hair was still damp with oil. I picked up the brush and continued where Mother had left off, working through the tangles with slow, methodical strokes.

In the mirror, my reflection smiled back at me. I looked innocent. Harmless. Fragile, even.

Father was right to worry about me. Just not for the reasons he thought.

I was fragile the way glass was fragile. Beautiful and delicate until you tried to grasp it too hard. Then it shattered and cut you to ribbons.

The new sentinel was interesting. I wanted to know the depths of his person and I hoped he wouldn't be the type to fight or resist me. Because he would learn soon enough. They always did.

Chapter 87: Cottonwood 1

CIAN

The alarm ripped through the quiet of my study. Sharp. Piercing. I reached out and slammed my hand down on it. The sound died.

My body ached everywhere. The chair I had spent the night in was not designed for sleeping. My neck was stiff. My back protested when I tried to sit up. Every muscle felt tight and wrong.

I pushed myself to my feet. My joints cracked. The room spun for a second before settling. I rubbed my face with both hands and looked at the time. Six in the morning. The sun would be rising soon.

I walked to the door and pulled it open. The hallway was empty except for one person. Ronan was walking toward me. His steps were purposeful and as direct as the Beta he has grown to be.

"So you avoided her," he said when he reached me.

"Priorities, Ronan," I said.

He shook his head but did not argue. "A small army is ready," he said instead. "The best and most ruthless sentinels we have."

"Good."

"They are loading up the vehicles now."

I nodded. My mind was already moving ahead. Planning. Calculating. But there was something I needed to do first.

"I want to see my mother before we go," I said.

Ronan's expression softened. "Of course, Alpha."

We walked through the corridors together. The pack house was waking up. Sentinels changed shifts at their posts. Staff moved through the halls carrying trays and supplies. Everyone moved with purpose. Everyone knew something big was happening.

The infirmary was quiet when we entered. The smell of antiseptic hung in the air. Clean and sharp. Maren was at the monitoring station. She looked up when we walked in.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Stabilized," Maren said. She stood and gestured toward the room where my mother lay. "Still not conscious. But her vitals are holding steady."

I walked to the doorway and looked in. My mother was exactly where I had left her. Pale. Still. The oxygen mask over her face. Tubes running from her arms. Machines beeping in steady rhythm.

She looked so small in that bed. So fragile. Nothing like the strong woman who had raised me. Who had led this pack with grace and strength. To know she was fighting fucking poison instead of some godforsaken disease made me even angrier. I needed that anger.

"I'll get the antidote," I said. My voice came out rough.

"We'll be waiting," Maren said behind me.

I stood there for another moment. Just looking at her. Memorizing every detail. The way her hair spread across the pillow. The rise and fall of her chest. The pale color of her skin.

I would fix this. I would bring her back.

I turned away from the door but something propped in my mind before I could leave and I looked at Maren.

"Can you do me a favor?" I asked.

"Of course," she said without hesitation.

"Could you be by Fia's side?" I asked.

Maren blinked. "Oh."

"What?"

"We aren't really close," she said slowly. Her tone was careful.

"But you are both women," I said.

Maren's eyebrows rose. She crossed her arms and stared at me. "We are both women?"

I realized how that sounded now that she said it. "I didn't mean it that way."

"Then what way did you mean it?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. This was not going the way I had planned. "Just be by her side," I said. "We will be attending Alpha Julius Knight's wedding soon enough. And I am sure her wardrobe is beautiful. But it is not anything grand. You are a fashion girl. Go shopping with her and have fun."

I pulled out my wallet and withdrew my Amex black card. Held it out to her. "Go wild even."

Maren looked at the card. Then at me. Then back at the card. A slow smile spread across her face.

"Now you're talking," she said. She took the card from my hand and examined it like it was a precious gem.

"We will have the wildest time," she said. Her eyes were already distant. Planning. Plotting whatever shopping adventure she was going to drag Fia on.

"Good," I said. "Take care of her."

"Oh, I will do."

I nodded and left the infirmary. Ronan fell into step beside me. We walked in silence through the corridors. Down the stairs. Out through the main entrance.

The front courtyard was full of activity. Ten black vehicles were lined up. Sentinels loaded weapons into the trunks. Checked ammunition. Strapped on protective gear. Every face was hard. Focused. Ready for violence if it came to that.

I recognized most of them. Warriors who had proven themselves time and again. People I trusted with my life. With the pack's future.

The lead car door was open. Waiting for me. I walked toward it. Ronan grabbed my arm.

"When we get to the witch's shop, I think I should get in there first," he said.

I looked at him. "We can do that together."

"I don't know," Ronan said. His grip tightened slightly.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"You tend to be rash."

The words hit me wrong. My jaw tightened. "I disagree."

Ronan held my gaze for a long moment. Then he let go of my arm and shrugged. "Whatever you say then, boss."

I climbed into the car. The leather seat was cold. The interior smelled like polish and steel. Ronan got in beside me. The driver was already in position. Engine running.

"Move out," I said.

The driver put the car in gear. We rolled forward. The other nine vehicles fell in behind us. A convoy of violence heading south.

We passed through the gates of Skollrend. The guards saluted as we went by. The road stretched out ahead of us. Empty in the early morning light. The sun was just starting to peek over the horizon. Painting the sky in shades of pink and gold.

I watched the landscape pass. Trees gave way to open fields. Fields gave way to hills. The neutral zone was two hours away. Two hours of driving and thinking and planning.

My wolf was restless. It paced inside my mind. Eager. Ready to tear into anyone who stood between us and the witch. Between us and the antidote.

"You really think we can do this without violence?" I asked.

Ronan was looking out his window. "I think we should try."

"And if she refuses?"

"Then we stop trying and you can do what you plan to do."

I nodded. That was fair. Reasonable. But I already knew how this was going to go. The witch had worked with Gabriel. Had poisoned my mother. Had taken money from traitors. She was not going to hand over the antidote out of the goodness of her heart. Maybe money was her master and she would be easy to convince. I hoped that was it.

"What if she does not have it?" I asked. It made no sense really. The creator of the mess would definitely have the means to undo it. But my head was an echo chamber of what ifs.

Ronan turned to look at me. "Then we make her create it."

"And if she cannot?"

"Then we find another witch who can."

I leaned back in my seat. My body still ached from the terrible night in the study chair. My neck was stiff. My back was tight. But the discomfort kept me sharp. Kept me focused.

The convoy drove on. We passed through small towns. Shadow villages that barely registered on any map. Underneath places where humans lived their simple lives. Unaware of the supernatural world that existed alongside theirs.

The sun climbed higher. Morning turned to mid morning. The landscape changed again. I saw more trees and denser forest. We were getting close to the neutral zone.

I could feel it. That subtle shift in the air. That sense of crossing from pack territory into unclaimed land. Into space where no alpha held dominion. Where the laws were looser and the dangers were greater.

"Five minutes," the driver said.

I sat up straighter. Rolled my shoulders. Cracked my knuckles. The wolf inside me surged forward. Ready.

The trees grew thicker. The road became rougher. We were deep in the forest now. Deep in territory that belonged to no one and everyone.

Then I saw it. A small cottage. Tucked back from the road. Smoke curled from the chimney. Herbs hung drying from the eaves. A garden sprawled in front. Wild and untamed.

"There," I said.

The driver slowed. The convoy came to a stop on the side of the road. Doors opened. Sentinels poured out. Silent. Efficient. They fanned out around the cottage. Creating a perimeter. Blocking all exits.

I got out of the car. My boots hit the dirt road. Ronan was beside me in an instant.

"Let me go first," he said again.

"Together," I said.

He sighed but did not argue. We walked up the narrow path to the cottage. The garden was full of plants I did not recognize. Strange flowers. Twisted vines. Things that probably had magical properties.

The door opened before we reached it.

A woman stood in the doorway. She was older than I expected. Gray hair pulled back in a loose bun. Sharp eyes that missed nothing. She wore a simple dress. An apron. She looked like someone's grandmother.

But I knew better.

"Ophelia Cottonwood?" I asked.

"Depends on who's asking," she said. Her voice was rough. Like gravel.

"I am Alpha Cian of Skollrend," I said. "This is my Beta, Ronan."

She looked us over. Her gaze was calculating. Assessing. "I know who you are."

"Then you know why we are here."

"I can guess." She leaned against the doorframe. Completely at ease despite the armed sentinels surrounding her home. "You want something from me."

"My mother was poisoned," I said. "You made the poison. Now you are going to give me the antidote."

Ophelia smiled. It was not a kind expression. "And if I refuse?"

My wolf snarled. I felt my control slip just slightly. Just enough. "Then this becomes unpleasant for everyone."

She studied me for another long moment. Then she pushed off the doorframe and stepped back. "You better come in then."

Chapter 88: Cottonwood 2

CIAN

She stepped aside and held the door wider. But then she raised one finger. "Only you should come in."

Ronan moved forward immediately. His body tensed. "I think not."

I put my hand on his chest. Held him back. "Remember what you said."

His jaw clenched. The muscle there jumped and twitched. But he stepped back. His eyes never left the witch.

I walked past Ophelia and into the cottage. The door closed behind me with a soft click.

The interior was exactly what I expected. Dried herbs hung from the ceiling in bundles. Shelves lined every wall. They were packed with jars and bottles. Some held liquids that glowed faintly. Others contained things I could not identify. A fire burned low in the hearth. The flames cast dancing shadows across the room.

But there was something else. A smell. Sweet and familiar. It tugged at my memory. It tried to surface but could not quite break through. I knew that scent. I had smelled it before. But where?

"Sit," Ophelia said. She gestured to a small table near the window. Two chairs sat on either side.

I remained standing.

She shrugged and moved to a cabinet. Pulled out a teapot and two cups. Her movements were slow. Deliberate. She poured dark liquid into both cups. Steam rose in thin wisps.

"Tea?" she offered.

"I am not here for tea," I said.

"It is not poisoned," she said. She picked up one cup and took a sip. "See? Perfectly safe."

The sweet smell grew stronger. It was coming from somewhere in the room. From one of the shelves maybe. Or from something brewing in a pot I could not see. My wolf stirred. Restless. Something about that scent bothered it. It bothered me more.

I pushed the thought aside. Focused on why I was here.

"I am here for business," I said.

Ophelia set her cup down. She settled into one of the chairs and looked up at me. "I really did not think they would use it against a member of a pack so powerful."

"You were working for my uncle Gabriel and you are surprised?" I asked.

She laughed. The sound was dry. Brittle. "It is actually just two low borns. A sentinel and an Omega."

I stared at her. I barely believed that shit. "What?"

"The people who paid me," she said. She picked up her cup again and took another sip. "They were not working for anyone important. Just two low borns with a grudge."

My hands curled into fists. "You have no problem helping people attack innocent pack members?"

"I have no problem helping the wronged," she corrected. "Given how classist your kind are."

"My mother who is as kind as she could be was caught in your kindness to low borns," I said. My voice came out harder. Sharper. "And I need a fix."

Ophelia set her cup down again. Her expression grew more serious. "What poison was it?"

"It was made to look like she has the rot," I said.

Her eyebrows rose. "Oh. One of my unique blends."

The casual way she said it made my blood boil. Like she was discussing a recipe for bread. Not something that was killing my mother.

"I can help," she said. "But it will cost you."

"How much?" I asked.

"Fifty grand for a bottle."

I did not hesitate. "You have a deal."

She smiled. It was a calculating expression. The smile of someone who knew they held all the cards.

"You can earn more," I said, satisfied that she was a slave to money. "If you know anything else regarding the sentinel and Omega that could push me in the right direction. Like who they were working for. Or who else came to see you."

Her smile widened. "How high will you pay?"

"As high as a million."

"Oh I like you," she said. She leaned forward in her chair. Her eyes gleamed. "You see there was this man who came to me once. He paid very well for information on how to make poisons that mimic natural diseases. He was very specific about the symptoms he wanted. Very detailed about how it should present."

"Who was he?" I asked.

"I never got a name," she said. "But he was important. You could tell by the way he carried himself. By the quality of his clothes. By the amount of money he was willing to spend."

My heart was pounding. This could be the connection. The link between Gabriel and everything that had happened.

"What did he look like?" I asked.

"Tall. Dark hair going gray at the temples. Strong build. He had these cold eyes. The kind that looked right through you." She paused. Took another sip of tea. "And he had a scar. Right here."

She traced a line down her left cheek.

That was Gabriel. She was describing Gabriel.

"He came back several times," she continued. "Always asking questions. Always wanting to know more about different poisons. Different methods. He was very interested in things that could not be traced. Things that looked natural."

"Did he ever mention why?" I asked.

"No," she said. "But he did not need to. Men like that only want such things for one reason."

The sweet smell in the cottage was getting stronger. More insistent. My wolf was agitated now. Pacing. Something was wrong. Something about that scent.

But I needed this information more. Needed to hear everything she knew.

"Who else?" I asked. "Who else came to you?"

"There was the woman," Ophelia said. "Young. Pretty. She came about eight months ago. Asked for different blends of poison and had enough to pay. My favorite was the one one that would make someone sick but not kill them. Something that would look like a chronic illness."

"What did she look like?"

"Dark coarse hair. Soft eyes. Acne scars across her nose. She was nervous. Kept looking over her shoulder like she thought someone was following her."

Bo. She had to be describing Bo.

"And then there was the sentinel," Ophelia continued. "Big man. Broad shoulders. He came just last month even. Wanted something fast acting. Something that could be slipped into food or drink without being noticed. But he had no money at the time so that was just kept at the back of my mind."

They wanted to do something else. What else?

But her description fit Kayden. All the pieces were falling into place.

"Gabriel was coordinating all of it," I said. It was not a question.

"If you say so, I would assume so," Ophelia said. "Though I never saw them together. They all came separately. All paid separately. But the timing. The types of poisons they wanted. It was all connected."

I pulled out my phone. Opened my banking app. "Give me your account details."

She recited a string of numbers. I typed them in. Transferred one million dollars. The confirmation came through almost immediately.

"Pleasure doing business," she said. She stood and walked to one of the shelves. Her fingers traced along the bottles until she found what she was looking for. A small vial filled with dark red liquid.

"This is what you need," she said. She turned back toward me. Held the vial up. "One dose. Administered orally. It will counteract the poison within hours."

I reached for it.

"Oh, there is something else I forgot to mention."

That sweet smell surged. Stronger than before. My wolf howled inside my mind. Warning. Danger.

"Do tell." I said. But my focus was on that scent.

I knew that scent and finally, I placed it.

Magic. The magic of most practitioners has a smell. And this was familiar.

But why? I knew a few practitioners. So it would be no surprise if these witches knew each other.

"There was one time the Gabriel you speak of came and I noticed his—"

The thought had barely formed when it happened.

Ophelia's head exploded.

One second she was standing there, about to finish her speech while holding the vial and smiling that calculating smile and the next second, her head was just gone.

Obliterated. Blood, bone and brain matter sprayed everywhere. It covered the walls. The shelves. The jars and bottles. It splattered across my face. My chest. My arms.

Red. Everything was red.

The vial fell from her hand and hit the floor. It says instantly and the dark liquid spread across the wood.

Her body swayed for a moment. Then crumpled. Fell to the floor in a heap of limbs and blood and torn fabric.

I stood frozen. Blood dripped from my face. Warm and thick. It ran into my eyes. Turned the world crimson.

The door burst open. Ronan came through first. His gun drawn. Eyes scanning. The sentinels flooded in behind him. Their boots thundered on the wooden floor.

"Cian!" Ronan shouted. His eyes were wide. Taking in the scene. The blood. The body. Me standing there covered in gore.

The rage hit me all at once. It surged up from somewhere deep inside. It was primal. Unstoppable.

I screamed.

The sound tore from my throat. Raw and jagged. It was not human. It was not even wolf. It was something else entirely. Pure fury given voice.

My hands clenched into fists. The blood on them was hot. Sticky. The witch's blood. The only person who could save my mother. The only person with answers. The only connection we had.

Gone. Just like that. Her head blown apart by offensive magic. By someone who had been watching. Someone who knew we were here. Who knew what she would tell us.

I screamed again. The sound filled the cottage. Bounced off the walls. The jars on the shelves rattled. Some fell. Shattered on the floor. The contents spilled out. Strange liquids and powders and things that probably should not exist.

Ronan grabbed my shoulder. Tried to pull me back. "Cian. We need to move. Now."

I shook him off. My chest heaved. My vision was red. Not just from the blood. From the rage. From the absolute fury consuming me.

"Search the area!" I roared. "Find the witch or warlock! Find them now!"

The sentinels moved immediately. They scattered. Some went outside. Some checked the other rooms. Their movements were quick. Professional. But I knew they would find nothing. Whoever did this was long gone. They had done their wicked spell and disappeared.

I looked down at the body. At what remained of Ophelia Cottonwood. The witch who had made the poison. Who had the antidote. Who knew everything.

The vial was destroyed. The liquid soaked into the floorboards. Useless now.

"No no no no," I said. The words came out strangled. Broken. "No. We need that. We need the antidote."

I dropped to my knees. My hands moved over the broken glass. Trying to salvage something. Anything. But it was gone. Absorbed into the wood and lost.

Ronan knelt beside me. "Cian. We need to go."

"We need the antidote," I said again. My voice cracked.

"I know. But we can't stay here. Whoever did this might still try again. Who knows if you are a target as well."

I looked at the body again. At the blood pooling around it. Spreading. Soaking into everything.

That sweet smell was still there. Underneath the copper tang of blood. Underneath the herbal scents and magical residue. That familiar sweetness that I still could not put my fingers at.

Why? Why did this place smell like that?

"Alpha," Ronan said. His voice was firm now. Commanding even. "We go now."

I let him pull me to my feet. My legs felt weak and unsteady. Blood dripped from my clothes. From my hair. From my face.

We walked out of the cottage. Into the morning light. The sentinels had formed a perimeter. Their weapons were raised. Eyes scanning the tree line. Looking for threats.

But there was nothing. Just forest. Just trees swaying in the breeze. Just birds singing like nothing had happened. Like the world had not just ended.

I stood there in the dirt path. Covered in blood. Empty handed. Failing.

My mother was dying. The witch was dead. The antidote was destroyed. And I had no answers. No leads. Nothing.

Gabriel had won again. He had been one step ahead. Had known we would come here. Had sent someone to make sure the witch never talked. To make sure we never got what we needed.

The rage built again. Stronger this time. I threw my head back and roared at the sky. The sound echoed through the forest. Birds scattered from the trees. Small animals fled.

But it changed nothing. Fixed nothing.

I needed more than rage. I needed fucking foresight.

Chapter 89: A Luna In the Making

FIA

The dream I was having dissolved into nothing as something bright attacked my closed eyelids. I squeezed them tighter and turned my face into the pillow. The brightness persisted. Insistent and demanding.

"What the hell?" I muttered and opened my eyes.

The room was flooded with morning light. Someone had yanked open the curtains. I blinked against the sudden assault and tried to focus. A figure stood by the window. Silhouetted against the sun.

My eyes adjusted slowly. The figure became clearer. It was Doctor Maren.

But she looked different. Very different.

Maren was young anyway. Maybe late twenties. But right now she looked even younger. Her brunette hair had been straightened to absolute perfection. It fell past her shoulders in a sleek curtain. Light makeup enhanced her features. A touch of blush. Some mascara. A nude lip gloss that caught the light. She wore jeans and a fitted sweater. Boots that looked expensive. She looked like she was about to walk into a magazine shoot instead of making house calls and jabbing needles into veins.

"What is going on?" I asked. My voice was rough from sleep.

Maren walked over to the bed. She grabbed the edge of my blanket and yanked it completely off me. The cold air hit my legs.

"We are going shopping, Luna Fia," she said.

I sat up quickly. "What? For what?"

"Oh, he hasn't told you." She laughed and shook her head. "Of course he hasn't."

"Told me what?"

"There is a wedding," she said. "Skollrend was invited. Which means you are as well. So while Alpha Cian is hunting down the witch who made those alchemised poisons, we get to spend the fuck out of his Amex card."

She sat down next to me on the bed. Pulled a black card from her pocket and held it up between two fingers. Her eyes were practically glowing.

"Look at this beauty," she said. She waved it back and forth like it was a winning lottery ticket. "What do you think? Think of all the things we can buy."

I stared at the card. Then at her face. She looked absolutely elated. Like this was the best day of her life.

"So Cian isn't in Skollrend at the moment then," I said.

"That is correct." Maren tucked the card back into her pocket and patted it fondly. "That means no weight on you. And Thorne has to take over all my business. I haven't been this free in a long while. It helps that I can go wild with money that isn't mine too."

She stood up and grabbed my hands. Pulled me toward the edge of the bed.

"So please get your ass off the bed and let's get to it," she said.

I resisted slightly. My brain was still trying to catch up. Shopping. A wedding. Cian gone. An Amex card with apparently no limit.

"I don't know if I want to go shopping," I said. "I'm sure I have a wardrobe that can work."

Maren dropped my hands. Her expression turned serious.

"That just will not do," she said.

"Why not?"

"Alpha Knight is not just any Alpha." She crossed her arms and looked at me like I was missing something obvious. "Julius has been a thorn in the side of Skollrend for a while. Ever since Cian took power from his father, Knight has been challenging our trade routes. Blocking our access to neutral zone markets. Making new alliances with packs that were traditionally friendly to us. Just when we thought this beef would persist until it breaks into a full blown war, he stops. And now he is getting married. For the second time, might I add."

I did not know any of this. Politics between packs were not something I had paid much attention to in Silver Creek. We were too small to matter.

"It is supposed to be a white flag," Maren continued. "But I do think it is mostly because you are now in the picture. A random marriage to a small pack. Skollrend's uniting with Silver Creek wasn't grand like most would expect. The big dogs weren't invited."

Her words hit harder than I expected. She was right. The wedding had been quiet. Almost secretive. No grand ceremony. No celebration. Just a small gathering and a ritual that the goddess happened to bless.

"There is also the scandal of why you are his Luna," Maren said. Her voice was gentle now. Not cruel. Just honest. "I'm sure they want to see. And they want to talk. They must also think this is a political plot of sort. Why else would Skollrend be involved with your father's pack? So if those two must happen, you must be the diamond in that room. You have to shine. Even brighter than the bride."

She leaned forward. Her eyes locked on mine.

"And I, Maren, love shiny things," she said. "And I can make shiny things. So if you like the small peace that is slowly befalling you in Skollrend, I suggest you stop being meek and let us spend this money."

She paused. A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

"You don't even have to like what you buy," she added. "It will be revenge for the way he has treated you so far."

That caught my attention. Revenge. Spending Cian's money on things I might not even want. Just because I could. Just because he had left me alone in this massive pack house without telling me about a wedding I was expected to attend. Without preparing me for anything.

My eyes must have lit up because Maren's smile grew wider.

"I see how your eyes are shining," she said. "Don't let that go."

I thought about it for another second. Then I nodded.

"Fine," I said.

Maren squealed. Actually squealed. She grabbed my hands again and squeezed them.

"Yes," she said. "This is going to be so good."

"You're different," I said.

"I just aren't in my professional mode." She let go of my hands and stood up. "Get a shower. I'll go to your suite and bring something casual. We have a lot of ground to cover today."

"Okay," I said.

She practically bounced out of the room. The door closed behind her and I sat there for a moment. Processing. A wedding. A shopping trip. An unlimited Amex card. Cian hunting down a witch somewhere.

I fell back onto the bed. Stared up at the ceiling. I would have to be by Cian's side at this wedding. Hold his hand probably. Act like we were a real couple. Like our marriage meant something beyond an arrangement and whatever strange pull existed between us.

My cheeks started to heat up. I could picture it. His hand in mine. His presence beside me. The way people would look at us. Judge us. Wonder about us.

I slapped my cheeks lightly. Twice. Trying to snap myself out of it.

"Stop it," I muttered.

I pushed myself up and walked to the bathroom. The tile was cold under my bare feet. I turned on the shower and let the water heat up. Steam began to fill the space.

I stripped off my sleep clothes and stepped under the spray. The hot water hit my skin and I closed my eyes. Let it wash away the grogginess. The confusion. The weird mix of nervousness and excitement that had settled in my chest.

A wedding. An actual wedding where I would be seen. Where people would stare and whisper and make assumptions. Where I would have to play the role of Luna in a way I had not done before.

I washed my hair. Scrubbed my skin. Took my time because once I stepped out of this bathroom, the day would start for real. And apparently it was going to involve spending an obscene amount of money with a woman I barely knew but who seemed determined to make me shine.

I turned off the water and grabbed a towel. Dried myself off quickly. Wrapped my hair up in another towel and wiped the fog from the mirror.

My reflection stared back at me. Pale skin. Dark eyes.

I heard the bedroom door open. Maren's voice called out.

"I'm back," she said. "And I brought options."

I wrapped the towel tighter around myself and opened the bathroom door. Maren was standing in the middle of the room. She had laid out three different outfits on the bed. Jeans. A sweater dress. Leggings and an oversized top.

"Pick your poison," she said. "We want comfortable but cute. We are going to be walking a lot."

I looked at the options. Pointed to the jeans and oversized top.

"Good choice," Maren said. She gathered up the other clothes and tossed them onto a chair. "Get dressed. I'll wait out here."

She turned her back to give me privacy. I dropped the towel and pulled on the clothes. They fit well. Comfortable like she promised. I toweled my hair some more and then ran my fingers through it. Let it air dry.

"Ready," I said.

Maren turned around. Looked me over and nodded approvingly.

"Perfect," she said. "Now let's go make Alpha Cian regret giving me this card."

She pulled the Amex out again and kissed it dramatically. I laughed. Actually laughed. It felt strange. Good but strange.

"You're really excited about this," I said.

"Are you kidding?" Maren grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the door. "I get to dress up a Luna. Spend someone else's money. And stick it to Cian a little bit for being an emotionally constipated Alpha. This is literally my dream day."

We walked out of the room together. Down the hallway. The pack house was busy. People nodded as we passed. Some looked curious. Probably wondering why the doctor and the Luna were walking around together looking like they were about to cause trouble.

"Where are we even going?" I asked.

"The city," Maren said. "There's a shopping district about an hour away. High end stores. Boutiques. Everything we need."

An hour away. That meant we would be gone most of the day. Maybe longer. I wondered if Cian knew. If he cared. He had given Maren the card so he must have expected something like this.

We reached the front entrance. A car was already waiting. Black and sleek. The driver who was in sentinel uniform, stood by the door.

"Ready when you are, Doctor Maren," he said.

"Perfect timing," Maren said. She gestured for me to get in first.

I slid into the back seat. Maren climbed in after me and the driver closed the door. The engine started and we pulled away from the pack house.

"This is going to be fun," Maren said. She settled back into her seat and pulled out her phone. Started scrolling through something. "I've been making a list of stores we need to hit. And I have some ideas already for the wedding."

"What kind of ideas?"

"You'll see." She glanced at me and smiled. "Trust me. You're going to look incredible."

I looked out the window. Watched the trees pass by. The pack lands gave way to open road. To the world beyond Skollrend's borders.

For the first time since arriving here, I felt something close to excitement. Not because of the shopping. Not really. But because of the possibility. The chance to do something for myself. To take up space in a way I had not been allowed to before.

And maybe, just maybe, to show Cian that I was more than the quiet girl from Silver Creek.

Chapter 90: Mirror Mirror 1

HAZEL

The boutique smelled like money. That particular scent of expensive fabric, air conditioning and the faint trace of whatever cleaning solution they used on the marble floors. I ran my fingers along a rack of dresses. The silk whispered under my touch.

The new sentinel stood near the entrance. His posture was rigid. Alert. Like he expected danger to leap out from behind the mannequins. I had learned his name during the car ride. Baruch. It suited him. Earnest and straightforward and utterly boring.

I pulled a dress from the rack. Midnight blue with a plunging neckline. Too much for what I actually needed but I liked the way the fabric caught the light. I held it up against myself and glanced at Baruch. He was looking at the ceiling. At the walls. At literally anything except me.

"What do you think?" I asked.

His eyes flickered toward me for half a second. "It's nice, Luna Hazel."

"You barely looked at it."

"I'm sure whatever you choose will be appropriate."

Appropriate. The word made me want to laugh. I draped the dress over my arm and moved to the next rack. A sales associate materialized beside me. She had perfect teeth and perfect hair. She also had the kind of smile that said she worked on commission.

"Can I start a dressing room for you?" she asked.

"Yes. Thank you."

She took the dress and several others I had been considering. Led me toward the back where a row of private changing areas lined the wall. Each one had thick curtains and enough space inside to fit three people comfortably. She hung everything on the hooks and gestured inside.

"Let me know if you need any other sizes," she said.

I thanked her and she disappeared. I looked back at Baruch. He had found a chair near the entrance to the dressing area. He sat down stiffly. His hands rested on his knees.

"You can wait closer," I said. "I might need help."

His expression did something complicated. "I'm fine here, Luna Hazel."

"Suit yourself."

I stepped into the changing area and pulled the curtain closed. The space was lined with mirrors. I could see myself from every angle. I stripped off my clothes and reached for the first dress. A red thing with a high collar and long sleeves. Conservative enough to wear to a funeral. I pulled it on and studied my reflection.

Boring. Absolutely boring.

I tried the next one. Emerald green with a fitted bodice and a skirt that flared at the knees. Better but still not right. The third was the midnight blue. I slipped it over my head and worked my arms through the sleeves. The fabric settled against my skin. Cool and smooth. I reached behind myself to pull up the zipper.

It stuck halfway.

I tugged at it. The zipper refused to budge. I twisted and tried to see what was catching but the angle was wrong. I pulled harder. Nothing.

It would have been frustrating but an idea popped into my head right there and then.

"Baruch," I called out.

There was a pause. Then his voice came from somewhere outside the curtain. "Yes, Luna Hazel?"

"I need help with this zipper."

There was another pause. It was longer this time. "I can get the sales associate."

I smiled at my reflection. "I'm more comfortable with you."

"Luna Hazel, I don't think it's appropriate for me to—"

I yanked the curtain open. Stood there in the half-zipped dress with the fabric gaping at my back. His eyes went wide. He stood up so fast he nearly knocked over the chair.

"It's just a zipper," I said. "Unless you're the kind of man who loses control around women."

His jaw tightened. "Of course not."

"Then come help me."

He hesitated. I could see the war happening behind his eyes again. The same one from last night. Duty versus propriety. Training versus whatever moral code he had been raised with. Finally he took a step forward. Then another. He entered the changing area and I turned my back to him.

"Just pull it up," I said.

His fingers brushed against my spine. The touch was feather light. Tentative. Like he thought I might shatter if he applied too much pressure. He grasped the zipper and pulled. The fabric closed over my back. The dress fit perfectly now. Snug in all the right places.

"Done," he said.

His voice was strained. I turned around and looked up at him. The changing area suddenly felt much smaller with both of us in it. His height seemed to fill the space.

"Well?" I asked. "How do I look?"

"Great."

I tilted my head. "You're not looking at me well enough to just say great."

His gaze was fixed on my face. Carefully. Deliberately. Like if he let his eyes wander he might combust on the spot.

"Look down," I said.

"Luna Hazel—"

"Look at the dress, Baruch. That's what we're here for, isn't it?"

He looked down. His eyes traveled over the midnight blue fabric. The way it hugged my waist and flared at my hips. The neckline that showed just enough to be interesting without being obscene.

"The dress is great," he said.

I turned back to the mirror. Studied my reflection from different angles. The dress really was beautiful. The color made my skin look luminous. The cut emphasized curves I sometimes forgot I had.

"Does it make my breasts look fuller?" I asked.

The silence that followed was deafening. I watched his reflection in the mirror. His face had gone bright red. The color spread down his neck and disappeared under his collar.

"I can't—" he started.

I turned back to face him. "Can't what? You're a man, aren't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Oh... Or are you gay?" I took a step closer. "Is that it? Because if you are, that's fine. But you should probably tell me so I know."

"No," he said quickly. "I'm not gay."

"So you must know." I took another step towards him. The space between us shrank to nothing. "Do they make my breasts look big?"

He swallowed hard. His throat worked visibly. "Is that what you're going for?"

I closed the remaining distance. Looked up into his eyes. They were brown. A warm brown that reminded me of honey. His pupils were dilated. His breathing had gone shallow.

"I just want honesty," I said softly.

His lips parted. I let my gaze drop down his body. Down past his chest. Past his belt. The evidence of his arousal was impossible to miss. His uniform pants did nothing to hide it. I smirked and looked back up at his face.

"Well?" I prompted.

He opened his mouth. The word was forming on his lips. I could see it. Could see him struggling between honesty and propriety. Between what he was thinking and what he should say.

"Oh my goddess, you look divine, Fia."

The voice came from a stall not too far away. Female. Excited. Familiar in a way I couldn't quite place. Baruch's mouth snapped shut. He took a step back but there was nowhere to go in the small space. His back hit the mirror.

I reached up and pressed my fingers against his lips. They were warm. Soft. He froze under my touch. I traced the curve of his bottom lip with my thumb. Let my fingers linger there.

"Hold that thought," I said. "I think my little sister is here."

I dropped my hand and stepped out of the changing area. Pulled the curtain closed behind me. Baruch remained inside. Trapped. I could almost hear his heart pounding through the fabric.

Two figures emerged from another changing stall down the row. One was a woman I didn't recognize. Boring brunette like Fia but put together. She looked like money too. Like she belonged in a place like this. The other figure made me stop in my tracks.

Fia.

She looked different from the last time I had seen her. Healthier. The hollowness that had clung to her back in Silver Creek was gone. Her hair was longer. Shinier. She wore

clothes that actually fit her properly. A soft pink thing that made her look delicate and pretty and everything I knew she wasn't.

The brunette woman was gushing over her. Adjusting the fabric. Stepping back to admire. Like Fia was some kind of doll to be dressed up and displayed.

I arranged my face into a smile. Wide. Warm. The kind of smile that said I was delighted to see her. I walked toward them with measured steps. My bare feet silent on the cold floor.

"Fancy seeing you here, Fia."

Fia's head whipped around. Her eyes went wide when she saw me. The color drained from her face. For a second she just stared. Then she found her voice.

"What are you doing here, Hazel?"

I laughed. The sound bounced off the mirrors and the marble. Bright and careless. I turned in a slow circle. Let her see the dress I was wearing. Let her see that I was here. That I belonged here more than she ever could.

"Shopping," I said. I stopped turning and looked at her. "You?"