

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 91: Mirror Mirror 2 - Read

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Chapter 91: Mirror Mirror 2

FIA

The boutique felt like stepping into a different world. Everything gleamed. The marble floors reflected the chandeliers overhead. The air smelled expensive. I had never been somewhere like this before.

Maren walked ahead of me. Her boots clicked against the floor with confidence I didn't feel. She knew this place. Knew how to move through it like she belonged. I followed her toward the back where racks of evening gowns stretched along the walls.

"We need to find you something stunning," Maren said. She pulled a dress from the rack. Deep purple with intricate beading. "Something that says 'I'm the Luna of Skollrend and you will respect me.'"

I touched the fabric. It was softer than anything I had ever worn. "I don't think clothes can say all that."

"You'd be surprised." She hung it over her arm and kept looking. "Clothes are armor. The right dress can make you feel invincible."

A sales associate appeared. She had the kind of smile that was probably practiced in a mirror. Professional. Warm but not real. She took the dresses Maren had selected and led us to the changing rooms.

The space was bigger than my old bathroom in Silver Creek. Mirrors lined every wall. I could see myself from angles I usually avoided. Maren hung the dresses on hooks and stepped back.

"Try them all," she said. "Don't hold back."

I started with the purple one. The beading was heavy. Beautiful but too much. I looked like I was trying too hard. The next was black with a high neckline. It made me look severe. Cold. I tried three more. Each one felt wrong in different ways.

Then I saw it. The pink fabric that caught the light. Simple but elegant. I pulled it from the hanger and slipped it over my head. The material whispered against my skin. I worked the zipper up and turned to look at myself.

The dress fit like it had been made for me. The neckline was modest but flattering. The skirt fell in soft waves to the floor. I looked like someone important. Someone who deserved to wear something this beautiful.

Maren had stepped out to look at jewelry. I heard her come back. Heard her footsteps stop.

"Oh my goddess," she said. "You look divine, Fia."

I turned to face her. She was holding a pearl necklace. Her eyes were wide. Genuine admiration on her face.

"Really?" The word came out barely louder than a whisper.

"Really." She moved behind me and clasped the pearls around my neck. They were cool against my skin. Perfect. "You have to get this."

I touched the necklace. Looked at my reflection again. The girl looking back at me didn't look like someone who had ever been rejected. Who had been treated like she was nothing. She looked confident. Strong.

"I'll keep it then," I said.

Maren grinned. "Good. We should probably get more though. A Luna needs options."

She was already pulling another dress from a rack near the entrance to the changing area. I stepped out of the booth to see what she had found. The boutique seemed brighter now. Less intimidating.

"Fancy seeing you here, Fia."

The voice froze me in place. I knew that voice. Had heard it my whole life. Sweet on the surface with poison underneath.

I turned. Hazel stood a few feet away. She wore a midnight blue dress that hugged every curve. Her hair was perfect. Her makeup was perfect. She looked like she had stepped out of a magazine. But it was her smile that made my stomach drop. That particular smile that meant trouble.

"What are you doing here, Hazel?"

The question came out harder than I intended. Defensive. Hazel's eyes moved from Maren to me. She laughed. The sound echoed off the marble and mirrors.

"Shopping," she said. She turned in a slow circle. Showing off her dress. "You?"

I swallowed. My throat felt tight. I turned to Maren. "We should leave."

I tried to walk past Hazel but she shifted and blocked my path. Her smile never wavered.

"Rude," she said. "I'm sure the guilt of what you did is still eating you up but it's all good." She tilted her head and studied me like I was something interesting. "Now that you're here, sister, we should catch up. Talk about your life at Skollrend. Shop together."

"I'm good."

I tried to move around her. She sidestepped again. Her hand caught my wrist. Gentle but firm.

"Don't tell me you're being treated like a prisoner."

"She's not," Maren said. Her voice was sharp.

Hazel turned her attention to Maren. Looked her up and down the way someone might examine a piece of furniture they were considering buying. No. This was that look you gave something before you discarded it.

"I know most Lunas," Hazel said. "You don't remind me of one." She paused. "You sure know how to dress like one though. But don't let a good fashion sense let you forget your place, Omega."

"I'm no Omega." Maren's jaw tightened. "You're different from the stories people tell about you."

"Forgive me for being a little bitter that my sister over here stole what should have been my life."

Heat flooded my face. I stepped between them. My body moved before my brain caught up.

"That's enough," I said. "Maren, we should go."

"You're right, Luna Fia." Maren turned. "We should leave before I lose my temper. Some tramps aren't worth fighting against."

The slap came so fast I barely saw it. The sound cracked through the boutique. Maren's head snapped to the side. She stumbled back a step. Her hand flew to her cheek.

"How dare you?" Hazel's voice shook.

Maren touched her face. Then she laughed in what sounded like a low rumble. There was a glint of danger underneath. She fixed her hair with her free hand.

"It must be the truth," she said. "Given how hard you whacked me."

Hazel turned to me. Her eyes were bright with anger. "Is this how the lowborns of Skollrend speak to people above their class?"

"Oh, I respect Fia." Maren's voice was ice. "I wouldn't respect you even if you were a fucking Alpha though."

Hazel raised her hand again. I opened my mouth to shout. To stop her. But a different sound cut through the air.

Click.

The sound of a gun cocking. I turned. The sentinel who had driven us stood behind Hazel. His weapon was raised. Pointed directly at her.

"I suggest you drop your hands before a nice bullet helps you out," he said.

Then came another click. This was a different gun. I watched as a sentinel emerged from the changing booth behind Hazel. He had his weapon trained on our sentinel.

"Watch your tongue when you speak with my mistress," he said.

Everything was happening too fast. I could see other shoppers starting to notice. A woman near the front grabbed her companion's arm. Pointed. This was going to explode into something worse.

"Drop it," I said to our sentinel. "Normies could walk in and see this."

He hesitated. His finger stayed on the trigger. I used the commanding voice I had tried in my head. The one that expected to be obeyed.

"Now."

He lowered the gun. Reluctantly. I then turned to Hazel's sentinel.

"Drop yours too."

He didn't move. If anything, he kept his weapon trained on our man.

"I am a daughter of Joseph Hughes, your Alpha. Would you defy me?"

The sentinel's eyes flickered. Uncertainty crossed his face. Then he lowered his gun. Hazel turned to him and scoffed. Then looked back at me with something like amusement.

"Power does look good on you."

She closed the distance between us. Her perfume was overwhelming this close. She leaned in. Her breath tickled my ear.

"However, never forget who put you there."

I met her eyes. Held her gaze. I didn't look away even though every instinct screamed at me to back down. To be small. Hazel's smile widened.

"Ooh, are you going to kill me with your eyes, little sister?"

"You should watch your tongue when you speak to the Luna of Skollrend." My voice came out steady. Stronger than I felt. "I can tolerate disrespect. My mate however will not." I took a breath. "Put your sentinel in check because in another situation, family will not be there to ease the tension you started. You of all people should know that sometimes the fire you start, don't burn the way you expect."

I turned to Maren. "We should go. We still have a lot to shop for after all."

I had taken maybe two steps when I felt it. The pearls around my neck pulled tight. Then snapped. The sound of them scattering across the marble floor filled my ears. I spun around.

Hazel's hand was raised. Coming toward my face.

I caught her wrist. My fingers closed around it. Time seemed to slow. I could see surprise flash across her face. I could see the exact moment she realized I wasn't going to let her hit me.

Then with all the pent up rage that had built inside me, I slapped her.

The sound was louder than when she had hit Maren. Sharper. My palm stung. Hazel's head turned with the force of it. A red mark bloomed on her cheek.

Satisfaction rushed through me. Hot and sweet. I had wanted to do that for years. Every time she had looked down at me. Every time she had made me feel small. Every insult and dismissal. All of it channeled into that one moment.

"How dare you, Hazel."

She held her cheek and stared at me like she didn't recognize me. Like I had transformed into someone else entirely.

"You slapped me?"

"You deserved it."

The words hung in the air between us. Hazel's eyes narrowed. But beneath the anger I saw something else. Uncertainty. Fear maybe. I had never stood up to her before. Never fought back. She didn't know what to do with this version of me.

I turned to Maren. "Let's go."

Maren nodded. Her own cheek still bore the mark of Hazel's hand. But she was smiling. We walked past her and our sentinel fell into step behind us. I didn't look back. I didn't give Hazel the satisfaction of seeing if her reaction had affected me.

My hand still tingled from the slap. The pearls were scattered somewhere behind us. Ruined. But I didn't care. Something had shifted. Some invisible weight I had been carrying had lifted. I had stood up for myself. For Maren. And it felt incredible.

Chapter 92: Pearls are forever

HAZEL

It was the pearls.

Those pearls around Fia's neck. I knew those pearls. I had looked at them myself weeks ago. Genuine South Sea pearls with the kind of luster that made your breath catch. Each one perfectly matched. The price tag had been obscene. Even I had hesitated.

My mind raced. Alpha Cian was going to let her get those? It made no sense. But He had to be the one. Who else would spend that kind of money on Fia? On my sister who was supposed to be nothing more than a political prisoner. A warm body to seal an alliance.

The dress she wore made it worse. That pink fabric moved like water. Simple but devastatingly elegant. If she wore that to Alpha Julius Knight's wedding everyone would look at her. Everyone would remember her. She would steal attention that should have been mine.

Fia swallowed. She looked at the woman beside her. "We should leave."

Oh no. Not yet. I shifted and blocked her path. My smile stayed fixed. I had practiced this smile until it was perfect. Until it could cut without anyone seeing the blade.

"Rude," I said. "I'm sure the guilt of what you did is still eating you up but it's all good." I tilted my head. Studied her like she was something interesting under glass. "Now that you're here, sister, we should catch up. Talk about your life at Skollrend. Shop together."

"I'm good."

She tried to move around me. I caught her wrist. Gentle pressure. Just enough to keep her in place. But Goddess did I want to make her bleed.

"Don't tell me you're being treated like a prisoner."

"She's not," the woman with Fia said. Her voice had an edge.

I looked her over. She dressed well but there was something about her. Something that didn't quite fit. She wasn't Luna material. Not really. So she had to be an Omega. We're there classes of Omegas that attended to the beck and call of the Skollrend Luna?

"I know most Lunas," I said. "You don't remind me of one." I paused for effect. "You sure know how to dress like one though. But don't let a good fashion sense let you forget your place, Omega."

"I'm no Omega." Her jaw tightened. "You're different from the stories people tell about you."

Oh. So she has heard tales about me. People always had stories. Most of them were jealous lies told by bitter women who couldn't compete. Though, the stories about me were nothing but odes to the angel that I was.

"Forgive me for being a little bitter that my sister over here stole what should have been my life."

Fia stepped between us. "That's enough. Maren, we should go."

"You're right, Luna Fia." The woman turned. "We should leave before I lose my temper. Some tramps aren't worth fighting against."

The word hit me like ice water. Tramp. She had called me a tramp. Me. In public. In this boutique.

My hand moved before I could think. The slap cracked through the air. Her head snapped to the side. Satisfaction rushed through me hot and sharp.

"How dare you?"

The woman touched her cheek. Then she laughed. The sound was low and dangerous.

"It must be the truth," she said. "Given how hard you whacked me."

I turned to Fia. My voice shook with rage. "Is this how the lowborns of Skollrend speak to people above their class?"

"Oh, I respect Fia." The woman's voice turned to ice. "I wouldn't respect you even if you were a fucking Alpha though."

I raised my hand again. This time I would teach her a real lesson.

Click.

The sound of a gun cocking stopped me cold. I turned my head slowly. A sentinel stood behind me. His weapon was raised. Pointed at me.

"I suggest you drop your hands before a nice bullet helps you out," he said.

Fear spiked through my chest. Then came another click. Relief flooded me. Baruch stepped from the changing booth behind the Skollrend sentinel. His weapon was trained on the man. My sentinel. My protection.

Pride swelled in my chest. He was defending me. Showing these Skollrend dogs that I was not someone to be threatened.

"Watch your tongue when you speak with my mistress," Baruch said.

Perfect. I wanted to laugh. Wanted to see the fear on their faces now.

"Drop it," Fia said to her sentinel. Her voice carried weight I had never heard before. "Normies could walk in and see this."

No. She couldn't be using that voice. That wasn't her voice to carry. Who did she think she was? Someone of valor?

"Now."

The Skollrend sentinel lowered his gun. I waited for Baruch to press his advantage. To show them who had the power here.

Fia turned to Baruch. My Sentinel. "Drop yours too."

He didn't move. Good. He knew who he answered to.

"I am a daughter of Joseph Hughes, your Alpha. Would you defy me?"

I turned to see something flickered in Baruch's eyes. Then he lowered his gun.

No.

Disappointment crashed through me. I stared at him. He had backed down. He had let Fia command him. Like he belonged to her.

I turned to Fia. I wouldn't let her see how that had rattled me. I closed the distance between us. Leaned in close enough to smell whatever cheap perfume she wore and overwhelm her with mine. Remind her of her place in life. A bottom feeder in the food chain.

"Power does look good on you."

She met my eyes and even dared to hold my gaze. When had she learned to do that? When had she learned not to look away?

"Ooh, are you going to kill me with your eyes, little sister?"

"You should watch your tongue when you speak to the Luna of Skollrend." Her voice was steady. Strong. "I can tolerate disrespect. My mate however will not." She took a breath. "Put your sentinel in check because in another situation, family will not be there to ease the tension you started. You of all people should know that sometimes the fire you start, don't burn the way you expect."

Her mate??? The words echoed in my head. She was claiming Cian. Claiming him as hers when she was supposed to resent the idea and be begging for freedom. Cian Donlon has promised to torture her till the end of time. What the hell was going on?

While I was deep in my feelings, Fia had the audacity to turn to the woman and say; "We should go. We still have a lot to shop for after all."

They started to walk away. Something twisted in my chest. Hot and violent. Those pearls caught the light as she moved. Those expensive, beautiful pearls that she did not deserve to wear.

I reached out, grabbed them and pulled hard. The strand broke. Pearls scattered across the marble floor. The sound was satisfying. Breaking something precious.

I raised my hand. I was going to slap that smug look off her face.

She caught my wrist. Her fingers closed tight around it. I felt surprise flash through me. She wasn't supposed to fight back. She never fought back.

Then she slapped me.

The sound cracked through the boutique. Louder than when I had hit the other woman. My head turned with the force. My cheek exploded in pain. Heat flooded the spot where her palm connected.

I held my cheek and stared at her. Who was this person? This wasn't Fia. This wasn't my weak little half sister who had always bent and broken under pressure.

"How dare you, Hazel."

"You slapped me?"

The words came out before I could stop them. Shock made my voice small.

"You deserved it."

She then turned and walked away. Just walked away like I was nothing. Like I wasn't worth her time anymore.

I stood there. The sting in my cheek spread through my whole face. My whole body. Something had shifted. Something fundamental had changed and I had missed it.

Mother's words echoed in my head. This is not an Alpha speaks of someone he despises... An Omega he despises... Be careful. Don't underestimate her.

Had I been a fool? Had I let Fia get too comfortable? Had I handed her Cian without thinking about what that would mean?

Baruch appeared at my side. "Mistress, are you alright?"

I pushed him aside. "You were useless there."

I walked to the racks. Found the pink dress Fia had been wearing. The one that would make everyone look at her. I pulled it from the hanger and added it to my pile.

"Mistress?"

"I'm getting this," I said.

It wasn't just about standing out at the wedding anymore. This was bigger. Everyone needed to remember that Fia had stolen Cian from me. That she was still stealing what should have been mine.

I looked at the pearls scattered on the floor. Should I get them too? I walked to the counter where an intact strand sat in a display case. The price tag made me pause. That would blow through most of what Father had set aside for my shopping.

A woman from the store approached me. Her smile was professional but cold.

"The necklace you ruined will be added to your bill."

"What?" The word came out too sharp. "What are you talking about?"

"Mrs. Donlon explained what happened in the dressing rooms and the cameras outside the changing room showed that it was true."

My throat went tight. I swallowed. Forced a smile.

"No problem then."

Baruch must have noticed my discomfort because he leaned close. "Will that be an issue with Alpha Joseph? I can help talk to your father. Swear that it was Luna Fia who egged you on."

The offer was sweet. Almost touching. I smiled at him.

"That is pretty nice." I patted his arm. "But it's no problem." I met his eyes. "And don't call her that. She's no Luna. She's just an Omega who stole what never belonged to her."

We went to the counter. I piled everything up. The dress. The shoes. The jewelry. The ruined pearls.

The woman rang it up. Scanned my card. Her expression flickered. She scanned it again.

"I'm sorry, this card is declining."

Heat flooded my face. People were starting to look. Starting to stare.

I grabbed a few dresses. Removed them from the pile. "Try again."

She scanned the card. It declined again.

I removed a pair of designer shoes. Took back one of the dresses. My hands shook.

The card went through.

The woman bagged everything. Baruch took the bags. We walked toward the exit. At the corner of my eye I saw Fia in another section. Trying on shoes. Laughing at something the woman with her said.

My body started to shake. Rage built in my chest like pressure. I held it. Kept walking. Kept my face neutral until we reached the car.

Then I kicked the tire. Hard. My breath came in shaky gasps.

"Does she think she's won?" The words came out barely louder than a whisper. "Oh, Fia. I am going to relish this."

"Are you okay?" The sentinel asked.

I fixed my hair. Smoothed down my dress. "To be honest? No." I looked at Baruch. "I was humiliated in there." My voice cracked. "You must know my sister. Heard what she did."

He nodded. "I heard a lot. I'm sorry for what she did."

I sighed. The sound came from somewhere deep. "I hate that she gets under my skin." The admission although plastic still felt like weakness. "It makes me feel weak." I turned to him. "Do you ever feel weak?"

"Don't we all?"

I gave him the look. The one I knew would work. The one that always worked on men. "I don't think you do."

I reached for his hand. Let my fingers trail across his palm. "You were very good out there. Even if I was mad." I stepped closer. "Thank you for protecting me."

His body went taut. I could see him fighting it. Fighting the pull.

I moved even closer. "We should go home. I'm craving some ice tea right now."

He seemed to break from whatever spell I had woven. "Of course."

We got in the car. I leaned back against the seat and closed my eyes. Fia's face floated behind my eyelids. That confident expression. Those pearls. That dress.

I had underestimated her. Mother had been right. But it wasn't too late. It couldn't be too late.

I would fix this. I would remind everyone that Cian was mine first. That Fia was nothing more than a thief who had taken what didn't belong to her.

And I would make her pay for that slap.

In fact, I think I wanted that Skollrend Alpha now. I was going to make him mine.

Chapter 93: A Donlon Affair 1

FIA

Maren's hand settled on my shoulder as we stood near the dress racks. Her touch was warm, grounding.

"You did good back there."

I wanted to believe her. My heart still hammered against my ribs. My hands still shook slightly. Hazel had always known exactly how to get under my skin, but this time felt different. This time I had fought back.

"I don't know if I did. I slapped her."

"She deserved it." Maren squeezed my shoulder. "But we're definitely going to show her."

Something in her tone made me look up. She had that expression again. The one that said she was planning something.

She led me toward the counter where a woman with perfectly styled hair waited. The woman's smile was professional, practiced.

"We'd like to purchase these items," Maren said. Then she paused. "But first, I need to report something that happened in the dressing room."

The woman's expression shifted to concern. "Of course. What happened?"

"The other woman who was here. I think her name is Hazel... She came into our dressing room uninvited and destroyed a pearl necklace that my friend here, Fia was trying on."

The woman's eyebrows rose. "I see. Let me check the security footage."

She disappeared into a back room. Maren turned to me and winked.

"Trust me."

The woman returned a few minutes later. Her mouth was set in a thin line. "I've reviewed the footage from outside the changing rooms. I can clearly see this Miss Hazel entering the space of your dressing room and then starting the altercation. I'm very sorry this happened."

"Forgive the pointing of guns," Maren said quickly. "We really believed we were in danger."

"Of course. We'll make this right."

"Thank you."

The woman rang up our purchases. I watched the numbers climb on the register screen. Dresses, shoes, jewelry. Things I would never have been able to afford back home. Things that still felt foreign on my body.

We paid and the woman bagged everything with care. Each item wrapped in tissue paper, tucked into glossy bags with ribbon handles.

We were heading toward the exit when Maren stopped suddenly.

"Oh. Wait."

She pointed to a display of shoes near the window. Heels in every color imaginable. The leather gleamed under the boutique lights.

"We should try those."

"Maren, we've already bought so much."

"A woman can never have too many shoes." She grabbed my hand. "Come on."

The next twenty minutes blurred together. Trying on heels. Walking back and forth across the plush carpet. Maren insisted I get at least three pairs. She got ten.

"How are you going to wear all of those?" I asked as the store clerk boxed them up.

"Life finds a way." She grinned. "Besides, different occasions require different shoes."

Outside, the late afternoon air hit my face. Cool and fresh after the perfumed atmosphere of the boutique. The sentinel took our bags and loaded them into the trunk of the car.

I slid into the back seat. Maren settled beside me.

"Did you have fun?" she asked.

"Yes." The word came out before I could overthink it. "It helped take my mind off things."

Maren sighed. "I'm sure your sister's presence ruined things somewhat."

"Somewhat."

"I would feel sorry for her." Maren looked out the window. "But the way she acted. I know her kind of woman." She turned back to me. "Maybe it's a good thing you stole her place."

The words hit me wrong. Something twisted in my chest.

"That's the thing. I didn't."

The sentinel closed the trunk and got into the driver's seat. The engine hummed to life.

Maren's expression shifted to confusion. "Oh. I apologize. It's just that is what everyone has been saying since you arrived. So I thought it to be true. Is it not?"

"I know that is whatever everyone says." I watched the boutique fade behind us through the window. "It's technically what happened."

"But?"

"But what most people don't know is that I had a mate before Cian." The words came slowly. I hadn't talked about this. Not really. Not since it happened. "A mate I actually wanted to spend the rest of my life with."

Maren went very still beside me.

"On Hazel's wedding day, she disappeared. Left a letter. My mate was nowhere to be found either." The memory played in my head like a movie I had seen too many times. "He called me to reject me and tell me that he found someone he loved. Hazel."

Maren's hand flew to her mouth.

"My stepmother convinced me to pretend to be Hazel. With the reputation that Alpha Cian had, I was worried that the pack would be endangered. That my father would suffer for it somehow." I looked down at my hands. "So I did take Hazel's place."

"But if that's the case, why would you have been villainized?"

I met her eyes. "Because I was deceived. Hazel didn't elope with my mate who rejected me. She wanted me to take her place so she could destroy me."

"She seems the type."

The comment was so matter of fact that I couldn't help but laugh. The sound surprised me.

"Before then, I really didn't think she would go that far." My laugh faded. "We were never close. But I still saw her as a sister." I paused. "I understood why she disliked me too. Why her mother would never give me the time of day. My mother and I were sore spots to the original marriage. But what happened on the wedding day was the straw that broke the camel's back. I just could never see them the same way anymore."

Maren was quiet for a moment. The car turned onto a wider street. Trees lined both sides.

"Everything in the universe happens for a reason," she said finally. "Perhaps all of this was meant to happen. Because you've helped Skollrend. You saved a life. The Grand Luna for that matter."

"I can't hold on to ideas like that." The words came out harsher than I meant. "Now that Alpha Cian knows his mother isn't going to die soon, he'll probably let me go. And it will be back to square one for me."

"I don't think so."

Something in her voice made me look at her. She sounded so certain.

"You sound sure."

"Because I have eyes, Luna Fia." She leaned forward slightly. "Last night when that Omega tried to take your life, injured you, and you were unconscious, I saw the way the Alpha cared about you. Even if all of him won't admit it yet, he likes you. And when Cian cares about someone, he's willing to go to hell and back for them. I know he would do that for you."

My throat went tight. "Doesn't he have someone?"

"What do you mean?"

"He has a photo. In his room. In his drawer. I had seen it by accident. I had opened the wrong drawer while staring at what I thought were just mundane pictures." The image had burned itself into my memory. Especially the way Cian has reacted when he saw me with the picture. "It was of a blonde woman and Cian. They looked like lovers. I got to know that her name is Madeline. She's his first flame, isn't she? And he hasn't moved on yet."

Maren's expression changed. Something shuttered behind her eyes.

"Oh. Madeline Blossom." She sighed. "We shouldn't talk about her."

"I see she's a sour subject in everyone's mouth." Bo might have been a traitor but she was not entirely wrong. "I wonder why."

"Because Alpha Cian sort of forbids it."

"Why?"

Maren opened her mouth. Closed it. She glanced at the sentinel in the front seat, then back at me.

"I really shouldn't."

The hesitation only made me more curious. More determined.

"I could order you." I kept my voice light. "You know. As your Luna."

Maren groaned. "Fine. I'll just say what I know."

She shifted in her seat to face me more fully. The car turned another corner. We were getting closer to the estate.

"Madeline Blossom was Cian's chosen mate. Not his fated mate. Just someone he chose." She spoke carefully, like she was picking her way through a minefield. "They were together for almost eight years. Everyone thought they would get married."

"What happened?"

"She left him." Maren's jaw tightened. "Right after his father died. Right when he needed her most."

The words settled over me like a weight. I thought about the photo. About the way Cian had looked when I accidentally smashed the frame. Like I had touched an open wound.

"Why did she leave?"

"That's where it gets complicated." Maren rubbed her temple. "When Cian's father died, Cian who had never seemed the type to want power suddenly decided he was going to participate. For some reason, Madeline didn't want that. I wish I knew more myself. But this was the basis for their breaking up. It could be more. But that is all I know."

Chapter 94: A Donlon Affair 2

ALDRIC

The Omegas moved around my room in a quiet hurry. They folded shirts and packed them into my cases. Their hands shook when they touched my things. That always amused me. Power changed the air around a man. It made the walls listen and the floor stiffen. Even the sunlight felt different when it shone on the right person.

My clothes were laid out on the bed. Dark suits. Clean lines. Clothes that fit a man who shaped the world instead of waiting for it to shape him. They knew better than to choose anything less.

One Omega lifted a coat with both hands like it was some holy relic. Her eyes flicked to mine then flinched away. Respect and fear lived close together. Sometimes they were the same creature.

The door opened. A softer sound than the others. Familiar.

Elara stepped in.

The Omegas bowed at once. Their backs curved low. "Luna Elara."

She ignored them and walked straight toward me. She always did that. She thought it made her look unbothered. It only reminded me she hadn't been raised mostly under my roof. Her mother's habits lived inside her without her notice.

"Are you really going to Skollrend?" she asked.

"Yes." I watched one Omega try to fold one of my shirts without creasing it. She failed. Her hands trembled too much. "But only for a short while."

Elara crossed her arms. Her eyes narrowed the way her mother's used to when she was annoyed. "Why?"

"There seems to be trouble brewing over there," I said. "And I have a feeling I am needed."

She huffed. "You always think you are needed."

"That is because I usually am."

Her mouth twitched at that. A small smile she tried to hide. I let her have it. Joy was not something I bothered to limit in my own home.

"You can come if you want," I said.

She shook her head. "I don't think I can pretend to like my cousin's new bride when I am friends with Madeline."

I turned to her fully. "Your cousin's new bride rules over you. I taught you better than to be blindly loyal to a friend."

She frowned. "I know. But it feels wrong to show up and smile in her face when I care about Maddie."

"What you feel is your business," I said. "What you choose to show the world is mine."

She stared at me for a long beat. Then she sighed. "Fine. I guess I will come. It would be rude if I do not show up for my cousin. These are trying times for him."

I stepped closer and placed a hand on her shoulder. "That is more like it."

Her eyes softened. I could see her thinking. Calculating. Good. I needed her to learn how to move without dragging emotion behind her like a broken wheel.

"You should bring a gift for the Luna too," I said. "It is best you get in her good graces."

Elara wrinkled her nose. "I hear she is an Omega."

"So?"

She scoffed. "You really are good at turning off your philosophy. Do you not hate them?"

"I do not hate anyone," I said. "There is an order to life. That order is not meant to be broken."

"Then what about the Omega Luna? Is that not breaking order?"

"What I believe and stand on is mine alone," I said. "If someone else is comfortable with something, I do not yuck anyone's yum."

She blinked at me. "That is not the response I expected."

"if you follow me, you better be nice."

She held up her hands. "I will. For your sake. And for Cian."

"Good. Now get packing. I will be leaving soon."

She nodded and left the room. The door shut behind her and the Omegas stiffened again as if the air had been released and snapped back tight.

I walked out onto the balcony. The mid morning light spilled across the maze of trimmed grass below. Every hedge was shaped by hand. My hand. Order made the world bearable. Chaos made the world honest. But order made it beautiful.

A breeze brushed past my face. Clean. Sharp. The kind of breeze that made you feel alone on purpose.

"Hello, Alpha Aldric."

The voice rose beside me. Too close. Too soft and almost inhuman. I turned.

Madeline stood there. Or the shape of her. Her form shimmered like a half remembered dream. Slight. Pale. Her long hair moved even though there was no wind. Not a ghost. Not alive either. A spell.

"What is this new trick?" I asked.

She smiled a little. "I did not want to use a phone while I am still in the area. I did not want to be tracked. This spell felt appropriate."

I raised a brow. "You always liked dramatic entrances."

"Not always. Only when they matter." Her gaze flicked to the view behind me then back to my face. "I have killed the witch. She will not be a problem."

I looked out at the maze again. Lines and shapes. Control. "Good. Then we move to the next step."

She stepped closer. The magic around her flickered like light through smoke. "How do I enter Cian's life now?"

"Alpha Julius Knight's wedding is in two days," I said. "I am extending an invitation to you. Come."

She crossed her arms. "Cian will be in grief. His mother is dying."

"He will still attend," I said. "His pride will not excuse him from such an event. At the point of his mental ruin, you will appear like a beacon of light."

Madeline's expression softened with hope she tried to hide. "You think he will look at me the same way again?"

"I think you underestimate him," I said. "When you learn what happened to his dear mother, you will offer to help. You are a talented Blossom witch. I am sure you are powerful enough to break the spell of alchemised poison. If you cannot, I have the cure."

She stared at me. Suspicion sat in her eyes like a guard dog.

"You will save his mother," I said. "He will owe you. Old feelings will bloom."

"That makes sense." She paused. Then her eyes narrowed. "But what do you get from this?"

"Why do you care?"

"Because I will not be played by you a second time," she said.

I laughed softly. "You threaten me knowing the power I have over you?"

"I came to you this way for two reasons," she said. "To hide my tracks for the murder by not using a phone. And to warn you."

She lifted her hand. A curl of light shimmered. In her palm rested a lock of hair.

My hair.

Interesting.

"I no longer care what you have over me," she said. "I have one over you too. You are allowed to plot. As long as it does not harm my Cian. Hurt him and I do not mind us going down together."

She looked steady. Confident. Braver than she should be. Love made foolishness look like courage sometimes.

"All three of us?" I asked.

She smiled. Not sweet. Not warm. Sharp. "None of it will happen if you do not fly too close to the sun."

I let out a breath. "Of course, Madeline. We all win here."

"You better pray that is the fucking truth."

She dissolved. Her form thinned like water poured into air and then she vanished without a single sound.

The balcony was quiet again. Only the breeze moved. The hedges stood still, perfect as always.

I rested my hands on the railing and looked at the world I built. Everything beneath me. Everything within reach. Every choice, every lie, every truth shaped by me.

The door behind me opened. An Omega stepped out. She kept her head lowered.

"Your luggages are ready, sir."

"Take them to the car."

"Yes, Alpha."

She left and the door closed again.

I stayed where I was for a long moment.

The morning sun warmed the stone under my hands. The maze stretched outward in clean lines and sharp corners. It looked peaceful, but peace was only another word for control.

Skollrend waited for me.

Cian walked toward his own ruin and did not know it yet.

Madeline would step into his grief like a drop of color in clear water. Spread. Sink. Become part of the fabric.

And I would be there. Above it all. Watching. Guiding. Pushing.

A god in this story I wrote.

Chapter 95: A Donlon Affair 3

CIAN

I told the sentinels to take everything. Every jar. Every bottle. Every dried herb hanging from the ceiling. All of it. The shelves needed to be emptied. The cabinets stripped bare.

"And the floor," I said. My voice sounded strange. Hollow. "Where the vial broke. Scrape up the wood. All of it."

The sentinels moved quickly. They pulled bags from the vehicles. Started filling them with Ophelia's inventory. Glass clinked against glass. The sound grated on my nerves.

Ronan stood beside me in the doorway. He watched the organized chaos inside. His jaw was tight.

"What do you want to do with all this?" he finally asked.

I pulled the napkin away from my face. The white cloth was soaked red now. More blood than fabric. I crumpled it in my fist.

"The witch didn't make just one bottle," I said. "There's no way. She had to have backups. Notes. Something."

Ronan turned to look at me. His expression was careful. "And?"

"Thorne might find something. Or Maren." I gestured at the cottage. At the sentinels loading bag after bag. "If we give them all this to work with."

"I don't think that's smart."

The words hit wrong. Made my teeth clench. "What?"

"This is alchemy, isn't it?" Ronan crossed his arms. "Magic made this mess. Magic has to be the thing that fixes it. You can't put your mother's life on the line with experiments."

Something snapped inside me. The rage I'd been holding back surged up. Hot and overwhelming.

"What do you want me to do?" I screamed. The words tore from my throat. Raw. Desperate. "Tell me. What the fuck else am I supposed to do?"

Ronan didn't flinch. He just stood there. Steady. His eyes met mine without wavering.

"I understand the pressure you're in," he said. His voice was calm. Too calm. "She's your mother. But we will find another witch."

I laughed. The sound was bitter. "What makes you think Gabriel hasn't considered that?"

"Cian—"

"He must have known all the moves we would make." I paced away from the door. Paced back. My boots left bloody prints in the dirt. "He must have chosen her for a reason. Ophelia. This specific witch."

"We don't know—"

"My fear is we will not get a fucking remedy." The words came out hoarse. Broken. "That's what keeps me up at night. That we're too late. That my uncle planned this too well."

Ronan stepped closer. He put his hand on my shoulder. The weight of it was grounding.

"We do not know that," he said. "Listen to me. If that witch could be killed by magic and not even notice it coming, there must be a stronger witch out there. Someone better. More powerful."

I wanted to believe him. Wanted to grab onto that hope and hold it tight.

"We will get someone," Ronan continued. "I will get someone. As your Beta, I promise you."

I closed my eyes. Saw Ophelia's head exploding again. The spray of blood. The way her body crumpled. The vial falling. Breaking. Everything we needed soaking into the floorboards.

And that smell. That sweet smell that had filled the cottage before it happened.

"There was something familiar about the magic that was used," I said as I opened my eyes and looked at Ronan. "The scent. I know I've smelled it before."

Ronan frowned. "You've fought witches before. Perhaps Alpha Gabriel used one of them."

Maybe. It made sense. Gabriel would use resources he already had access to. People he could trust to keep quiet.

I hummed in response. My mind turned it over. Tried to place that scent. But the memory wouldn't surface completely.

One of the sentinels approached. Young guy. Face pale from what he'd seen inside. "We're ready, Alpha."

"Good. We should go."

Ronan turned to walk toward the vehicles. I caught his shoulder and stopped him from walking.

"Get Tech here as soon as we get back," I said quietly. "Maybe we can find the witch or warlock who did this. Track them somehow."

"Of course."

We entered the car. The engine started. The convoy began moving back through the forest. Away from the cottage. Away from Ophelia's body.

I stared out the window. Watched the trees pass. My mind wouldn't settle. It jumped from thought to thought. What to do next. Which witch or warlock to approach. There were some I could ask. Talented bloodlines existed. The favored children of Hekate. Bloodlines who had consumed a relic and gained power from it.

My mind went to the Blossom house.

I shook my head hard. Tried to clear the thought. But it was too late. Madeline came to my mind in vibrant color. Her laugh. The way she used to look at me. The way she left.

But if she was the only option I could trust, would I let my pride get in the way of saving my mother?

The question sat heavy in my chest. Pressed down on my lungs. Made it hard to breathe.

"Seems like we have a visitor," Ronan said.

I looked up. Blinked. We were back in Skollrend already. I'd been too deep in thought to notice the drive. The familiar streets. The gates.

I recognized the car immediately. Black. Expensive. Parked near the main entrance to the estate.

We stopped. I got out before the vehicle had fully settled and walked toward the other car. My legs felt wooden. Disconnected.

A sentinel was helping with bags from the trunk. But when he saw me, he bowed quickly. "Alpha Cian."

"I recognize you." I looked at him. Then at the car. "Is Uncle really here?"

"Hey, kiddo."

The voice came from behind me. Warm. Familiar. So I turned.

Uncle Aldric stood there with his arms spread wide. He looked the same as always. Tall. Broad shouldered. Gray streaking through his dark hair. Smile lines around his eyes. He wore casual clothes. Jeans and a button up shirt. Nothing fancy.

But there was something in his eyes. A sharpness. Like he was assessing me. Taking in my appearance.

I looked down at myself. I was still covered in blood. Ophelia's blood. Most of it had dried now. It was stiff and dark on my clothes. My skin. My hair.

"Uncle Aldric." The words came out flat. Tired.

He closed the distance between us and pulled me into a hug before I could protest that I was covered in witch guts. His arms were strong. Solid. The kind of embrace that used to make me feel safe when I was younger.

"What happened?" he asked quietly. Close to my ear. "You look like you went to war."

"Something like that."

He pulled back and held me at arm's length while his eyes scanned my face. The blood. The exhaustion I knew was written there.

"We need to talk," he said.

"Now's not a good time."

"When is it ever a good time?" He squeezed my shoulders. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up first. Then we talk."

Ronan approached. He nodded to Aldric. "Alpha Aldric. Good to see you."

"Ronan." Aldric returned the nod. "Take care of whatever needs taking care of. I've got him for a bit."

Ronan looked at me. I gave a slight nod. He moved off toward the sentinels and started giving orders about the bags from Ophelia's cottage. Where to take them. Who to get to start analyzing the contents.

Aldric put his hand on my back and guided me toward the estate entrance. We walked in silence. Through the doors. Down the familiar hallways. Servants and pack members we passed stared. Their eyes went wide at the blood covering me. But no one said anything.

We reached my quarters. Uncle pushed the door open and walked me inside like I was a child who needed guidance. I felt like it.

"Shower," he said as he pointed toward the bathroom. "I'll wait."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to say I didn't have time for this. That every second mattered. That my mother was dying and I needed to figure out what to do next.

But my body moved on its own. Toward the bathroom. The blood on my skin felt wrong now. Oppressive. Like it was suffocating me.

I stripped. Turned the water on hot. Stepped under the spray. Watched Ophelia's blood swirl down the drain. Pink at first. Then red. Then pink again as it diluted.

My hands shook. I pressed them against the tile wall. Let the water beat down on my back. On my head. Let it wash everything away.

But it couldn't wash away the image burned into my mind. Ophelia's head exploding. The vial falling. My only chance at saving my mother destroyed in a split second.

Gabriel was always one step ahead. Always knew what we would do. How we would react. Where we would go.

How was I supposed to fight that?

I don't know how long I stood there. The water started to run cold before I finally turned it off. Dried myself. Found clean clothes in my closet. Pulled them on with numb fingers.

When I came out, Aldric was sitting in one of the drawers near the window. He looked relaxed. Comfortable. But his eyes were alert. Missing nothing.

"Better?" he asked.

"Not really."

He gestured to the other chair. "Sit. Talk to me. What happened?"

Chapter 96: Hereditary 1

FIA

The car slowed as we approached the estate. My stomach tightened. Shopping bags rustled behind us as the sentinel navigated the final turn toward the gates.

Something felt different. Movement near the entrance caught my eye. There were more people. Even more activity than usual.

"Is that..." I leaned forward in my seat.

A car sat parked near the main entrance. I hadn't been in Skollrend long. But the catas has a theme to them. A look to them. So this one did not look like one of ours. The trunk stood open, and someone directed staff members who carried luggage toward the house.

"Looks like we have guests," Maren said.

The sentinel pulled up and stopped. He got out first and opened our door. I stepped onto the gravel and straightened. The late afternoon sun warmed my face. My muscles ached from walking in heels all day. My mind still replayed the confrontation with Hazel like a song I couldn't turn off.

Maren climbed out beside me. Our shopping bags piled high in the trunk.

The woman near the entrance moved with purpose. She gestured sharply at a man struggling with a heavy suitcase. Her hair caught the light. Bleached copper. Dark eyebrows that made a stark contrast against the pale shade.

"Make it snappy," she called out. "I want to settle into my guest room before dinner."

Her voice carried authority. The kind that expected obedience without question.

I found myself staring. Something about her reminded me of my sister Hazel. It has to be that air of superiority that sat on their shoulders like expensive perfume.

She turned. Her eyes landed on me.

Her gaze traveled from my face down to my feet and back up again. Slow. Deliberate. Judging.

"Do you have a staring problem?"

The words hit like a slap. My face heated. I glanced around to make sure she was talking to me.

Maren rushed forward. She reached my side and bowed low. Lower than I had ever seen her bow.

"Luna Elara," Maren said quickly. "This is the current Luna of Skollrend. Alpha Cian's bride. Fia."

The woman's expression changed instantly. The hard edge smoothed into something softer. A smile spread across her face. It was warm but clearly practiced. Completely different from the look she had given me seconds before.

"Oh." She walked toward me. Her movements were fluid. Confident. "I apologize. I didn't know."

She reached out for a hug. I stood frozen for half a second before accepting. She smelled like vanilla and something sharper underneath. Her arms wrapped around me briefly before she pulled back.

"I'm Elara," she said. "Cian's favorite cousin."

I forced my voice to sound normal. "Hi. I'm Fia."

Her eyes flickered past me. I turned to follow her gaze. The sentinel had opened our trunk and pulled out the first of our shopping bags. The glossy paper gleamed. Ribbons hung from the handles.

Elara looked back at me. Her smile stayed in place but something shifted behind her eyes.

"Oh. You went shopping."

The words sounded innocent enough. But the tone underneath made my skin prickle. It reminded me again of Hazel. That same false sweetness that hid something sharper.

I nodded. "Yes."

"I'm a fashion girl myself." She crossed her arms. "And with that big wedding coming up, I'm sure you felt the need to show up looking your best." She paused. "But priorities, you know. My aunt is fighting for her life right now and you're buying nice dresses?"

The criticism landed like a punch. My throat tightened. Guilt twisted in my chest even though I knew the shopping had been mostly Maren and Cian's idea. I had still followed through with it and I had fun.

"But to each their own I guess," Elara added. Her smile never wavered.

I swallowed. Words stuck in my throat. What could I say that wouldn't sound defensive?

"It was actually me who dragged her along," Maren said quickly. "I thought it would help take her mind off things after everything that's happened."

Elara's head turned toward Maren. The smile vanished.

"I don't remember extending a conversation to you." Her voice dropped several degrees. "Get lost."

Maren bowed immediately and backed away. Her face had gone pale. She disappeared toward the side entrance without another word.

Heat rushed through my body. Anger mixed with shock.

"That was rude."

Elara turned back to me. Her eyebrows rose slightly. "No. Her chipping into a conversation you and I were having was weird." She tilted her head. "You really should fix yourself up and command more respect. You aren't an Omega anymore."

The words stung. I opened my mouth to respond but she continued by immediately putting a hand to her mouth. "Oh, was that offensive? I'm sorry." Her voice dripped with false apology. "I tend to be very potty mouthed and my father warns me but I swear I'm not doing it on purpose."

The contradiction made my head spin. She apologized while her eyes stayed cold. Every word felt calculated to wound while maintaining plausible deniability.

"In fact, I brought you a gift." She smiled again. "I'll give it to you later perhaps after dinner."

My face felt hot. My hands clenched into fists at my sides. I forced them to relax.

"Well, it was nice to meet you Elara." The words came out stiff. "I can sense Cian is around. I'll go check up on him. See you later I guess."

"I would not recommend that."

Something in her tone made me pause. I looked at her. "I'm sorry?"

"He didn't get a cure for his mother." She spoke matter of factly. "From what I've heard from the talkative Omegas in this estate anyway. And I know how my cousin lashes out when he doesn't get his way." She shrugged. "It's a Donlon thing."

My heart cracked. The world tilted slightly. He didn't get the cure to the alchemy poison. Would that grand Luna be in even dire danger now? I couldn't bring myself to imagine what Cian would be feeling right now.

He would need someone by his side. Someone in his corner. I had to be there for him.

"All the more reason I should be at his side." I retorted right back at Elara.

I didn't wait for her response. I turned and ran toward the house. My feet hit the stone steps. The front doors opened easily under my hands.

The entrance hall stretched before me. I didn't slow down. The bond pulled in my chest like a string tied to my ribs. I followed it through corridors I had memorized by now. Up the stairs. Down the hallway.

Two Sentinels stood guard outside Cian's door. They watched me approach but neither of them moved to stop me. I grabbed the handle and pushed.

The door swung open and I stepped into the familiar space. The lounge area sat empty. Afternoon light filtered through the windows. Everything looked exactly as it always did.

Voices drifted from the bedroom. Low, controlled. Both male. One of them belonged to Cian.

I crossed the lounge, each step swallowed by the thick carpet. At the doorway I noticed the bathroom door slightly open, a sliver of white light cutting across the darker room.

The warmth under my feet faded as I stepped from the carpet onto the cool marble. The shift made me inhale, as if the temperature itself warned me that something waited ahead.

Cian stood near the dresser. Another man held him, an older figure with dark hair threaded with gray at the temples. His arms were wrapped around Cian in a steady hold, not possessive, not casual, something in between. A lifeline.

Cian's face was buried in the man's shoulder. His body was wound tight, tension carved into him from the neck to the fists at his sides. He looked like someone trying to keep his entire world from breaking open.

I stepped back on instinct and my shoe scraped the marble. The sound cracked through the quiet.

Both men turned.

"I am sorry." The words slipped out before I could think. "I did not mean to intrude."

The older man released Cian with care. His hands lingered on Cian's shoulders, giving one firm squeeze that felt like reassurance before he let go fully. Then he faced me head on.

His eyes were sharp, the kind that studied everything and missed nothing. The kind that learned you before you even spoke.

"Is this her?" he asked.

Cian nodded. He looked drained, shadows heavy beneath his eyes, his jaw rigid as if he was still holding back something that hurt too much to name.

The man's expression shifted. His face opened into a warm smile that softened every hard line. It reached his eyes in a way that felt disarming.

"Well hello." He stepped toward me with practiced ease, as if he had spent his whole life moving through rooms people watched. "You must be Fia."

I nodded because anything more felt impossible.

He offered his hand. "I am Aldric. Cian's uncle." His grip was firm when I took it, strong in a way that felt grounding rather than intimidating. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you."

My throat felt tight. I glanced past him to Cian. The pain was still there in the set of his shoulders, in the tremble he tried to hide, in the way he stood as if one wrong movement could break him apart.

My heart cracked again.

Chapter 97: Hereditary 2

HAZEL

I stared at the ceiling of my bedroom. The light fixture needed dusting. I noticed these things when my mind wouldn't stop racing.

Fia's face kept appearing behind my eyelids. That confident expression. The way she had met my eyes without flinching. The slap that still burned across my cheek hours later.

I touched my face. The sting had faded but the memory hadn't.

How dare she.

My fingers curled into the silk sheets beneath me. I had spent years building myself up. Years perfecting every detail. My appearance. My connections. My reputation. And she

thought she could just waltz back into society wearing expensive pearls and steal everything I had worked for because she was married to Cian Donlon?

No. I gave her that.

Everything she had now was trash I didn't want.

I sat up. My reflection stared back at me from the vanity mirror across the room. Even now, disheveled and angry, I looked perfect. That was the difference between us. I had always been perfect. She had always been lacking.

Whatever Fia had, I had always had it ten times better.

But something had changed.

I needed to get back into Skollrend. I needed to see what was happening there. Needed to understand how my weak little sister had suddenly grown teeth. Why she now seemed to have allies.

And I needed Fia to see that those wings she was trying to grow wouldn't save her. That I could take Cian back whenever I wanted. That she was nothing more than a placeholder keeping his bed warm until I decided to reclaim what was mine.

Actually, I did want him now. Since that daring clap back that Fia did, the idea settled in my chest with surprising weight. Yes. I would make him mine. I would show Fia that she couldn't have anything I didn't allow her to have.

A knock at my door interrupted my planning.

"Come in." I said.

Mother swept into the room. One look at her face told me everything. Her jaw was tight. Her eyes had that dangerous glint that meant someone was about to get eviscerated.

That someone was probably me.

"Did something happen at your outing?" I kept my voice light. Curious enough but with a cadence that was supposed to scream that I was not concerned.

She held up her phone. The screen faced me. Numbers glared back. Big, accusatory numbers.

"You spent this ridiculous amount on clothes."

My stomach dropped. I had hoped Father would see the charges first. He was easier to manipulate. A few tears. Some talk about wanting to represent the family well. He would have grumbled but ultimately let it go.

Mother was different. Mother kept track of everything. Everything.

Which was a shame really. Because with all her tracking. Father still stumbled on his fated mate and had a child out of wedlock. If anything, she was the reason why I was having such a bad day.

"I have to wear the very best, Mother." I lifted my chin. "The wedding and the annual ball are no small matter."

"Except you are spending recklessly." Her voice cut through my excuse like a knife through butter. "You are lucky I mostly deal with this family's finances. Because your father would not have taken it lightly."

She was wrong in that regard. Father was currently my squishy chew toy. But I tried not to let that show even when it tried to surface, I pushed it down. She could still make this hell.

"Well, it is not an issue then."

She stared at me. Really looked at me. I felt like a bug under glass again.

"What the hell did you even buy?"

"The necessary items." I gestured vaguely toward the shopping bags piled near my closet.

Mother turned her back to me. Walked to the bags. I watched her spine, straight and unforgiving.

"You are deflecting."

"I am not."

She knelt. Pulled out one of the dresses. The fabric caught the light. She examined the label, the stitching, the price tag still attached.

"These brands are beautiful." She pulled out another dress. Then the shoes. "But they hardly worth what you spent."

She turned to face me. Her eyes narrowed.

"What is going on?"

My heart rate picked up. I kept my face neutral. Years of practice made it easy. Mostly easy.

"I bought a necklace." The words came out steady. "Pearls. It cost a lot."

"Well, where are they?"

I stood. The movement felt too fast. Too defensive. I slowed down. Smoothed my dress.

"It seems like you are fishing for something. For trouble, Mother."

I walked to my desk. Opened the bottom drawer. The velvet box sat there. Mocking me. I pulled it out and held it up.

Mother's gasp filled the room. "Are you stupid? Those are crazy expensive."

"Only the best for what is to come, don't you think?"

She crossed the distance between us. Her heels clicked on the hardwood floor. Each step measured. Deliberate.

"I like the ambition you have." She stopped in front of me. "But Hazel. I am starting to think you are soaring too close to the sun. If you are not smart about this, you will fall hard and fast."

"I got this covered, Mother."

"I mean it." Her hand reached for my arm. I let her take it. "Even the move you pulled with Milo was stupid and it could have gotten you in quite the predicament."

Heat rushed to my face. "It did not. I am that good. That is what taking risks mean for me. High rewards."

She studied me for a long moment. Then her expression shifted. That look. The one that meant she knew I was hiding something.

"Let me take a look at the pearls."

I took a step back. The box pressed against my chest. "No."

Mother's eyebrow raised. Slowly. Deliberately. "I knew something was off."

She moved faster than I expected. Her hand shot out and she grabbed the box. I held on but she was stronger. More determined.

The box came free.

She flipped it open.

The pearls lay inside. A scattered mess. The string cut clean through where I had grabbed them from Fia's neck.

Mother looked up at me. "Explain."

I bit my bottom lip as I reached for the box. "No. I can handle it."

She pulled the box away. Held it out of reach like I was a child trying to grab a toy.

"I could call the sentinel who protected you and hear it all." Her voice dropped. Became deadly quiet. "So if you are smart, you know the smart thing to do."

My throat tightened. I swallowed. "It was an accident."

"If that was the case, you wouldn't have gone through length to hide it from me." She closed the box. The snap echoed in the quiet room. "Hazel, don't play games with me. I am your mother. What could you be hiding?"

"I swear nothing."

Mother walked to the door. Opened it. A sentinel stood outside. He straightened when he saw her.

"Where is that sentinel?" she asked him.

He bowed. "I do not have no idea who you are referring to, Luna Isobel."

"Get me Sentinel Baruch. I believe his name his Baruch anyways. He's one of the new guys. Get him here."

The sentinel left. His footsteps faded down the hallway.

My pulse hammered in my ears. From what I had observed so far, Baruch was loyal. But he was also rigid. He followed rules. Respected authority. Would he lie for me?

I wasn't sure.

Mother closed the door and turned back to me. She didn't speak. She just waited and let the silence build.

I counted my heartbeats. Tried to think of a way out. Any way out.

A knock came at the door.

"Enter," Mother called.

Baruch stepped inside. His uniform was perfect. Not a crease out of place. He bowed to Mother. Then to me. His face gave nothing away.

"You called for me, Luna?"

Mother held up the box. Opened it again and let him see the situation with the pearls.

"What happened when Hazel was shopping?" She paused. Let the question hang. "I have a feeling there is a story here."

Baruch's eyes flicked to mine. Just for a second. Then back to Mother.

"And I should tell you," Mother continued. Her voice turned sharp. "That lying would put you in an uncomfortable position. Like conspiracy. And treason."

My stomach twisted. She was threatening him. Making sure he knew what was at stake.

Baruch bowed again. Lower this time. "I understand."

He straightened. His hands clasped behind his back.

"However, nothing happened. I wasn't in the dressing room when the pearls broke while she was trying it on. But I know that much." He paused. "The store had a policy since it broke on her hands and that is why Luna Hazel had to buy it."

I fought to keep my expression neutral. To not let the surprise show.

He was lying for me.

Mother studied him. I could see her mind working. Calculating. Trying to decide if she believed him.

The silence stretched. Baruch didn't fidget. He didn't look away. He just stood there. Perfectly still. Perfectly composed.

Finally, Mother took a deep breath. "You can go."

Baruch bowed. "Of course, Luna."

He turned. His eyes met mine for just a moment. I saw something there. Something I couldn't quite read.

Then he was gone. The door clicked shut behind him.

Mother set the box on my desk. She didn't look at me.

"You are playing a dangerous game," she said.

I didn't respond. What could I say?

She walked to the door. Her hand rested on the handle.

"He might not have seen it. But I know you Hazel and I know that something happened. I can see it all over your face. Whatever happened today, whatever has got you looking like that..."

"Like what?" I cut in.

"Like you are plotting something," She said as she turned her head and met my eyes. "Be smarter about it. Because next time, you might not be as lucky as you were with Milo."

The door closed. Her footsteps faded.

I stood there. The broken pearls sat on my desk. Mocking me. Reminding me of my failure.

But Baruch had lied for me.

A smile tugged at my lips. I let it spread. Let it grow.

Maybe he was more malleable than I thought.

I picked up the box and studied the scattered pearls.

Fia thought she had won. She thought that she had power now and that the slap had put me in my place.

She was wrong.

I closed the box. Set it back in my desk drawer.

I would let her enjoy her moment. Let her think she was finally strong enough to stand up to me and I was certain after that slap, she would become even more emboldened.

The wedding was the perfect time to strike. Break whatever new shaky comfort she was slowly building at Skollrend and remind everyone... And I meant everyone... That Fia was a scheming beast who was not to be trusted. It had been done before, it could definitely be done again.

As for Cian, well I had a plan for him as well.

Chapter 98: Hereditary 3

CIAN

The bathroom door was cold against my palm. I pushed it open and stepped through. My reflection stared back at me from the mirror. Dark circles under my eyes. Jaw tight enough to crack teeth.

I looked away.

The bedroom stretched behind me through the doorway. Uncle Aldric sat in one of the drawers near the window. His presence had always been steady. Reliable. Even when everything else fell apart.

"I was so close to saving my mother."

The words came out rough. My throat felt raw. I crossed the room toward him. Each step felt heavier than the last.

"It was like that jerk found it funny. Decided to take it right from under me."

Aldric's expression didn't change. He watched me with those sharp eyes that saw too much. Always had.

I stopped in front of him. My hands curled into fists at my sides.

"The second he shows his face again, I will not hesitate." My voice dropped lower. Colder. "There is no blood in this matter anymore. He is a threat to the people I care about and he is too much of a coward to face me and challenge me properly."

"I don't know about that," Aldric said quietly.

The contradiction hit like ice water.

"Oh I do." Heat flooded my chest. Anger mixed with something sharper. Something that tasted like fear but I refused to name it. "Because there is a chance that he loses. So using poisons and others he can poison with his ideologies is more than enough." It is safe for him."

My voice cracked on the last word. The anger drained out as fast as it came. Exhaustion rushed in to fill the space.

Aldric stood. He closed the distance between us and pulled me into his arms. The hug was firm. Grounding. Everything I needed but couldn't ask for.

"We will figure this out, my boy."

I let myself lean into it. Just for a moment.

"I have a lot of contacts." His voice rumbled through his chest. "I will use them to find her a powerful magic practitioner to lift this mess."

The mention of witches and warlock made my stomach twist.

"I am scared."

The admission felt like pulling out my own teeth. I hated the sound of it. Hated the weakness it exposed.

"It is so irrational but I cannot help it." The words kept coming. They poured out like poison I needed to drain. "What if whatever witch we bring turns out to be working for him? Finishes the job?"

My fingers dug into Aldric's shoulders.

"I am about to even screen the Omegas and Sentinels for their loyalties. That alone is giving me a headache."

"It is alright." Aldric's grip tightened. "I am here now."

The simple statement shouldn't have meant so much. But it did. It always did.

"Maybe we can get a witch you trust," he continued.

I pulled back enough to look at him. Trust. The word felt foreign in my mouth.

"I can't call Madeline or any of her family members." My jaw clenched. "Not after the way we ended things."

The memory surfaced before I could stop it. Harsh words. Accusations. The look on her face when I told her we were done. That her services were no longer needed. That I didn't trust her judgment anymore. But that was after all the things she had said.

It had been messy. Brutal. Final.

Aldric pulled me back into the hug. Tighter this time.

"I understand, my boy." His hand pressed against the back of my head. "But this is your mother we are talking about. We should cross every bridge."

He was right. I knew he was right. But the thought of reaching out to Madeline made my skin crawl. Pride mixed with shame in a toxic combination.

A sound broke through my thoughts. A scrape against marble. Shoe against stone.

I turned.

Fia stood in the bathroom doorway. Her eyes were wide. Worried. Scared.

She looked at me with something that felt like pity.

My entire body went rigid. I hated it. Hated being seen like this. Vulnerable. Capable of being hurt. Weak.

"I am sorry." Her voice came out soft. Uncertain. "I did not mean to intrude."

Aldric released me. His hands squeezed my shoulders once before he let go completely. Then he turned to face her.

"Is this her?" he asked.

I nodded. Words felt impossible.

His expression changed immediately. The sharp observation melted into warmth. His smile reached his eyes. He crossed the room toward her with practiced ease.

"Well hello." He extended his hand. "You must be Fia."

She nodded. Her throat moved as she swallowed.

"I am Aldric. Cian's uncle." He took her hand in a firm grip. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you."

My heart hammered against my ribs. I watched them shake hands. Watched the way Fia's eyes kept flickering back to me. The worry never left her face.

That same look that made me want to simultaneously pull her close and push her away.

"I heard you were instrumental to helping us see Morrigan's situation was actually poisoning instead of the rot," Aldric said.

Fia's cheeks colored slightly. "It was just luck if I am being honest."

"Well, I hope I can get to know you more."

"Of course."

She moved past Aldric and walked straight toward me. Her steps were careful. Measured.

"Are you alright?"

The question hung in the air between us. My gaze fixed on a point somewhere past her shoulder. I couldn't meet her eyes. Couldn't face the concern I knew I would find there.

Something fluttered in my chest. An uncomfortable warmth that made my skin feel too tight.

"Yeah. Pretty much."

The lie tasted bitter.

"I am sorry."

Her words made my jaw clench. I forced my voice to stay level.

"Well, it is not your fault."

"I will be going now," Aldric said from behind her.

I managed a nod. His footsteps crossed the room. The door opened and closed with a soft click.

Then it was just us.

Silence filled the space. I needed to say something. Anything. Change the subject before she could dig deeper into wounds I wasn't ready to show.

"How was your shopping?"

The question came out stiff. Awkward.

Fia's eyebrows rose. "Do you really want to talk about my shopping right now?"

I finally looked at her. Really looked at her. The late afternoon light caught in her hair. Her expression held a mix of disbelief and something softer underneath. It reminded me of how much I hated being pitied.

"Well, I think I deserve to know."

"Deflecting looks horrible on you." She retorted.

She then closed the remaining distance between us. Before I could process what was happening, her arms wrapped around me.

"I am sorry, Cian."

The world stopped.

My heart slammed against my chest. Once. Twice. So hard I wondered if she could feel it through the embrace. Everything else faded. The room. The situation. The fear that had been eating at me for hours.

Nothing existed except the warmth of her against me.

My hands moved on their own. They found her back. Pulled her closer. I buried my face in her hair and breathed in the scent of her shampoo. It was floral and it smelled clean if that could even be described.

The hug felt like the only solid thing in a world that wouldn't stop tilting.

Her lips were close to my ear. Her breath warm against my skin.

"You don't have to put the world on your shoulders." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "It is okay to be frustrated. No matter how small it makes you feel."

The words cracked something open inside my chest. Something I had been keeping locked and barricaded.

My grip tightened. I held her like she might disappear if I let go. Like she was the only thing keeping me from falling apart completely.

She didn't pull away. Didn't try to escape. She just stood there and let me hold on.

The bond hummed between us. A living thing that pulsed with warmth and light. It wrapped around my heart and squeezed. Not painfully. More like a reminder that I wasn't alone in this.

That someone else was standing in the fire with me.

When we weren't trapping it in a bubble, it actually did feel quite...nice.

My throat felt tight. Tears burned behind my eyes but I refused to let them fall. I had broken enough today. Shown enough weakness.

But this. This felt different.

This felt like permission to break. Just a little. Just enough to breathe again.

Fia's hand moved against my back. A slow, soothing motion. The kind someone would use to calm a frightened animal.

I should have hated it. Should have pushed her away and rebuilt the walls she was tearing down with nothing but her presence and gentle words.

But I couldn't.

I didn't want to.

"I thought I had it," I said against her hair. "The cure. I thought I finally had it."

"I know."

"He took it from me. Just snatched it away like it was nothing."

"I know."

Her responses weren't meant to fix anything. They were just acknowledgment. Understanding. The simple recognition that I was hurting and it mattered.

"My mother is dying." The words scraped out. "And I can't stop it."

Fia's arms tightened around me. "We will find another way."

The certainty in her voice cut through some of the darkness. Not all of it. But enough to let a sliver of light through.

"What if we don't?"

"Well I hope we do." She pulled back just enough to look up at me. Her eyes held mine. "But in this small scenario that we do not, you don't have to carry that fear alone."

My hand came up on its own. My fingers traced the line of her jaw. Her skin was soft. Warm.

She leaned into the touch.

The air between us felt charged. Heavy with something I didn't have a name for. Something that made my pulse race and my breath catch.

Her lips parted slightly. A question formed in her eyes.

That was when door burst open.

We jerked apart. My hand fell back to my side. Fia stepped away quickly. Too quickly.

A sentinel stood in the doorway. His face was pale.

"Alpha Cian." He bowed low. "I apologize for the interruption. But there is something you need to see. Immediately."

The moment shattered. Reality crashed back in like a wave.

I straightened. Forced my expression back into something harder. More controlled.

"What is it?"

"It concerns the Grand Luna." The sentinel's voice was tight. "Her condition has worsened."

My blood went cold.

Chapter 99: Some Protector 1

CIAN

My hands shook as I grabbed the first shirt I could find. I yanked it over my head. The fabric caught on my shoulder. I didn't care. My fingers fumbled with the buttons.

"Cian, wait—"

I didn't wait. I couldn't. My feet hit the floor hard as I ran. The hallway blurred past me. Paintings on the walls became streaks of color. My pulse hammered in my ears, drowning out everything else.

The infirmary doors loomed ahead. I slammed my palms against them. They swung open so hard they crashed against the walls.

The smell hit me first. Antiseptic mixed with something bitter. Something wrong.

My mother still lay on the bed in the center of the room. Tubes still ran from her arms. Monitors beeped in frantic rhythms that made my chest tighten. Her skin looked gray. Waxy. Like something already dead.

Maren stood over her. Her hands moved quickly across her body. Checking vitals. Adjusting machines. Her jaw was set in a hard line.

Elder Thorne worked beside her. His aged hands traced patterns right above my mother's chest with his herbs.

"What's happening?" The words tore out of my throat.

Neither of them looked at me. Maren pressed two fingers against my mother's neck. Her lips moved silently. Counting.

"Her heart stopped." Thorne's voice was strained. "We got it started again but it's weak."

The world tilted. My knees nearly buckled.

I watched them work. Watched Maren compress her chest. Watched Thorne use his alternative medicine to supplement whatever Maren was doing. Every second stretched into an eternity. Every beep from the monitor felt like a countdown to the end.

My mother's chest rose. Fell. Rose again.

The frantic beeping slowed. Steadied into something more rhythmic.

Only then did Maren stepped back. Her shoulders sagged. "She's stable."

Stable. The word should have brought relief. It didn't. Stable wasn't cured. Stable wasn't safe. Stable was just another word for barely holding on.

"You can see her." Maren looked at me finally. Her eyes were tired. "But only for a moment. She needs rest."

I couldn't move. My feet were rooted to the floor. I stared at my mother's still form and every part of me screamed to go to her. But I couldn't make myself take that step.

If I went to her, I would have to face it. Face how close I'd come to losing her again. I would have to face just how helpless I was.

"No." The word came out flat. Empty.

Maren's eyebrows rose. "Alpha Cian—"

"This madness needs to stop." I turned to face her and Thorne. My hands curled into fists. "I brought you herbs. Pills. Potions. Everything from that dead witch's store. You need to make a cure. Now."

Thorne shook his head. "We cannot do that."

"Why not?"

"It is still magic." Maren's voice was gentle. I hated that it was too gentle. Like I was child that needed to be schooled. "We don't know what interactions—"

"I don't want to hear that!" The shout exploded out of me. It echoed off the infirmary walls. Several heads turned. I didn't care. "Figure it out. That's what you're supposed to do."

"Cian." Ronan's voice came from behind me. I hadn't heard him enter. "You need to calm down."

I whirled on him. "How can you tell me that? Did you not just see what happened? Did you not just hear what happened?!"

"I did." His expression was carefully neutral. "But shouting at the people trying to help won't—"

"They're making excuses."

"Cian, please—"

"No." I pointed at my mother. "She just coded. It will only get worse. Just because she's a Luna doesn't mean this poison won't damage her permanently. I'm sick of hearing excuses."

"Those are not excuses." Fia's voice was quiet. I'd forgotten she'd followed me. She stood near the door. Her arms wrapped around herself. "They cannot just delve into what magic clearly caused. There are protocols. Safety measures—"

"I just need everyone to just shut up."

The words came out cold. Harsh. They hung in the air like poison.

Fia flinched. The hurt that flashed across her face made something twist in my gut. But I pushed it down. Buried it under the weight of everything else threatening to crush me.

Maren's expression had gone stony. Thorne looked disappointed. Ronan's jaw clenched.

I heard even more footsteps and soon uncle Aldric appeared in the doorway with Elara close behind. He took in the scene quickly. His eyes moved from me to my mother to the tense faces of everyone else.

"I heard what happened and they all have a point," Aldric said carefully.

I scoffed. The sound was bitter. "She just coded. Did you all miss that part?"

"We didn't miss anything." Ronan's voice had an edge now. "But flying off the handle—"

"I'm not flying off the handle. I'm being realistic." I could feel the words pouring out. I could hear how cruel they sounded. But I couldn't stop. The pain had to go somewhere. It had to land on someone and at this point, I didn't care who. "She's dying and you're all standing around talking about protocols and safety measures."

"Cian." Fia took a step toward me. Her eyes pleaded. "We're just trying to help."

"Then help." My voice cracked. "I need to stop hearing why they can't do it. I need something... anything to just be done."

The silence that followed felt suffocating. I could see the hurt on their faces. I could see how my words landed like blows. Some small, distant part of me knew I was wrong. Knew I was lashing out at people who didn't deserve it.

But that part was drowned out by the roaring in my head. The image of my mother's gray skin. The memory of those frantic monitor beeps. The knowledge that I might lose her right now and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

"I'm tired." The words came out quieter. Defeated. "I'm really tired."

No one spoke. They just watched me. Waiting.

I turned to Ronan. "You know what you can do for me right now? Get Elder Moira with all her spiritual sensibilities. Get every sentinel and Omega. Make them take another oath. Whoever still wants Gabriel can go to hell before I send them there as well."

Ronan's throat moved as he swallowed. "I will."

I didn't wait for more. I couldn't stay in that room another second. The walls felt too close. The air too thick. I pushed past Aldric and Elara. My shoulder hit the doorframe. I barely felt it.

The hallway stretched endlessly. My feet carried me forward without conscious thought. Downstairs. Through the corridors and out the back doors into the gardens.

The cool evening air hit my face. I gulped it down like a drowning man. My hands found a stone bench. I gripped the edge hard enough to hurt.

Don't explode. Don't break. Not here. Not where anyone can see.

My phone felt heavy in my pocket. I pulled it out. The screen was too bright. I squinted at the contacts list. My thumb scrolled down. Past names I barely remembered. Past people who couldn't help.

It stopped on Madeline's name.

My hand wavered. Pride warred with desperation. She hated me. I'd made sure of that. The things I'd said to her during that last argument still echoed in my memory. Cruel. Cutting. Designed to push her away because I'd been angry and hurt and too proud to admit I needed her by my side.

I hit call.

The sound that came back made my stomach drop. Not ringing. Just a flat, dead tone followed by an automated message. "The number you have dialed is currently unavailable please—"

I ended the call. My vision blurred. Tears burned hot behind my eyes. I blinked them back furiously but one escaped. It tracked down my cheek. I wiped it away with the back of my hand.

Blocked. Of course she'd blocked me.

My fingers scrolled up and I found another name. Valentine. Her father. The head of their coven.

This time the call went through. It rang once. Twice. Three times. But he didn't pick so it went straight to voicemail.

"This is Valentine. Leave a message."

The beep sounded. I opened my mouth. Nothing came out at first.

"I know I shouldn't be calling." The words stumbled over each other. "But I—"

What was I supposed to say? That I was desperate? That my pride had finally broken under the weight of watching my mother die?

"I need help." My voice cracked. "Please, I need either you or Madeline's help. I don't want my mother to die."

The words hung there. Pathetic. Pleading. Everything I'd sworn I'd never be.

This was stupid. Childish. I reached for the phone to stop the recording but my thumb slipped. Hit send instead of cancel.

"No." I stared at the screen in horror. The message sent. Gone. Out there for Valentine to hear and judge.

I wanted to throw the phone. Wanted to scream. Wanted to do anything except stand there feeling like the world's biggest fool.

"It seems like you are ready to get their help."

I spun around. Aldric stood a few feet away. His hands were in his pockets. His expression was unreadable in the dim light.

"I apologize for listening in." He moved closer. "But you ran out so quickly. I wanted to make sure you were alright."

"I'm fine." The lie was automatic.

"If they do not reply, I can try." Aldric stopped beside the bench. "I have contacts among the covens. Different ones. People who might—"

"It was something I did in the moment." I cut him off. My fingers tightened around the phone. "It was stupid. Not like they would take it up."

"You don't know that."

"I do." The words tasted bitter. "It might seem cruel, but I would understand. I put Madeline through hell."

Aldric waited. Let the silence stretch.

"She told me to choose." The confession pulled itself out of me. "Between her and this pack... And I... And I chose." I laughed. The sound had no humor in it. "I didn't choose her. Wow. Just hearing myself say it does bring new perspective. I am so selfish. It's selfish wanting her hand again. Isn't it?"

My uncle was quiet for a long moment. The garden rustled around us. Wind through leaves. The distant sound of water from a fountain.

"Desperation makes us reach for things we pushed away," Aldric said finally. "It doesn't make you selfish. It makes you mortal."

"She blocked my number."

"Then she is still angry. And that means you still linger. But anger fades." He put a hand on my shoulder. "Especially when someone they once cared about needs help."

I wanted to believe him. Wanted to think that Madeline might put aside her hurt and anger for my mother's sake. But I knew better. I'd burned that bridge thoroughly. Salted the earth where it stood even.

My phone stayed silent in my hand. No call back. No message. Just the weight of my own poor choices pressing down.

"Come inside." Aldric squeezed my shoulder. "You need rest."

"I can't rest." My throat felt raw. "Not while she's—"

"I know." His voice was gentle. "But you cannot help anyone if you collapse. You are this pack's Alpha. You need your shit together. And your mother will need you strong when she wakes up."

When. Not if. The word choice wasn't lost on me.

I let him guide me back toward the house. Each step felt heavier than the last. The phone burned in my pocket. A reminder of how far I'd fallen. How desperate I'd become.

Inside, the halls were quiet. Most of the pack had retreated to their own concerns. Word would spread about my mother's episode. About my outburst in the infirmary. Another failure added to a growing list.

We reached my room. Aldric paused at the door.

"Try to sleep," he said. "Even an hour will help."

I nodded. Didn't trust my voice anymore.

He left. The door clicked shut behind him. I stood in the middle of the room and stared at nothing. My phone stayed silent. The message sat unanswered in Valentine's voicemail. Madeline's block remained firmly in place.

I'd never felt more alone. Never felt more stuck. Not since that day...

Chapter 100: Some Protector 2

MADELINE

My mother's voice drifted up the stairs. "Madeline, dinner's ready."

I closed the grimoire I'd been studying. The words had stopped making sense an hour ago anyway. My mind kept wandering to the metaphorical blood on my hands. To the way that witch's eyes had probably gone dim first when the gift I had left her started working his magic before her body would have exploded. Her blood and guts would have gotten everywhere. From the distance I stood, I could tell that Cian must have suffered the brunt of it. I really had not expected him to be there. If I had known, I would have made it less violent.

I pushed myself up from my desk. My legs protested. I'd been sitting too long. The walk down the hallway felt longer than usual. Each step echoed in the quiet house.

The dining room came into view. I stopped in the doorway.

Something was wrong.

My mother stood by her chair. Her hands gripped the back of it too tightly. Her knuckles had gone white. She didn't look at me when I entered. Just kept her eyes fixed on the table.

Wilhelm sat across from where I usually sat. My little brother's blonde hair fell into his eyes. He looked pale. Sick almost. His jaw worked like he was chewing on words he couldn't spit out.

My father sat at the head of the table. His expression was completely blank. Dead. Like someone had carved his face from stone and forgotten to add any emotion back in.

"Sit down, Madeline." His voice matched his face. Flat. Empty.

I moved to my chair slowly. The scrape of wood against floor sounded too loud. I lowered myself down. My hands found my lap. I pressed them together to keep them from shaking.

No one spoke. The silence pressed against my eardrums. I could hear my own heartbeat. Could hear Wilhelm's breathing. Could hear the grandfather clock ticking in the hallway.

My father reached into his pocket. He pulled out his phone. His thumb moved across the screen like he was finding something and only stopped when it seemed like he had found what he was looking for. He set the phone down in the center of the table.

Then he pressed a button.

A voice filled the room. Crackling slightly through the speaker. But unmistakable.

"I know I shouldn't be calling."

My entire body went rigid. I knew that voice. Would know it anywhere. Even distorted by a phone recording. Even when it was rough with pain.

Cian.

"But I—"

The pause stretched. I heard him breathing. Heard the way his voice caught on whatever he was trying to say.

"I need help. Please, I need either you or Madeline's help. I don't want my mother to die."

The message cut off. The silence that followed felt worse than the words themselves.

I stared at the phone. My mouth had gone dry. My heart hammered against my ribs hard enough to hurt.

His mother was dying. Cian's mother was dying and he'd called my father for help. Called because I'd blocked his number and he had nowhere else to turn.

The pain in his voice. Goddess, the raw desperation in those few words.

I looked up at my father. His expression hadn't changed. It was still that terrible blank mask.

"Just say it." The words came out sharper than I meant them to. "Don't leave me in suspense."

"Do not think about it." My father's voice was cold. "Do not think about helping him."

I almost laughed. The sound died in my throat. "That's not possible."

"Yes, it is."

"No." I shook my head. "Even if I was callous and cruel enough to not want to help. Even if I could ignore what I heard in his voice. I can't refuse."

My father's eyes narrowed. "You can and you will."

"He wants me by Cian's side." I kept my voice steady. Calm. Even though nothing inside me felt calm. "He' wants me there. So I must be."

"Who?" The single word came out like a whip crack.

I looked at my mother. She stood frozen by her chair. Her face had gone pale but her eyes were sharp. She knew. Of course she knew. She always knew. Most of it at least.

Then I looked at Wilhelm. My baby brother who was freshly nineteen and thought he was grown. Who wanted so badly to be let into the family secrets. Who had no idea what those secrets would cost him.

"You really want me to speak here, father?" I met his gaze. Held it.

His throat moved as he swallowed. It was the first crack in that stone mask. "You two should leave us."

My mother nodded. She moved toward the door quickly. Not running but close to it. She knew better than to argue. Knew when a battle was already lost.

Wilhelm didn't move.

"Wilhelm." My father's voice dropped into a warning.

"I am a son of this house." Wilhelm's hands curled into fists on the table. "It's about time I start getting to know what is happening around here."

I watched my father's expression shift. Watched anger flash across his face. Real emotion finally breaking through.

"If I repeat myself, you will be carried out of this room unconscious."

Wilhelm stood. His chair scraped back violently. He looked at me and the disgust on his face made something twist in my chest. Like I was something dirty. Something shameful. He believed what I had was special treatment.

Then he left. His footsteps pounded up the stairs. A door slammed somewhere above us.

The moment he was gone, my father flicked his wrist. Magic slammed the dining room door shut. The lock clicked. A shimmer appeared around the frame. Soundproofing. Privacy wards.

"Aldric and his antics again I see." My father's voice dripped with venom.

"I killed a witch today because he asked me to."

The words hung in the air between us. My father went completely still. His face drained of color.

"Are you insane?"

"What was I supposed to do?" My voice rose despite my efforts to control it. "Defy him? Pretend like I had a choice?"

"You always have a choice."

"No." I stood up. My chair tipped backward. "No, I don't. And if you're worried I'll be caught, I won't be. I was careful. I covered my tracks."

"That's not—"

"It hurts, father." The words ripped out of me. "What I have to do for this family. The things I have to sacrifice."

He opened his mouth and closed it shortly after. He couldn't seem to find the words.

"I hurt Cian again." My voice cracked. "To keep this family safe. To keep Aldric from destroying everything we've built. And now I'm about to become his dog again. Because that's what he wants. He wants me back at Cian's side so he can use me however he needs."

My father shot to his feet. The chair fell backward. "I have had enough of this."

"Have you?"

"Tell that bastard you are not doing anything for him." His hands slammed down on the table. "Let him threaten all he wants. I don't care anymore."

"You should have thought about that before you participated in fleshcraft."

The words came out cold. Clinical. Like I was discussing the weather instead of the one crime a witch shouldn't commit that had now tied our family to Aldric forever.

My father moved faster than I expected. His hand cracked across my face. The sound echoed in the spelled silence of the room. My head snapped to the side. Pain bloomed across my cheek. Hot and sharp.

I didn't move. I didn't even raise my hand to touch my face. I just stood there and let the sting spread. I took it.

"I didn't mean to." My father's voice broke. "Madeline, I didn't mean to. I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter." I turned back to face him. My cheek throbbed. "But I cannot say no to Aldric for that exact reason."

"We can find another way."

"There is no other way." I moved around the table toward him. "Even if you decide in the goodness of your heart to come clean. To pay for your crimes. Everyone else in this house will suffer."

"Madeline—"

"Mother will suffer. Wilhelm will suffer. The entire coven will be dragged through the mud because of what you did." I stopped in front of him. "So we are bound to Aldric until he gets bored of us. And trust me, father, he will not. Not until he is the ruling Alpha of Skollrend."

My father's face crumbled. He reached for me but I stepped back.

"So yes." My voice steadied. "I will go to Cian. I will help his mother if I can. Because I want to help Cian. It is the least I can do for the crimes I have committed against him and the crimes I will commit against him. I have to help Aldric too. He wants me there after all and we don't get to say no."

"There has to be something—"

"There isn't." I walked toward the door. My hand found the handle. The wards dissolved at my touch. Family magic recognizing family blood. "So pull yourself by those bootstraps you love so much and act like the Coven leader of Primrose that you are."

"Madeline, wait."

I didn't wait. I walked out of the dining room and up the stairs. My cheek still burned. My heart still raced. But my hands had stopped shaking.

In my room, I pulled out my phone. Scrolled to Cian's contact. My thumb hovered over the unblock button.

His voice echoed in my memory. The desperation. The pain. The way he'd said please like the word was being torn out of him.

I pressed unblock.

Then I typed out a message.

"I'll be there tomorrow. Tell me what you need."

I was about to hit send before I could second guess myself. Before I could think too hard about what going back to Skollrend meant. What seeing Cian again would do to me.

But I hesitated. I hesitated because I was worried. Because I was scared. Aldric has already said how he wanted us to meet again. Was it smart to defy him?

I was about to go against any common sense present and just fucking do it when a phone call came in.

It was Aldric. Speak of the fucking devil.