

The Devil's Fire by Mariam El-Hafi Chapter 111 - 120

"Was there by any chance some powdered sugar on top?" Ellie asked. I nodded and the look on her face immediately showed she knew what it was.

"Arsenic. That's what I think it was." She said confidently.

"What is that?" Arianna questioned, crossing her arms, and stepping closer to listen.

"Arsenic is a white, sugar-like powder that has no taste to it but is extremely poisonous. It was used as a former rat poison. It was probably mixed with the actual powdered sugar. And since she only had a small bite, she still

experienced cramps and vomiting, the typical signs of food poisoning. If they wanted to kill her, they would have put in a larger dose..." Ellie trailed off.

"I think they tried to make her miscarry. But what doesn't make sense is that it would have shown up when they did a blood test, which is making me believe that her test was swapped out with another." I turned around and faced the window, my hands holding tightly onto the window sill. I wanted to punch something badly to let out my anger.

Instead, I closed my eyes and tried to calm down.

"I can't help but think that it was an attack on you, Damiano." Arianna spoke, making me tilt my head a little to her side, and listened to her speak.

"Someone has been keeping track of us all, knowing she was pregnant when she showed us the baby shoes. ...I think they're trying to prevent you from getting an heir and made sure to put the poison on something she would definitely eat." This time I couldn't hold in it and punched the wall, hard. My chest rose and fell in anger as her words got to me.

"The guy we found who attacked Althaia in the hotel was Asian as well. Her pictures were hung all over the walls too and they used the same method in that warehouse. Her mother was laundering money but we never found out for who... Could it really be for the Asians?" Giovanni was thinking out loud, trying to connect the ties.

"But why Asians? It doesn't make sense." Arianna questioned.

“She wasn’t working for the Asians.” I said and turned around and faced them.

“They were hired to finish the job for whoever had ordered the kill. The ones who were after them were not only of Asian descent. There were different people involved. Random people from the streets. To make sure we wouldn’t know who was the one behind the attack. Whatever her mother was doing, it was coming to an end and they wanted to get rid of her.” I said to them.

I had been thinking the same too. Maybe her mother was involved in one way or another with some Asian gang but it didn’t make sense why she would be.

The laundering money was for someone much more powerful than some random street gang who blackmailed her into doing it for them. She could take care of herself. She was too smart of a woman to be taken advantage of and get blackmailed like that by a couple of low lives. It must be someone who had something much greater and more valuable to hold against her to make her act the way she did.

Such as her daughter.

The door opened again, and Antonio and Lorenzo walked in, giving me a nod in greeting.

Antonio and Luca had done the best they could out in the woods. If we hadn’t arrived in time to help them out, we would have found them all dead. There were at least thirty people who had to be taken care of, and it showed on their faces and bodies just how much they had fought against them to keep them at bay.

Luckily for Antonio and Luca, not everyone had been carrying firearms on them but used knives, which gave them a chance to hold them back with the extra weapons that were hidden in the car. Luca got shot in the leg but it was a flesh wound, nothing he couldn’t handle, and he would be back on his feet in no time with proper care. Antonio needed a few stitches as well from being slashed a few times.

Ellie went to her husband to check up on his stitches before she went out, leaving us to our discussion. I was somehow relieved when she left so I wouldn’t have to look at the painful reminder that she was pregnant and Althaia was not. I didn’t want to feel bitter about it because they deserved a family after so long but right now, I couldn’t help it.

We were supposed to have a family too.

“Cara talked to Althaia’s father. He’ll be here in a few hours.” Lorenzo informed. Even though I didn’t want anyone from outside to come close to her, he was still her father.

“How’s Cara holding up?” Arianna asked him.

“I had to give her something to calm down. She’s asleep now.” Lorenzo had to break it all down to Cara, and she reacted as any normal person would.

“What do you want us to do?” Giovanni asked impatiently, eager to get his hands on someone.

“Nothing. For now.” My response shocked them all. Arianna looked at me as if she had heard wrong and Giovanni looked furious.

“You can’t be serious?!” Arianna exclaimed loudly.

“Keep your voice down.” I sneered at her with a glare.

“We know some of them were of Asian descent. They could be Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and what the fuck not. If we go into action now, not knowing exactly who to target, word would spread out that we are looking for someone and it would send the targets into hiding.” I said, looking at them all as they listened.

“We lay low for now but I want eyes and ears everywhere. Some managed to flee during the fight, and there will always be one fucker or two who will run their mouth and brag about being hired to take down Famiglia di Bellavia. Once we have given them enough time to let them think we won’t make move, we’ll strike.” I wanted them all to believe they had managed to break me.

But no.

I was about to release hell on them.

“I want to know who is behind this. And then, we will kill them all.”

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Althaia

My entire body felt heavy. So heavy I couldn't move a finger.

I was surrounded by darkness and I wanted to open my eyes. but I couldn't. It felt like I was trapped in some way, not being able to move and not being able to feel a thing either.

My entire body was numb.

I could hear voices. Very faint voices but I couldn't make out what was being said or who it was. I wanted to say something but nothing came out. I wanted to know what was happening to me. What was wrong with my body?

Suddenly, a wave of tiredness washed over me and put me into a deep sleep, making me forget about everything else.

I was slowly coming out from sleep but my body was still feeling heavy and... in pain. I felt pain everywhere. My head was pounding and my stomach was killing me, keeping me down.

There was a different feeling on top of my hand. It was kind of heavy too but not the kind of heavy the rest of my body was feeling. I tried to move my hand to see if I could make out what it was but only a finger moved. I heard some movements before my hand got a small squeeze before something

touched my face.

I slightly leaned into the touch, a small sound escaped my lips

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when I wanted to say.

"Althaia, baby, wake up." I always recognized his voice, feeling at ease knowing he was with me.

Everything hurts I wanted to say but I still couldn't.

I tried to see if I could move my hand, feeling myself giving a half squeeze to his.

“You’re doing good, baby. Take your time.” He spoke so softly to me while he caressed my head.

After some time, I slowly opened my eyes, blinking a few times with my heavy eyelids while trying to let my eyes focus on my surroundings. It was dimly lit as I looked around the room, confused as I noticed it was a hospital room. I turned to look to the side and saw Damiano.

We didn’t say anything as we looked at each other and I saw him visibly relax. He looked at me with this...pained expression, making me frown a little as to why he would look at me like that. I lifted my hand, placing it on his cheeks as I caressed him, noticing how tired he looked.

He closed his eyes as if he had longed for my touch, and placed his hand over mine, kissing my palm.

“Wha -” I winced in pain and stopped talking when my throat hurt and was painfully dry.

“Shh, don’t talk if it hurts. I will give you some water.” Damiano poured a glass of water and grabbed a straw.

“Small sips.” He instructed. I tried to do so but the cool water running down my incredibly dry throat felt so good that I

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emptied the glass a little faster than I should have, having me now feel a little nauseous.

I tried to move a little only to immediately groan out in pain. I felt like I had been hit by a truck over and over again.

“Don’t move, you have a bruised rib. I’ll call for Ellie and let her know you’re awake.” He pressed a button to the side. I licked my dry lips as I tried to figure out why I was in so much pain.

“Wh-what happened?” It came out as a half-whisper. My voice was hoarse and cracked a little as I tried to speak.

“... You don’t remember what happened?” Damiano frowned a little when I shook my head. He kept my hand in his when the door quietly opened and Ellie walked in with a smile on her face.

“Good to see you’re awake. I’m just going to examine you and ask you a few questions.” I gave her a small nod as she flashed her penlight into my eyes, making me rapidly blink at the sharp light.

“Do you know who you are... When is your birthday?” Ellie continued to ask me questions about myself and I answered them all, feeling a little confused why I was asked such questions.

“Do you know what happened to you?”

“Not really...” Damiano gave my hand a small squeeze which made me look at him.

“Is e-everything okay?”

“Althaia.” I looked back at Ellie. She was now looking at me

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with a serious expression. It had my heart beating faster. For some reason, I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like what she had to say.

“You were in a car accident.” I frowned and put a hand up to my head, feeling the bandage that was wrapped around me. I swallowed hard when I tried to remember the episode and my body tensed despite the pain. Small bits came rushing back to me and my breathing came out faster and louder as I squeezed Damiano’s hand.

All those men were after us in the woods.

My mother!

“My mom...” I said in a panic and I tried to get out of bed.

I had to see if she was okay.

Ellie tried to calm me but I ignored her and pushed her hands away.

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“Althaia, stop. You’re hurting yourself.” Damiano said when I kept groaning out in pain when I tried to move. He held me to prevent me from moving anymore and I already felt tears prickling in my eyes as I looked at him,

“My mom... She’s okay, right? She’s okay?” I held tightly onto his arms as I frantically looked around his face for any kind of answer. But the longer he was quiet, the more I understood.

Images of my mother being stabbed over and over made me let out a shocked gasp and my eyes went wide. Tears were already streaming down my face. I shook my head at him, waiting for him to tell me it was a terrible nightmare and everything was okay.

“I’m sorry...” Damiano confirmed it wasn’t a nightmare. Sobs escaped my lips and I broke down as he held me.

“You’re lying!” I screamed at him, trying to get out of his hold but he held me tightly as I cried into his chest.

My mother. The one who had taken care of me my whole life was... gone. My chest tightened painfully and hurt the more I cried.

She was my rock. She was my everything! How could she be gone just like that?

My entire body was shaking as he held me tightly into his. The tears didn’t seem to want to stop and I felt my heart breaking with every second passing.

I didn’t know for how long I was crying but my sobs stopped, and I felt numb.

“Baby... Our baby?” I asked emotionlessly and placed a hand

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on my stomach. I remembered the pain I felt in the woods, seeing the thick stream of blood running down my legs.

Damiano looked at me and placed his hands on my cheeks. and, I saw the sadness visible in his eyes.

“The trauma... It was too much for your body to handle.” He explained carefully. I took a sharp intake of breath, feeling myself getting more broken inside.

“You had a miscarriage.” He said in an almost whisper.

I didn’t know how to digest what he said. I felt like my heart was being ripped out of my chest, leaving me in utter confusion. I was pregnant... I was bearing his baby. Now, our baby was gone too? Losing the baby we had just seen on a screen. A baby we had gotten excited about and had come to love... Everything was just gone in a blink of an eye.

I couldn’t feel the sudden crash of despair and mourning, instead, I felt numb and paralyzed.

Why?

I wanted to ask why was this happening to me. But I couldn’t, fearing there was an actual answer to it. Instead, I was overwhelmed by the feeling of loss.

I lost everything.

“I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry I couldn’t get to you in time.” Damiano buried his face into my neck, still holding me tightly while I stared numbly out of the window. He kept whispering how sorry he was. Over and over again but everything still felt so unreal. Somehow I was still expecting to wake up from this nightmare.

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To end this torture.

But as time passed, I realized this nightmare was truly my reality.

“My dad... I want my dad.” I muttered, feeling the need to have my only parent left to be with me.

“I will go and get him.” Ellie said and left the room. Damiano leaned back to look at me. I had never seen him like this before. I wanted to comfort him in some way but I was completely lost, confused, and empty.

The door opened shortly after and I saw my father with Michael right behind him. I broke down all over again.

“Papá...” I cried out and reached out to him like I would when I was younger. My father immediately went to my side and embraced me.

“They took my mom from me.” I cried to him and clung tightly to him, afraid I would suddenly lose the only parent I had left.

“They are going to pay for it. I promise you, figlia.” My father assured me while he rubbed my back, comforting me the best he could. Michael stepped closer to me and held my hand for comfort, looking at me with sadness in his eyes.

We had all grown up together and I knew he saw my mother as his own. She had taken care of us all, and showed us a love that couldn't be replaced. And now she was just... gone.

A part of me refused to believe it, clinging to the little hope that was within me that it wasn't true. But deep down inside I knew it wasn't the case, and now I had to somehow live in a world without having my mother by my side.

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“God, why...” I cried. My baby, whom I had come to love and care so much for, was gone too and the pain in my body kept reminding me of my misery.

“My mom and my baby... They're gone.” I whispered out between my sobs. Michael's body tensed at my words, a frown appearing on his face.

“Your...baby?” Confusion was written all over him. I didn't say anything and wrapped my arm around my stomach, his eyes following my movements until it hit him. I had yet to tell them about my relationship with Damiano and the last thing they expected, was for me to get pregnant.

Michael's hand squeezed mine a little. He looked up to stare at Damiano with his cold blue eyes.

I closed my eyes as I leaned into my father, trying to escape reality.

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Althaia

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“She’s going back with us.” I heard Michael say with a firm tone.

“No.” Damiano replied in his cold tone.

“No? Who do you think you are to make that decision?!” Michael erupted angrily.

“If you don’t keep your voice down, I will kill you.” Damiano’s voice was low and calm but filled with promise as they continued to argue about me. I wasn’t sure if they were aware I was awake and I could hear them. My back was to the door but I guess it was slightly open as I heard everything they said, arguing about where I should stay.

It made me realize I didn’t have a place I could call home anymore.

Even though I had stayed a few weeks in my father’s mansion before, I still didn’t consider it home.

Because for a long time, it wasn’t.

It wasn’t the same home I grew up in and so much had changed... It didn’t have that homey feeling it used to have when I was living there with my mother.

“She’s staying with me.” Damiano stated firmly, giving no room for discussion. I could hear how Michael was getting frustrated until my father decided to end their argument.

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“Michael, it’s fine.”

“She needs to stay with her family. Not him.” He pressed on.

“Enough!” My father raised his voice and Michael went silent.

“She will stay with him.” I heard him make a sound of

disapproval before hearing him walk away. My father let out a sigh.

"I apologize for his behavior. Understand that they grew up together and he is only looking out for her." My father tried to explain.

"I don't care. If he steps out of line one more time -"

"He won't." My father quickly said.

"I will make sure he knows his place."

The door closed and I heard footsteps approaching me. Damiano came into my view and sat on the chair beside the bed, looking at me. I didn't try to hide the fact I heard everything they talked about.

Not that it was something I cared about.

I couldn't be bothered to care about anything. The only thing going through my mind was what happened in the woods. There was a constant replay of images that didn't want to stop torturing me and it was even worse whenever I tried to sleep. The nightmares were haunting me, making me stay awake no matter how exhausted I was. No matter how much my eyes burned from the lack of sleep.

"Ellie will come and change your bandages and then we can leave." Damiano said quietly. I didn't reply and continued to

stare straight-ahead, still feeling numb and so lost.

He helped me sit up on the bed when the door opened and Ellie came in. My body still felt incredibly heavy but with minimal pain thanks to the drugs I had been given.

I sat on the edge of the bed while she checked the wound I had on the side of my head. As I kept my eyes down, I saw the small baby bump behind her loose shirt.

Ellie was pregnant.

A lump in my throat formed as I continued to stare at her stomach. Was she trying to hide she was pregnant with loose clothing so I wouldn't notice? I wanted to let out a humorless laugh at life for mocking me right now.

“Everything is healing as it should be, and you won’t be needing the bandages anymore. You’re all set and free to go.” Ellie said. I was healing on the outside but inside, my soul remained broken.

“Congratulations...” I mumbled out to her and tried to give a small smile but not much happened. It felt more like a painful grimace than a smile. Ellie looked at me with a surprised look and then noticed I was looking at her stomach, and

unconsciously fixed her shirt in a way it didn’t look like she was pregnant.

She didn’t know what to say as she stood still in front of me, hesitating a bit before she let out a small smile and quickly walked out. I wanted to roll my eyes at them all for walking on eggshells around me as if I would break down at any minute. I was already broken to the point I wasn’t feeling anything anymore.

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I was dead on the inside.

“I’ve got some clothes for you.” Damiano picked up a bag that was on the floor. He helped me get out of the hospital gown I was, wearing and dressed me in some comfortable clothes. I tried to get up to dress myself but he gently kept me from moving and continued to dress me.

“I want to walk.” I muttered and stopped him from carrying.

“You shouldn’t be moving around just yet.” He said but I ignored him and got up on my feet. Damiano quickly held onto me to steady me as my legs wobbled from still being weak.

“Let me carry you.” He tried again but I shook my head at him and held onto his arm instead and carefully took a step. I needed to do something to distract my mind from the constant thoughts and images that wouldn’t stop haunting me. It was working as the only thing I could think about was how heavy my body was and how tired I quickly got from taking a few steps. But I didn’t let it stop me as we continued our way out at a snail’s pace.

The hallway was heavily guarded by his men. Some were in front of us and some were behind us, almost forming a complete circle around us in protection.

Finally coming outside to the parking lot, a pair of shoes. stopped in front of me. I looked up, seeing it was Giovanni. He -looked around my face, a slight frown appearing on his face

the more he studied me. Then his eyes went down to my stomach.

“Don’t. Please...just don’t.” I said to him before he could say anything. I couldn’t handle hearing about it. The pitying looks

I was given were already too much for me to handle. I just didn’t want to talk about it or have anyone ever mention it to

I know what I lost.

Giovanni gave a slight nod before stepping aside so I could get in the car.

I was completely exhausted as we sat silently in the backseat. I rested my head against the window and I so badly wanted to close my eyes and sleep, but I couldn’t. Her face was all I saw when I closed my eyes so I had to distract myself by keep looking out of the window.

Damiano was sitting close to me and held my hand in his, caressing me.

“How many days...?” I asked quietly, continuing to look out of the window, watching as we drove past the fields. I had no sense of time and I had no idea how many days had passed since that day.

“You were out for three days.” He said and I was surprised by his answer.

“Five days have passed.” I swallowed hard at the information. Five days had gone by. Five days I had somehow survived and lived without a mother.

How was I supposed to continue living my life like this?

“We’ll figure it out.” Damiano said softly to me as if he had read my thoughts.

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We arrived at the manor and it seemed unusually quiet when I stepped out of the car. Or maybe it was just because I was in deep sorrow that I thought everything was dark and gloomy. Even the majestic manor didn't seem very majestic at this moment. It was as if I had lost all vision of color and all I could see was dark grey.

I saw Cara when I got inside. She looked at me with her sad, red eyes and her disheveled hair. She quickly walked up to me, embracing me as she broke down. My arms were down by my sides. I stared numbly over her shoulder, avoiding eye contact with anyone. I didn't think there were any more tears for me to spill. I wasn't even feeling anything at this point.

I was a standing empty hollow

I felt the tears seep into my shirt and I slowly patted her on the back, trying to comfort her in some way. I had no idea what to say to her. I wasn't sure if there even was anything I could say that would make anything better. So I just silently patted her on the back like some kind of robot.

Cara leaned back to look at me but I avoided her eyes and looked down. I didn't want to be reminded that I had lost a mother and a baby at the same time.

"I...uh...I'm tired." I said the only excuse I could think of so I could be left alone.

I made my way to the stairs, looking up at them and knowing in my current state, I wouldn't be able to handle walking up on my own.

"Let me." Damiano said and he carried me in his arms. We were in his room when he placed me on the bed.

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"The bathtub is ready if you want to wash up now." I nodded and made my way to the bathroom. If there was one thing I desperately needed, it was the need to scrub myself clean and raw from all evidence of what I had been through.

I kept looking down at my hands. Even though there was nothing on them, I felt like they were covered in thick blood, and I unconsciously kept wiping them against my clothes to somehow get rid of the feeling. But no matter what I did, the feeling always came back.

I carefully undressed with the help of Damiano, trying not to move my arms too much as my ribs still hurt to the point I couldn't move my arms above my head without immediately wincing in pain.

Then I made the mistake and looked in the mirror, shocked to see my appearance.

My body was discolored with bruises, and dark bags under my eyes, and my skin was unusually pale. I swallowed hard as I with a trembling hand touched my throat where it was visible to see I had been choked with the nasty dark purple color that covered my throat.

I looked like I had died and been brought back to life.

Damiano quickly stepped in front of me to block me from looking at myself in the mirror. It was the first time I had looked at myself, and if this was how I looked after five days, I couldn't imagine what I had looked like when he found me.

"Come." He gently led me to the bathtub. The hot water felt nice to the point I let out a small sigh of relief and was able to slightly relax. I was exhausted and my body was aching like crazy.

I guess the drugs were starting to wear off.

Damiano was being careful and gentle with me. He washed me and dried me off when I was done and brushed my hair after getting dressed.

"Althaia, you have to eat to get better." He kept trying to make me eat something but the sight of food was unappetizing to me and made me nauseous.

"I'm not hungry." I moved away and lay down on the bed, turning my back to him and closing my eyes. Whatever pills he had given me made me extremely sleepy and I struggled to keep my eyes open.

Damiano let out a sigh and placed the food to the side. He got in bed with me, gently caressing my head, and for once, I let myself give in and fell asleep.

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Damiano

“Are you even getting some sleep?” Arianna asked me, looking at me concerned.

“How do you expect me to sleep when she’s going through hell?” I snapped at her but she wasn’t bothered by my tone.

I had stepped outside to smoke once Althaia fell asleep. She hadn’t slept properly and I had secretly given her a sleeping pill just so she would be able to get a little sleep. I had never been this stressed or so lost in my life before, and even though I had quit smoking because she couldn’t tolerate the smell of it when she was pregnant, I had picked it up again.

It was the only thing that could help me relax a little and prevent me from going out and slaughtering people. I couldn’t be a ticking bomb right now. I had to be patient even though it was killing me to wait and watch her suffer like this.

“How are you?” She asked again and I let out a humorless chuckle at her question.

“Does it even matter?” I inhaled the cigarette smoke deeply but it was not giving me the fill I wanted.

“It does. You lost -”

“I know what I fucking lost!” I stared at her with an enraged glare. My hands were trembling in anger at the painful loss. But I had to keep it together for the sake of her.

“Mind your own business.” I sneered.

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“You are my business! You need to talk about it so you don’t bury all of your feelings into that deep, dark hole like you’re always doing.” Arianna exclaimed

in frustration and looked at me with a frown on her face. I flicked the cigarette bud away and turned to face her. My eyes were cold as I stepped so close to her that she had to take a step back.

“I will handle it the way I want to. I don’t need you or anyone else to tell me what to fucking do.” My voice was low as I looked at her furiously.

A hand on my shoulder pulled me slightly back and I glanced over to see it was Antonio who had stopped me. I hadn’t noticed that I kept walking toward Arianna, forcing her to back away from me. I frowned at him when he tried to get me away from her.

“What are you stepping in for? You think I’m going to hurt my sister?” I roughly pushed his hand away from me and took a couple of steps back. I may be pissed but I would never lay a hand on my sister no matter how fucked up I got.

“No. But you have pent-up anger and frustrations that you’re taking out on your sister. If you don’t want to talk about it, then fine, but get your ass in the ring and we’ll take it from there.” Antonio said calmly with his emotionless face. I let out a scoff.

“Fuck off.” I ignored them, making my inside when Antonio once again grabbed me.

“Or we can just settle it here.” He said and threw a punch at my jaw. It had me take a step, my head got whipped to the side at the impact. I let out a low laugh as I moved my jaw a little and spit out when I tasted blood.

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Ahtohio!” Arianna gasped out in shock and tried to step in between us but he stopped her from intervening.

“Trust me. He needs this before he fucking explodes.” Antonio looked at me as if he hadn’t just punched me in the face.

“I won’t go easy on you.” I smirked and he mirrored my expression.

“I don’t expect you to.” He said and threw another punch my way. This time, I blocked it and sent him a strong kick to the side of his stomach. He grunted

out a little in pain as I kicked him where I knew he got stitched up. He quickly composed himself and lunged at me again.

We kept going, throwing punches, kicking and slamming each other to the ground, not giving each other a break before making the next move. By now, we had gathered a small audience, my men forming a circle around us to make it more interesting and wilder as we continued to furiously punch and kick each other.

“Okay, that’s enough! You’re going to kill each other if you keep going.” Arianna yelled out and stepped in to stop us.

We had been going at each other for a while now and we were both breathing heavily. At some point, we discarded our shirts after they got ripped from throwing each other to the ground.

I took a look at Antonio, seeing some of his stitches had gotten messed up and was now bleeding. I had gotten him. pretty good just as he had gotten quite a few punches landed in my way. He also had managed to open up the stitches on my arm.

I took a look at my arm, seeing the wound had reopened and

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blood was trickling down and onto the grass.

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“Go get yourself fixed.” I told him. Without saying another word, I turned around and walked inside.

Instead of going to my own room, I went to the guest bedroom where Althaia had previously stayed to take a shower. Even though I had given her a sleeping pill, I didn’t want to risk her waking up.

I took a shower and removed the remaining suture from my arm before taking the staples to close the wound and bandaging it. It was throbbing in pain but I

didn't care much about it. The fight did help me relieve some tension in my body and gave me a temporary distraction from my thoughts.

I made my way to my room, carefully opening the door not to wake her up. I felt relieved to see her still in bed, sleeping. I went to lie next to her, pulling her closer to me and caressing her body as I watched her. I noticed her eyelashes were wet, letting me know she had been crying in her sleep and my chest tightened at the sight. She had barely stepped a foot into my world and had already become a target.

This wasn't a life for her. It was never a life for her to begin with and I now understood why her death had to be faked.

This is my fault. I did this to her.

I took a deep breath, trying to contain my anger. I closed my eyes in an attempt to get some sleep, holding her close to me, fearing she would disappear if I didn't.

Two days passed and a funeral for her mother had been arranged. I watched Althaia as she stood next to Cara and Michael, watching the casket being lowered into the ground

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while she stared at it numbly.

She hadn't cried since the day of the hospital. It was like every single emotion within her had disappeared, and I hated every single moment of it. I could see her and feel her. But she wasn't present. Her green eyes, usually bright and full of life, had lost their spark.

She was like a ghost.

Her skin had lost the usual tan color and had become pale. She wasn't eating anything either, only sometimes I could get her to eat a spoonful or two and it was visible to see she had lost weight.

Cara couldn't stop crying and held tightly onto Althaia's hand, seeking comfort, but she barely reacted to it as she continued to stare blankly at the lowered casket as it was getting covered in dirt.

I took a look around, seeing it was mostly my men present. Her father and his men were present too as well as some people that knew her mother attended the funeral and gave their condolences. They were told it was a car accident and she had died instantly to avoid further questions.

I kept my eyes on Althaia, barely letting my eyes leave her. I watched her legs give up on her when they finished burying the casket. I quickly took a step toward her but a hand

stopped me from getting closer to her. I looked to see it was -Lorenzo who has stopped me. He shook his head and I

clenched my hands but stayed still and turned to look at her again, only to see the bastard's arms wrapped around her.

She needs to be with her family too.

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I kept telling myself and watched her go to her father for comfort. It was killing me to see her like this, and it was killing me she wasn't seeking me for comfort. But this wasn't the time nor the place to be a possessive and jealous maniac.

Instead, I stayed put and watched her.

Althaia had gotten straight up to the bedroom when we came back. She had barely uttered a word the whole day, walking around with her eyes down like a lost ghost. She avoided everyone, not wanting to look at anyone.

Especially me.

She couldn't look me in the eyes and always tried to distance herself from me and just wrap her arms around herself when I stepped too close to her. I wanted to give her the space she needed but I couldn't get myself to leave her alone.

I opened the bedroom door, only to find her sitting on the floor by the balcony doors. I stepped closer to her and sat down on the floor as well on the opposite side.

"I understand now what you meant..." She said quietly while she continued to look out of the window. I didn't say anything and let her continue to talk, desperate to hear her voice for a little.

"It does fuck you up in a different way. How...could I lose everything like that?" Her voice went into a whisper. She sniffed when tears made their way down her cheeks.

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"I see her face everywhere now. First, it was only when I closed my eyes, but now, it's like she's everywhere. Haunting me because I couldn't do anything to help her. I can't look up because I think it's her among people. And when I look down, all I can see is blood on my hands." Althaia let out a choked chuckle.

"I'm not a killer...but he wanted to rape me. I shouldn't feel guilty that I took his life. I keep telling myself I shouldn't because he deserved it... But I can't. All I see is his blood on my hands no matter how many times I'm washing them!" She broke down. I went to her and placed her on my lap as I held her tightly while she cried into my chest.

It broke me for every single tear she was shedding.

"I can't do this anymore! I feel suffocated... I can barely stand being in my own skin." My heart started to hammer behind my chest at her words.

"I can't do it anymore... I just... I have to go away." She cried out in desperation. My throat went dry and I swallowed hard.

"I can't..." I managed to whisper. She looked at me with her tear-streaked face.

Her eyes showed me how shattered she was.

“Damiano... Please, don’t keep me here.” Her hands fisted my shirt while she kept crying to me.

Are you leaving me?

I wanted to ask her but the words died down in my throat the more I looked at her. I couldn’t stand watching her like this. She was broken and suffering so much, and I had no idea

1/3

what I could do to make the pain go away.

“I’m begging you...” She whispered. I couldn’t get myself to say anything and just held her in my arms.

Maybe for the last time.

I went to my office once the sleeping pill had kicked in and Althaia fell asleep. I poured myself a drink and downed it in one go before filling it up once again. I went behind my desk and opened the drawer, only to feel my heart drop at the sight of the red baby shoes. I picked them up and looked at them before I angrily tossed them across the office.

“You wanted to see me?” Arianna walked in just as I downed another drink and slammed the glass down on the desk. I placed my hands on the desk, my back still facing her and I let out a breath before I spoke.

“I need you to take her away.”

“...What?” I turned around to face her. She was looking at me confused.

“Althaia. She wants to leave and I need you to take her away. To a safe house.” I ordered. This was what she wanted and it

was for the best.

I had already ruined her.

“You can’t be serious? Are you letting her go?” She asked in disbelief and looked at me to see if I was being serious or not, but I only stared at her blankly.

“Just do it.”

“Damiano, you can’t – ”

“What the fuck am I supposed to do?!” I yelled out at her.

“Hasn’t she suffered enough because of me? This wouldn’t have happened if I had just left her alone. But no. I was fucking selfish and greedy and had to have her. I would rather watch her walk away and be safe than watch her die.” My chest was rapidly rising and falling as I spoke. I ran a hand through my hair in frustration.

There was nothing I could do for her.

“I need you to take her away because I know I won’t be able to let her go.” I said, leaving no room for discussion.

Arianna didn’t know what to say but gave a small nod before she left my office. I grabbed the bottle and drank from it and sat down on the couch, wanting to get rid of all these unfamiliar feelings in me that only she could get out of me.

I looked across the office, my eyes landing on the baby shoes on the floor, chuckling to myself as I leaned back on the couch and stared at the ceiling.

“You fucking idiot. You really thought you could have it all.”

I wasn’t meant to be happy. I was meant to be alone.

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Althaia

I woke up alone in the room and had been staring blankly at the ceiling ever since. The little light that came from above the curtains let me know the sun was shining brightly today.

Normally, such weather would get me in a better mood. But now, I couldn’t help but just think about what was the point of it all when my world was ripped to pieces. My thoughts were in chaos. Not once giving me a break and I was

constantly having a headache as I tried to direct my thoughts to something else.

But the dark side always won.

I felt like I had been swallowed by a black hole and it was mercilessly shredding me into tiny pieces. I couldn't piece myself together, or even find a way out no matter how hard I tried.

It was becoming too much for me. I had to go. Find a way to clear my mind.

So much had happened and I had so many questions and so much rage inside of me. I wanted to do something.

Something to be able to get to the bottom of this. I have never felt like this before. It was an unfamiliar feeling that kept burning at the pit of my stomach, wanting to avenge my mother in some way, desperate to see blood being spilled for whoever had been after us.

But at the same time, this wasn't who I was. I was not the type

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of person who kills. Never have I ever had the feeling of wanting to kill someone. And now, I have taken a life. It had me fucked up, yet at the same time, it wasn't enough.

This world...was undeniably too dark and cruel as I have been warned about over and over again. I just didn't expect to be going through something like this. To witness my mother's death. My heart couldn't bear thinking about it, and the episode kept going like a constant replay in my mind.

And the blood that streamed down my bare legs...

I showed that image away and I looked at the side of the bed where Damiano normally would be sleeping. It didn't look like he slept next to me. His side was cold and it was still as neat as it could be but I didn't have the energy to be thinking about where he had been if he didn't spend the night here.

I let out a sigh and finally dragged myself out of bed and made my way to the bathroom. I looked in the mirror, seeing how my appearance was a tad better

than it was when I first saw myself. My body was still discolored and the bruises were turning more yellowish.

The dark bags under my eyes were still as dark as they could be, and my face was also still lost in color. I truly looked like a ghost, who was still wandering around on earth and hadn't found the light yet to cross over to the other side.

Not only was I feeling miserable on the inside, but I also looked like it.

I took a shower and rummaged through some of Damiano's clothes to get dressed, but everything was way too big for me and I just ended up wearing one of his t-shirts. I didn't have any of my own clothes with me and I think the clothes I had

worn at the funeral were either Cara's or Arianna's. I would normally ask for some clothes to borrow, but I didn't feel like facing anyone today.

The looks they would give me when they saw me were a constant reminder, and I felt suffocated. I wanted to be alone to try and figure out what to do with myself.

Not wanting to leave the room today, I went to the windows and opened the curtains to get a peek outside. Not much was happening in the backyard. Only a few of Damiano's men were out there and walking around, making me wonder if it was for security purposes.

As I looked around, I noticed Luca standing slightly to the side, almost out of my view, looking distressed. He was talking to someone but I couldn't see who it was, but whatever the conversation was about, he was not looking happy at all about it. I could open the balcony doors and step out to see what was going on. But frankly, I just didn't care about anything at all.

It was as if he felt I was looking at him when his eyes suddenly flew up to mine. I took a step back and closed the curtains again to avoid any sad looks. I went back to the bed and lay down, staring at the ceiling once again.

Shortly after there was a knock on the door before it opened. I turned my head slightly to the side to see who it was before resuming my staring at the ceiling again when I saw it was Arianna.

I heard her take a couple of steps inside the room but she didn't say anything, leaving us in complete silence. She let out a sigh after a while.

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"You wanted to leave?" Her words got my attention. I turned to look at her and sat up on the bed. I wanted to leave but where was I supposed to go? It looked like she hesitated a little before she spoke again.

"I have prepared a safe-house for you to stay in. Where you can be alone." Arianna explained. I swallowed hard and my heart started to beat fast at her words, thinking I heard wrong.

"...I can leave?"

"That's what you wanted, right?" She almost snapped at me. I couldn't tell if she was mad about it or if it was something else with the way she was speaking but I ignored it.

"Do I go now?" I asked. For the first time, my voice sounded hopeful. Arianna kind of had a disapproving look on her face but it was short-lived before she nodded.

"If that's what you want, I can take you there now. I've got some clothes for you to wear." She handed me a small bag that I hadn't noticed was in her hand. Once she left the room, I changed into the clothes before making my way downstairs.

"Althaia?" Cara's voice stopped me before I could make it outside. I turned around to face her.

"You're leaving?" Cara asked. Her words made my stomach knot and a lump formed in my throat with the way she was looking at me.

"...just have to be alone for a bit." I muttered to her and she bit down on her lips as her eyes glistened.

"I understand... Take care of yourself." She embraced me in a

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tight hug and this time, I hugged her back just as tightly before saying goodbye.

I took a deep breath and made my way outside. Arianna was standing next to an SUV, waiting for me but she wasn't alone. Two more cars were present and Antonio, Giovanni, and Luca were outside as well.

Chapter 120

Post Views: 8

? Views, Released on February 11, 2024

"Ready?" Arianna asked and I gave her a small nod before she opened the door to the backseat and waited for me to get in.

Antonio was the one driving and Luca got in the passenger seat. I noticed Giovanni went to the car in front of us and I figured out it was because of security reasons why two more

cars were with us.

Before I slid into the backseat, I couldn't help but look around and a pang of sadness hit me even more when I didn't see him anywhere.

"Damiano is... busy." Arianna said when she noticed who I had been looking for.

I'm never too busy when it comes to you.

His words echoed in my mind but I guess that day became today. I gave one more look around and slid into the backseat. I couldn't help but feel hurt about it but maybe it was because he couldn't bare the sight of me anymore.

Why would he when I failed to protect something in my own body?

Maybe it was for the better that he wasn't here... It was not like I knew what to say to him anyway. Maybe he felt the same and that was why he didn't want to see me. Or maybe he truly was too busy and couldn't be here?

I guess the reason why didn't really matter anyways.

I let out a sigh and looked out of the window as we drove to wherever the safe-house was located.

The drive took way longer than I expected. It was hours away and it felt even longer since it was silent in the car as no one tried to make conversation.

We came to a stop in front of a large, two-story beach house. I got out of the car to take a look around. It was windy here but I welcomed it and closed my eyes for a, taking in a deep breath, and smelling the salty but fresh air.

I followed Arianna inside the house with the rest following close behind me. I scanned around quickly the very spacious living room as I made my way to the floor-to-ceiling window and looked out. The beach was in full view from here and I could faintly make out the sound of the waves. It was so... peaceful here. Just what I needed.

"Everything has been prepared for you." Arianna spoke, making me turn around to look at her.

"The fridge has been stocked up and the closet is filled up with clothes, so you don't have to worry about any of that."

"The windows are bulletproof and the doors have bolts going into the ground, making it impossible to break in." Antonio explained and I gave a small nod, impressed by the

information. It was a safe house, after all, I shouldn't have expected anything less.

"Also, there is an alarm system and security cameras. You can see what's going on outside. Let me show you how they work." Arianna commented and showed me a small screen on the wall, explaining what to do, how to activate it all, and what codes to use.

"I guess this is it..." She trailed off and they were all looking at me. I bit the inside of my cheek, feeling slightly awkward with

their eyes on me.

"Uhm...thank you." I said to them. It may not have sounded like it but I was truly grateful for them doing this much for me.

"You shouldn't stay here." Luca suddenly snapped, making me look at him in surprise. I noticed he didn't look very happy about the whole trip here. His usually friendly look around me had turned into a frown.

"Luca." Antonio warned him but he didn't care and continued to look at me with a disapproving look.

"He's hurting too, you know. Staying here won't help either of you." His words felt like daggers stabbing into my heart, making me take a couple of steps back. My throat closed and I looked down at the floor, feeling my eyes burn with tears.

"That's enough, Luca!" Antonio sneered, making him go quiet. Arianna and Giovanni didn't say anything, making me wonder if they were silently agreeing with him.

Without saying another word, Luca made his way out and Giovanni was right behind him. I didn't know what they were expecting of me. What I was going through... No one should ever have that happen to them. But it did and I had no idea what to do with myself.

I could barely breathe, let alone think.

I just wanted to be alone. To have a chance to figure things out for me.

"You can always call, remember that." Arianna said and gave my shoulder a small squeeze before she went out, leaving me alone with Antonio.

3/5

"Here. Keep this with you." A gun entered my view. My eyes widened a little before I looked at him.

"Do you remember how to use it?"

"Yes..."

"Good. I don't expect you to use it but it does ease my mind a little to know you have a weapon on you." Antonio placed the gun on the table. I had absolutely no intention of using it. either.

"...Damiano?" I wanted to ask him about it but hesitated with my question, fearing I would get the same reaction Luca gave

"He'll be fine."

"Is he mad at me? Is that... why he didn't want to see me?" I held my breath as I waited for his answer, feeling my heart beat faster.

Does he resent me?

That was what I wanted to ask, but I wasn't bold enough to ask. Nor ready for an answer to it.

"It doesn't matter what he thinks. We all heal differently and if this is what you need, then so be it. Just get better, that's what we all want." His words made me feel a little better about the situation and I was thankful he wasn't scolding me for staying here.

"Take care, Althaia."

"Thank you for doing this for me. And take care of him... please." My voice cracked and I took a deep breath. I didn't

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want to cry.

"Don't mention it. He's in good hands." Antonio gave me a small smile. He closed the distance between us and suddenly embraced me, taking me by surprise.

"Don't worry about him and just focus on yourself." This time I couldn't keep it in and cried into his chest.

Post Views: 9