

To ruin an Omega

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FIA

The healer's hands were steady on my arm as she helped me sit up. My throat burned where the glass had bitten, and I could feel the warm trickiness of blood still seeping despite the pressure she'd applied. The towel against my neck was soaked through, heavy with what I'd gambled.

Worth it.

I looked down at Hazel. She sat crumpled against the shattered tiles, her broken hand cradled against her chest. Mascara streaked down her face in ugly black rivers. She rocked slightly, lips moving in what might have been prayers or curses. Hard to tell which.

Then I looked up at Aldric. He stood near the doorway, his expression unreadable but his posture tense. Alert. He'd positioned himself between the crowd and the scene, like he was ready to block anyone who tried to interfere. When our eyes met, something passed between us. Understanding maybe. Or acknowledgment of what I'd just done.

The risk I'd taken.

The madness I'd dragged myself through.

Hazel's head whipped toward the door suddenly, her whole body going rigid. "I was framed!" Her voice came out raw and desperate. "This is insane! She attacked me first and now she's making me look like the villain!"

Her head swung back and forth, searching the faces in the crowd for someone, anyone, who would believe her. "You all know her reputation! You know what she's capable of! She's been plotting this from the beginning!"

The crowd shifted. Murmured. Some looked uncertain.

Then the sea of people parted.

Father pushed through first. His face was a mask of controlled fury, jaw tight, eyes scanning the bathroom like he was cataloging evidence for a trial. My step mother

followed close behind, one hand pressed to her chest in that dramatic way she had when she wanted everyone to know she was shocked.

"What the hell is happening here?" Father's voice cut through the whispers like a blade.

Hazel scrambled toward him as much as she could with one hand hanging useless. "Father! Thank the goddess you're here! She attacked me and now she's trying to—"

I didn't let her finish.

I lifted my phone. The screen was cracked from where I'd hit the floor, spiderwebbed with fractures, but it still worked. My fingers found the recording app. Found the file I needed.

Without another word, I pressed play.

Hazel's voice filled the bathroom. Clear, damning and unmistakable.

"Your mother and your existence hurt my mother. In a domino fashion, it trickled down and hurt me too. So I swore I wouldn't be like her. If I had been in my mother's shoes, I would have taken you and your mother out before you had the chance to even grow."

The crowd went silent. Completely silent. The kind of silence that felt like it had weight.

The recording continued.

"It's why I had to kill Milo even when I didn't want to. He still held something in his stupid heart for you."

Someone in the crowd gasped. Someone else whispered, "Oh my goddess."

I watched Father's face. Watched the color drain from it slowly, like someone had opened a tap and let it all flow out.

The recording went on. Every word Hazel had said. Every confession. Every calculated admission about framing me, about manipulating Milo, about the pink dress and the smear campaign and the jealousy that had driven all of it.

When it ended, no one moved.

"Is she insane?" someone whispered from the back.

"Who would even do this?" another voice added.

"Wow. Talk about calculated."

Hazel's eyes were wide, fixed on the phone in my hand like it was a weapon. Then she turned to Father and grabbed at his jacket with her good hand, fingers clutching desperately at the fabric.

"I was just trying to get back at her!" Her voice came out high and frantic. "For all the crazy things she said to you! I didn't mean a word I said there! I was just trolling her, trying to get under her skin!"

Tears poured down her face. Real ones this time, not the practiced kind she could summon at will.

"You have to believe me! I would never actually hurt anyone! I was just playing with her!"

Stepmother stood frozen beside Father. Her mouth opened slightly, then closed. She looked at Father, then at Hazel, then back at Father like she was waiting for him to tell her what to think.

Father didn't move. His eyes stayed fixed on Hazel's hand gripping his jacket. For a long moment, he just stared at it.

Then he reached down and peeled her fingers away. One by one. Deliberately.

He straightened up as a sound came out of him. A chuckle. Awkward and wrong, like someone had forced it out of him at gunpoint. He brushed off his jacket where Hazel had wrinkled it, smoothing the fabric with careful precision.

His eyes found mine.

"Are you happy now?"

The words landed flat. Cold.

I blinked. "What?"

"Now that you've dragged this family through a new fresh hell to prove your innocence." He gestured vaguely at the crowd, at the blood on the floor, at the recording that still sat paused on my cracked screen. "Are you happy now?"

I couldn't breathe. The pain in my throat was nothing compared to the hollowness that opened up in my chest.

"I cannot believe this." My voice came out steady somehow. Steadier than I felt. "Your perfect daughter just confessed to the things you blamed me for. I'm showing you that you played right into her hands. And you still find a way to blame me?"

I pointed at my throat. At the blood still seeping through the bandage the healer had pressed there.

"She even tried to kill me!"

Father looked down at me. His expression didn't change. There was not a flicker of concern. Not a hint of remorse. Just that same cold disdain he'd worn when he'd told me things. Horrible things.

He turned away from me and faced Cian instead.

"I apologize for both my daughters' actions." His voice was formal now. Diplomatic. "I hope we can settle this as an extended family in private rather than carrying our dirty linen outside."

The whispers started immediately.

"Does he have favorites?"

"Well, she is an Omega. Better protect the better gene, right?"

"Still, it isn't right."

Cian stepped forward. His face was carved from stone, every line of it hard and unforgiving.

"I'm afraid we cannot."

Father's jaw tightened.

"This was not done on my territory," Cian continued. His voice carried across the bathroom, clear and absolute. "So as much as I want to be kind to family, I cannot. This was attempted murder on the grounds of the Knight Estate and under the Night banner pack. I have no sovereign power here."

He paused, letting that sink in.

"Who you should be apologizing to is your daughter Fia, and Alpha Julius Knight for what your ward just pulled at his wedding."

Father's throat worked. He swallowed hard. I watched his shoulders rise and fall with a breath he was trying to control. Then he turned back to me.

For a second, our eyes met.

I saw nothing there. No recognition. No guilt. Just the same emptiness that had been there when he'd told me shit to my face.

He turned away from me again and towards Alpha Julius, who stood at the edge of the crowd with his arms crossed and his expression unreadable.

Father dropped to his knees.

"I am begging for your mercy and forgiveness for the sake of my daughter Hazel."

"Father, no." Hazel's voice broke. "Please don't."

The healer touched my arm gently. "Let us take you somewhere quiet and change the bandage so I can stitch you up properly."

I looked at Father one more time. At the way he knelt there on the blood-stained tiles. At the way he refused to look at me. At the way he'd chosen, even now, even with the truth laid bare and undeniable.

Something inside me died.

Something small and stubborn that had still been holding on. Some tiny piece that had believed, despite everything, that the truth would matter. That proof would change things. That he would see what Hazel had done and finally, finally understand.

But he didn't want to understand.

He'd wanted me to suffer for things I'd never done because it was convenient. Because it was easier than facing what his precious Luna daughter actually was. And now that the truth had come out in the most inconvenient way possible, when Hazel had ruined and burned her own life down without care or kindness for anyone else, he still couldn't bring himself to acknowledge it.

Because that would mean admitting he'd been wrong.

The healer helped me to my feet. My legs shook but held. She kept one hand on my elbow, steadyng me as we moved toward the door.

Cian fell into step beside me immediately. His hand found the small of my back, warm and solid.

"Are you alright?" His voice was low, meant just for me.

I touched the bandage at my throat. Felt the rough texture of gauze and the sting of the herbs the healer had put in. "Yeah. I'm fine."

We made it three steps into the hallway before I heard footsteps behind us.

"Fia!"

It was Isobel's voice. It was sharp and insistent.

"We need to talk!"

Cian moved before I could. He stepped between us, his body a wall blocking her path.

"No." His voice was flat. Final. "I don't think you two need to talk."

Mother's expression shifted. Hardened. "This is a family matter, Alpha Cian."

"I concur." Cian didn't move. "My wife doesn't need to talk shit with you."

I put my hand on his arm. Felt the tension coiled there, ready to snap if Mother pushed any harder.

"Cian." I kept my voice quiet. "It's fine. I'll talk to her."

He looked down at me. His eyes searched my face, looking for something. Certainty maybe. Or permission to tell her to fuck off.

I nodded slightly.

Only then did he step aside.

Chapter 152: The Confession

FIA

He stepped aside slowly. Reluctantly. But he didn't go far.

Mother stood three feet away. Her makeup was still perfect despite everything that had just happened. Not a hair out of place. She looked like she'd just stepped out of a portrait instead of a bathroom where her daughter had tried to kill me.

"It must feel good." Her voice was soft. Almost conversational. "To do that to your father. Hurt his pride. Make him kneel before his peers. Make our pack seem even smaller and insignificant than it already is."

The words hit me wrong and twisted in my gut. But I had no empathy left. I was on a different kind of high.

"Did it feel good when you did it to me?" My voice came out steadier than I expected.

Her expression didn't change.

"And I didn't do such a thing to Father." I pressed my hand harder against the bandage at my throat. "He had the option to let Hazel pay for her crimes. Like he did with the crimes you and your daughter thrust upon me. I paid for them."

Something flickered across her face. Too quick to catch. Too quick to name.

"I wish I hadn't given in to her." The words came out measured. Controlled. "You should have stayed ordinary and small. The way life was intended for you. You never were meant to be Luna. But less Luna of Skollrend. How you survived him and he started to cherish you is beyond me. Must be inherited. Your mother has the same sinister charm."

Heat flooded through me. Sharp and bitter.

"The goddess blessed my union." I took a step forward. "Seethe all you want."

Her lips pressed into a thin line. "Me? Seethe?"

"Yes. And I hope your illusion of a white picket house can stand now that the cat is out of the bag." My voice gained strength with each word. "But I imagine Hazel will wiggle her way back to the good graces of our father. He's already sacrificing everything for her. His pride even. So if you have beef, take it up with your daughter who started this sick demented competition in the first place."

My stepmother laughed.

She was trying to at least. But the sound was hollow, twisted and wrong.

"You think the goddess is on your side? How naive."

Then she moved. Fast. Her hand shot out and grabbed my wrist, yanking me toward her. The sudden motion sent a shock of pain through my throat. I gasped.

She pulled me close. Too close. I could see every line around her eyes. Every careful stroke of her makeup.

"Your mother is dead dead dead." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "But if she was here, I'd ask you to ask her. A fated mate bond is not enough. You know very well what she had to endure. You were there."

My heart hammered against my ribs.

"I hear this man who has been letting you grow wings met an old flame today." Her smile was sharp. Cutting. "So I would give you advice. Mother to child. Fight with everything you have if you want to keep this wings of yours."

The smile widened. No. It stretched. Something sick and twisted crept into it.

"Kill, if you must. I know I did."

Everything went still.

The hallway. The air. My blood in my veins.

I stared at her square in the face. "What does that mean?"

"I am never one to toot my horn." Her voice stayed light. Conversational. Like we were discussing mundane topics. "But I cannot for the life of me imagine why Hazel thinks I didn't do something about my competition."

My throat closed up. Not from the wound. From something else.

"Sure, I bided my time. I let it go. And when I was going to do something, the gods seemingly heard my prayer and struck her down with the rot."

No.

"But imagine my surprise when I was outside in the night for a drink on what was supposed to be the last embers of her pathetic small life and I see her disease lifting."

No no no.

"A miracle? I think not." Her eyes locked on mine. Cold. Dead. "I smothered her with her pillow."

The world tilted.

Red flooded my vision. Hot. Burning. My blood turned to fire in my veins.

My fist flew before I could think. Before I could breathe. Before I could do anything but react to the poison she'd just spilled into my ears.

She caught it. Her fingers wrapped around my knuckles and stopped me cold.

"The deed is done." Her voice stayed calm. Steady. "It doesn't bring her back. Punches cannot be taken back once drawn. So take this as a warning. The next time you pack a punch. Think. If they survive my blow. What the fuck will they do? How will they retaliate?"

I didn't think. I didn't plan.

I drove my forehead forward. Hard.

I heard the crunch of cartilage. I saw the spray of blood. Isobel stumbled back, hands flying to her nose.

"You murderer!" The scream tore out of my throat. Pain exploded where the wound opened up again. I felt the warmth of blood seeping fresh through the bandage.

I lunged forward. My hands reached for her. For her throat. For anything I could grab.

Arms wrapped around me from behind. Strong, familiar and immovable.

Cian.

"Let me go!" I thrashed against his hold. "Let me go!"

Isobel took another step back. Blood poured from her nose, running over her lips and chin. Ruining that perfect makeup. But she was smiling. Actually smiling. Blood in her teeth and everything.

She looked at Cian. "Hold the rabid girl. Before another scandal finds us."

Then she turned and walked away. Casual. Like nothing had happened. Like she hadn't just confessed to murder.

"Let me go, Cian!" I fought against his arms. Goddess knows I struggled. The heavens had to know how much I twisted to get out of his grip.

"You're bleeding." His voice came from right behind my ear.

"I don't care!" I turned in his grip to face him. To make him understand. "She killed her! She killed my mother!"

His expression changed. Shifted from restraint to shock. "What?"

"She just confessed now and I never knew." My voice broke. Cracked down the middle. "Cian, I never knew."

The moment those words were said... the hallway spun and tilted sideways. The floor rushed up to meet me except it didn't because Cian's arms were there. Solid and real.

"I never knew," I whispered again.

The light dimmed at the edges. Faded to gray. Then black.

The last thing I felt was Cian's chest against my cheek. The last thing I heard was his voice calling my name.

Then nothing.

Chapter 153: A just goddess

HAZEL

The world had gone quiet.

Not the kind of quiet where you could hear yourself think. The kind where every whisper felt like a shout. Where every eye that landed on me burned through my skin.

My hand throbbed. The broken one. Pain shot up my arm in waves but I barely felt it. I couldn't feel anything except the weight of what had just happened. What I'd just lost.

The recording. That damned recording.

Alpha Julius stood near the doorway. He hadn't moved since my father dropped to his knees. His arms were still crossed. His expression was still carved from ice.

Father knelt there on the tiles. On the blood. His knees had caught some of the glass. I watched it bleed. As his blood and Fia's mixed together in some sick metaphor I didn't want to think about.

"I think you should tend to the tear that is within your family." Alpha Julius' voice cut through the silence. Clean. Final. He looked at Father like he was something small. Something beneath notice. "No tragedy happened. So we should be grateful for that."

He then turned and walked out.

Just like that. No punishment. No demands. Just dismissal.

Somehow that was worse.

The crowd shifted. They still whispered. But now they were moving. They started to disperse slowly, reluctantly, like they didn't want to miss whatever came next but knew they couldn't stay.

But I heard them. Goddess help me, I heard every word.

"Did you hear what she said?"

"She killed someone. She actually killed him."

"It is crazy how she deceived everyone. How pathetic."

"I always thought she was too perfect. Too sweet."

"Well, now we know it was all fake."

My chest tightened and squeezed. I couldn't breathe right. I couldn't think right.

This was worse than punishment. Worse than anything Fia could have done to me. Because now they all knew. Everyone would know. The story would spread like wildfire through the packs. Through the territories. Hazel Hughes, the perfect Luna daughter who framed her sister into marriage and murdered her sister's ex mate.

They would talk. They would whisper. They would form opinions.

Bad opinions. Horrible opinions.

My reputation was gone. Shattered just like the mirror behind me. Just like my hand.

It would be worse if the elders of the pack decided to try me for murder. My body shook at the thought.

Father finally moved. He stood slowly, joints creaking like an old man's. He didn't look at me. Not yet. He just stared at the space where Alpha Julius had been.

Then he turned.

"Stand up." His voice was flat. Empty. "We should go home."

I looked up at him from where I sat crumpled against the broken tiles. My good hand still cradled my broken one against my chest. Mascara stained my cheeks. Blood dotted my dress.

"Father." My voice came out small. Broken. "You don't believe any of the lies that they are spewing, right?"

Please. Please say you believe me. Please say you know I would never do those things. That the recording was fake. That Fia manipulated everything.

He gave me a quick look. His eyes swept over me once. Then away.

"I am begging you, get up and let us leave before the embarrassment covers us whole."

The words hit me like a physical blow.

Something inside me cracked, then splintered before it shattered completely.

"That means you don't believe me." The realization burned through my chest. "You actually think I did it."

Father's jaw tightened. "Hazel. Not here."

"Why would you kneel before them?" My voice rose. Pitched higher. "Why would you make yourself small? Beg for mercy from them when your daughter, your true daughter, is the one who was attacked?"

I scrambled to my feet. Pain shot through my hand but I ignored it. Pushed past it.

"This is why Silver Creek is the way it is!" The words tore out of me. Hot. Angry yet true. "You have no drive. No ambition. You are just a small minded man and a disappointment as a father!"

His face went red. Mottled with anger or shame or both.

"Why wouldn't you force Fia to apologize?" I took a step toward him. "Why wouldn't you make her take it all back and retract her statement! She is lying! Can't you see that? She has always been lying and you just let her walk all over us because you feel guilty that she is an Omega! Because you feel bad that her mother died!"

The slap came out of nowhere.

My head snapped to the side. The crack of his palm against my cheek echoed in the bathroom. In my skull. In my chest.

I stood there. Frozen. My face burning where he'd hit me. My good hand flew to my cheek, pressing against the heat that bloomed there.

Father had never hit me. Not once in my entire life.

"Joseph!" Mother's voice cut through the ringing in my ears.

She pushed through what was left of the swiftly diminishing crowd. Her face was pale. Her eyes wide with shock.

Father turned to her then back at me. His hand still raised slightly. Still trembling.

"Oh, she was right about you all along." His voice came out harsh. Raw. "You snake."

Mother stopped. Blinked. "What? Joseph, this is our child."

That seemed to annoy father. He said; "You have a fault in this too. Plenty in fact."

"Joseph—"

"Everything Fia said. Everything she accused your daughter of." Father took a step toward Mother. Then another. "It was true, wasn't it? You are responsible because you poisoned our daughter against her sister. You fed this jealousy. This hatred. You made Hazel into this. An ugly beast full of wickedness."

He gestured at me. At the mess I'd become.

Mother's mouth opened. Closed. Her composure cracked just slightly around the edges.

"Joseph, she is your daughter regardless."

"She is no daughter of mine."

The words hung in the air. Heavy. Final. Absolute.

I couldn't move.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't process what I'd just heard.

Father pushed past mother and stormed toward the exit. His footsteps echoed on the tiles. His harsh steps slowly fading.

Mother stared after him for a moment. Then she turned to me. Her eyes swept over my broken hand, my tear-stained face, the wreckage of the bathroom around us.

"What pushed you to even do this?"

The question landed wrong. Twisted. Like somehow this was my fault. Like I'd planned for everything to fall apart.

Then she turned and rushed after Father. Her heels clicked rapidly on the floor as she chased him down.

"Joseph! Joseph, wait!"

I stood there alone.

The bathroom was empty now except for the broken glass and the blood and the shattered pieces of my perfect life scattered across the tiles.

My cheek still burned where Father had slapped me. The red was probably blooming there now. Spreading across my skin like evidence.

'She is no daughter of mine.'

The words played over and over in my head. A loop I couldn't stop. Couldn't escape.

I walked to one of the mirrors. The glass was spiderwebbed with cracks from where I'd hit it earlier. From where Fia had been slammed against it. My reflection stared back at me in fractured pieces. Dozens of Hazels, all broken in different ways.

I pulled my fist back and drove it forward.

The glass shattered. Cut into my knuckles. Pain exploded up my arm, mixing with the agony from my already broken hand.

But it didn't help. It didn't make anything better. The anger still burned in my chest. The humiliation still clawed at my throat.

"Taking out your anger on that mirror will do no good."

I spun around.

A man stood in the doorway. Tall, with salt and pepper hair and darker eyes. He looked vaguely familiar but I couldn't place him. One of the wedding guests maybe. Someone who'd witnessed my complete and total destruction.

"If you want to do it right, you should let the feeling count." He took a step into the bathroom. His voice was smooth. Almost pleasant. "Hurt who hurt you if you catch my drift."

I stared at him. Blood dripped from my knuckles onto the floor. Both hands ruined now.

"You." The word came out flat. Recognition sparked. I'd seen him. He has been the one to hold Alpha Cian back when he wanted to take my life. Cian had even called him uncle.

He smiled. The expression didn't reach his eyes.

"The name is Aldric."

He moved closer. Careful. Like he was approaching a wounded animal. His gaze swept over me, taking in every detail. The broken hands. The mascara stains. The blood on my dress.

"You've had quite a night."

I couldn't speak. My throat had closed up. Everything had closed up.

"Your sister really did a number on you, didn't she?" Aldric tilted his head slightly. "Played you like a fiddle. Made you look like a monster in front of everyone who matters."

"Shut up." My voice cracked.

"And your father." He clicked his tongue. "That had to sting. Being practically disowned in front of people who matter. In front of Alpha Julius himself."

"I said shut up!"

"But you know what the worst part is?" Aldric's smile widened. "She gets to walk away from this. She gets the powerful mate. The Luna position. The respect. Everything you wanted. Everything you worked for. All because she had a recording."

My hands shook. Blood and pain and rage mixed together until I couldn't tell them apart.

"She took everything from you." Aldric's voice dropped lower. Softer. Like he was sharing a secret. "Your father's love. Your reputation. Your future. All of it. Gone."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to tell him he was wrong. But I couldn't.

Because he wasn't wrong.

Fia had destroyed me. Completely. Thoroughly. She'd waited until the perfect moment and then she'd pulled the trigger. And I'd walked right into it. Played right into her hands.

Just like she'd played into mine.

Except she'd won.

"What do you want?" I finally managed to ask.

Aldric's smile shifted. Changed into something else. Something sharper.

"I want to help you get back what you lost." He extended his hand toward me. "I want to help you hurt the people who hurt you."

I looked at his hand. Then at my reflection in the shattered mirror. At all the broken pieces of myself staring back.

She is no daughter of mine.

The words echoed again. Louder this time.

"Aren't you family with Alpha Cian? Why would you want to help me? Why would you want to hurt Fia?"

"Do you care?"

He was not wrong. I did not.

So I took his hand. "No."

His fingers closed around mine. Firm. Sure. Like he'd been expecting this all along.

"Good girl." Aldric pulled me slightly toward him. Away from the mirror. Away from the blood and glass. "Now let's talk about what comes next."

The bathroom door swung shut behind us with a soft click.

"What exactly do you know about Fia?"

Chapter 154: From Sir Aldric, with love

HAZEL

"What exactly do you know about Fia?"

The question caught me off guard. I turned to look at Aldric fully, my broken hands throbbing with each heartbeat.

"What would I know about her?" The irritation in my voice was sharp. Raw. "She's been nothing but a thorn in my side since she was born."

"You're her family." Aldric's tone was patient. Almost condescending. "An opposition to her as well. So wouldn't it be smart to know your enemy inside and out?"

I wanted to argue but my mouth stayed shut. The truth was I hadn't thought much about Fia beyond how to get rid of her. How to make her disappear from my life. I'd never considered actually understanding her.

"I just got her in my life," Aldric continued, moving closer. "And I find it's good policy to know someone to the root. Which is why I am doing what I am doing. Are you telling me you know nothing about your sister?"

"All I know about her is insignificant." I shifted my weight, wincing as pain shot through my hands. "If there's something you're sniffing for, you need to be more specific."

Aldric studied me for a long moment. His dark eyes were calculating. Weighing something I couldn't see.

"Her mother." The words came out deliberately. "Who exactly was her mother? I know she wasn't originally from your pack. So what pack was she from?"

The question felt strange. Out of place. What did Fia's dead mother have to do with anything?

"Her mother was an Omega." I frowned at him. "A rogue, I believe. I don't know the specifics of how she met my father. But I'm aware she was on the run."

"From who?"

"I don't know." My patience was wearing thin. "What does this even have to do with helping me?"

Aldric sighed. The sound was heavy with something I couldn't quite name.

"Can I tell you something?" He moved closer still. Close enough that I could smell his cologne. Something expensive and sharp. "Something that should motivate you to be more receptive to my questions."

"I'm not sure I like your tone very much." I met his gaze head-on. "It seems like you're looking down at me because you believe I'm desperate."

"You are."

The words hit like another slap. My face still burned from where Father had struck me. Now this stranger was throwing the truth at me like stones.

I opened my mouth to protest but Aldric's smile stopped me cold.

"I'm never going to tell it differently." His expression didn't change. "You are desperate. That's why I'm here after all."

My throat tightened. I wanted to deny it. Wanted to throw his words back in his face. But I couldn't. Because he was right.

"Do you want to know what's at the forefront of your father's mind right now?" Aldric tilted his head. "Saving you from the fate that's meant to befall you. You killed someone. If he still has any love for you and doesn't want you to suffer repercussions, he'll practically whore you out to a stronger pack."

The word hit me like ice water. Whore me out. Trade me like property to save his own reputation.

"By then, you will be someone else's business and if your pack stronghold has an issue with it, they have to take it up with your would be Alpha."

"It would save your life," Aldric continued. His voice was matter-of-fact. Clinical. "But you look like the kind of girl who would hate being chosen for. So if you want my help, a safer fence and salvation from even your father, give me something I can work with."

I swallowed hard. My pride wanted to tell him to go to hell. To walk away from this stranger and his invasive questions. But my survival instinct was stronger.

Father's words still echoed in my head. She is no daughter of mine.

He'd already disowned me in his heart. What would stop him from selling me off to the highest bidder? From using me to repair the damage I'd done to his reputation even if it was going to be sold as saving me?

Nothing.

Nothing would stop him.

"Alright." The word came out quieter than I intended.

Aldric leaned in slightly. Waiting.

"Fia's mother escaped a sick sex trafficking ring."

The words felt heavy on my tongue. I'd never spoken them aloud before. Mother had told me years ago in hushed whispers. A secret she'd used to justify her hatred of the woman who'd stolen her husband's heart.

Aldric's smile widened. It was the smile of someone who'd just found exactly what they were looking for.

"Interesting." He drew the word out. Savored it. "Was it busted?"

"From what I know..." I paused, trying to remember the fragments of information I'd overheard. "No."

"Did she reunite with family after she was saved?"

"No." I shook my head. My hair fell across my face and I didn't bother pushing it back. "She carried the moniker Sterling. She claimed it was her family name. But they couldn't be found. My mother believed it was a lie. A lie she refused to let go of."

The information felt small. Insignificant. Just pieces of a dead woman's past that had nothing to do with me or my current situation.

"But she's dead now," I added. "There's nothing more I know."

"That was good." Aldric's expression shifted. Brightened. "More than good."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card. It was a plain white with simple black text. He held it out to me.

I stared at it without moving. "I don't need this. I need salvation. How do you save me?"

The look Aldric gave me made my stomach drop. It was the look of someone who held all the cards. Someone who knew I had no choice but to play by his rules.

His hand stayed outstretched. Offering the card. Waiting.

I hated how pathetic I looked. But there was no changing this. I took it.

My broken fingers screamed in protest as I gripped the small rectangle. I couldn't even read what it said through the pain and the blood smeared across my hands.

"You're part Strati, are you not?" Aldric's question came out of nowhere.

I blinked at him. "My maternal grandparents don't talk to my mother much anymore. Or me."

"Well, they will now."

The certainty in his voice made me look up sharply. But Aldric was already turning away. Already walking toward the door like our conversation was finished.

"Wait." The word burst out of me. "What does that mean? What are you going to do?"

He paused in the doorway. Looked back over his shoulder at me. The light from the hallway cast his face in shadow.

"Save the number as Gabriel."

Then he was gone.

I stood there in the wreckage of the bathroom. Blood dripping from both hands onto the tiles. My father's rejection still burning in my chest. My sister's victory still fresh as a wound.

I looked down at the business card. The letters swam in front of my eyes. I couldn't tell if it was from the tears or the pain or both.

Gabriel? Why?

The name meant nothing to me. But Aldric had said my grandparents would talk to me now. The Strati family I'd been kept away from my entire life because of some old family drama I'd never fully understood.

Mother had always been tight-lipped about why her parents had cut her off. Why they'd refused to acknowledge me as their granddaughter. Until I was old enough to learn myself that it was because she decided to marry father.

But now this stranger was telling me they'd talk to me. That somehow this Gabriel person would make it happen.

I wondered. What sort of new enemy did Fia make?

Well... As long as I benefited from this. Who gave a fuck.

Chapter 155: Familiar Magic

CIAN

The healer reappeared next to us the second Fia fainted.

"Great heavens," she said as she looked at the wound and put a hand on her head. That seemed to calm her down a bit before she said; "Come with me."

She didn't wait for an answer. She just turned and walked toward the nearest room with the expectation we'd follow.

I adjusted my grip on Fia. Her head lolled against my shoulder. I cupped the back of her skull to keep it steady. To keep her safe even in unconsciousness. The bandage at her throat had turned even darker with fresh blood. The white cotton was saturated and useless now.

The healer pushed open a door of the estate. It looked like a guest room given how simple the sight beyond was. It was clean. There was a bed with crisp white sheets. A desk and a mirror. other than that, there was nothing else.

I carried Fia inside and laid her down as gently as I could. Her body was so light. Too light. The mattress barely depressed under her weight.

The healer moved to her side immediately. Her fingers pressed against Fia's wrist. Then her neck, careful to avoid the wound. She leaned close to check her breathing.

"She fainted from stress." The healer's voice was matter-of-fact. Clinical in the way they always were. "The blood loss didn't help. Neither did the exertion. She needs rest. No stress. No excitement or shock. Nothing that will raise her heart rate or blood pressure."

She straightened and began gathering supplies from her bag. I saw a gauze. Some Antiseptic. Thread for stitches probably.

"I'll finish treating her wounds now." She glanced at me. "She should be fine with proper care and rest. But she cannot keep stressing herself for the time being. Her body can't take it."

I nodded. My throat felt tight. Words wouldn't come anyway.

The door opened.

Madeline stepped inside. Her blonde hair caught the lamplight. Her blue eyes swept the room and landed on Fia's still form.

"Seems like I'm late to the ruckus." Her smile was soft. Sympathetic even. "I heard what happened. Is she okay?"

"Yes." The word came out rough. I cleared my throat. "Yes. She is."

I pulled a chair close to the bed and sat. My hand found Fia's automatically. Her skin was cold. Too cold. I wrapped both my hands around hers and rubbed gently, trying to warm her. Trying to bring some life back into her fingers.

Her stepmother had killed her mother.

The words echoed in my skull. I'd caught fragments of their conversation before Fia screamed. Before she tried to attack. I'd thought I must have misheard. Must have misunderstood. It would be insane for someone like Isobel to confess something so monstrous so casually.

But it had to be true. Fia had said the same words before she collapsed.

It was true and Fia had carried the weight of her mother's death all these years thinking it was natural. Thinking it was the disease. The rot. Something inevitable and cruel but not deliberate.

Not murder.

I couldn't imagine what she'd felt in that moment. The revelation hitting her like a physical blow. The grief compounding with rage and helplessness because what could she do? Her mother was still dead. Still gone. Knowing the truth changed nothing except everything.

I had to do something about this.

"I can help."

Madeline's voice cut through my thoughts. I looked up.

"What?"

She moved closer. Her steps were quiet on the wooden floor. "Her injuries. They won't heal well on their own. She's not a Sentinel. Not a Delta. Not a Luna by birth." Her gaze moved to Fia's throat. To the bloody bandage. "There will be plenty of events in her future. High society functions. Gatherings where appearances matter whether we like it or not. Scarring tells a story. People will ask questions. They'll stare. What she survived... It is brave... But if we can avoid a scar, we should."

The healer had paused in her work. She was looking at me now. Waiting for something. Permission maybe.

When I didn't speak because how bothered I was by the state of Fia and what caused it, the healer proceeded to ask Madeline; "You are good with healing magics?"

Madeline nodded. "It is rare and hard but yes. I'm good at performing healing magic. Not many can do it properly. But it would be a significant advantage for Luna Fia. For her comfort and confidence."

"Alpha Cian, the witch is not wrong."

I looked at Fia's face then. She looked peaceful. Even in unconsciousness. She looked younger like this. Vulnerable. The strong, defiant woman who'd headbutted her stepmother was hidden beneath exhaustion and pain.

I nodded, looking at Madeline. "Do it."

Madeline smiled curtly. She closed the distance between us in three steps. Her hands moved to the bandage at Fia's throat. She unwrapped it slowly. Carefully. The fabric peeled away from the wound with a wet, sucking sound.

The cut was nearly deep even if the healer has claimed it was not fatal. It looked vicious. The edges were ragged where the clothing had torn when Fia screamed. Fresh blood welled up and trickled down the side of her neck.

Madeline placed her hands on either side of the wound. Her fingers were steady. Confident. She began to whisper.

The words were soft. Almost inaudible. They didn't sound like any language many knew. But I knew those old words. Familiar ancient words. They had a rhythm to them. A cadence that felt deliberate and practiced.

She has used it on me several times before even if I didn't need it. It brought back memories. Lots of memories.

Then I smelled it.

Magic had a scent. Most people usually didn't realize this. They thought it was invisible and incorporeal. But it's not. Not really. Every magic user in the book carried their own distinct signature...that distinct smell made sure to clung to the air and coat the back of your throat.

This magic smelled familiar and not in the way I hoped it was supposed to. Not because of the memories I had with Madeline.

My entire body went rigid.

I knew this smell.

I'd smelled it before.

The memory hit me like a fist to the gut. Ophelia's head exploding. Her skull fragmenting outward in a spray of bone and brain matter. Her body crumpling to the ground like a puppet with cut strings. And that smell. That unique, distinctive smell filling my nostrils and coating my tongue.

I hadn't been able to place it then. It had been so long since I'd felt and smelled Madeline's magic. Days. Weeks. Months. Years. But it had niggled at the back of my mind. A forgotten thing trying to surface.

Now it was here again.

Right in front of me.

I watched Fia's throat. The torn flesh was moving. Knitting back together in a way that was too fast. Too smooth. The edges of the wound reached for each other like seeking fingers. They touched. Merged. The skin grew over them like water filling a depression. The blood stopped flowing. Then it receded. Absorbed back into her body or simply vanished.

In less than a minute, the wound was gone.

Not scarred or healed in the normal sense. It was just gone. Like it had never existed.

Madeline pulled her hands back. She was smiling. That same soft, sympathetic smile. Her blue eyes met mine. They were bright. Almost excited.

"There. Much better, don't you think?"

I looked at Fia's throat. At the smooth, unblemished skin. Then back at Madeline.

Her blonde hair. Her blue eyes. Her delicate hands that had just performed magic. That smell was still in the air.

The same scent from the magic that had killed Ophelia.

My mind raced. Connections were forming. Terrible connections that I didn't want to acknowledge but couldn't ignore.

Had Madeline had been there? At Ophelia Cottonwood's shop?

No... No... No...

Was her presence here not a coincidence?

Would Madeline... Could Madeline be working for... NO!

"Cian?" Madeline tilted her head. Her smile faltered slightly. "Are you alright? You look pale."

I realized I was staring. My hand had tightened around Fia's. Hard enough that my knuckles had gone white.

"I'm fine." The words came out flat. Emotionless. I forced myself to breathe normally. To relax my grip. To arrange my face into something neutral. "Thank you. For helping her."

"Of course." Madeline's smile returned full force. "I'm happy to help anytime. You know that."

Did I?

Chapter 156: Resist

MADELINE

I walked straight out of the ballroom and into a corner of the corridor because I was bothered. Deeply, uncomfortably bothered, the kind that sits under your skin and refuses to be ignored. It was about the Omega. About Fia.

I had told myself I was above it. That I would not be the villain in anyone's story, least of all hers. You could not fight what the heart wanted, that was always the excuse, the clean and reasonable one. If Cian still chosen me, then so be it. Fate, instinct, all of those things people liked to blame when choices became inconvenient.

But tonight was doing a very good job of proving just how wrong Aldric's careful assumptions had been.

I had seen it. The moment Cian realized she was gone. The way he had charged out of the ballroom, barely contained, his control slipping in that unmistakable way that meant his wolf was right there, clawing at the surface. That was not concern out of obligation. That was not duty to a bond he tolerated.

He loved her.

The realization landed hard and stayed there.

It bothered me more than I wanted to admit.

Because even though there was still something in his eyes when he looked at me, something familiar and unresolved that he could deny all he wanted, it did not change the truth. Whatever had once been mine now belonged, at least in part, to that Omega. Maybe more than part. Maybe most of it.

I did not understand how that was even possible.

I pulled out my powder mirror and stared at my reflection longer than necessary. My ears were red, flushed in a way no amount of makeup could hide. That was how unsettled I was. I adjusted my earring just to give my hands something to do, even though it was already sitting perfectly.

My phone buzzed against the side of my clutch.

I did not need to look to know who it was, but I did anyway. Aldric's name glowed on the screen, neat and unyielding. The message was short, as his instructions always were when he expected obedience rather than discussion.

Find Cian. Use this opportunity as an aperitif to get even closer to Cian before Morrigan. Help the Omega if you must.

I stared at the words. Once. Then again. By the third time, my mouth had gone dry.

Help the Omega if I must.

What did that even mean in Aldric's world?

I slid the phone back into my clutch and smoothed my hands down the front of my dress. The silk was cool, grounding, a small mercy against the heat crawling up my neck. I took a steady breath, then another, trying to shake the feeling that I was being nudged into something I did not fully understand yet.

Aldric's message lingered anyway, needling at the back of my mind.

I snapped the powder mirror shut and turned back toward the ballroom.

Something had changed while I was gone. The air felt different, thicker somehow. People were gathered in tight little knots, their voices low but animated, the kind of hushed excitement that only ever came from witnessing drama you were not directly involved in. Eyes flicked toward doorways. Heads leaned together. Information was already spreading.

I searched the room for Cian again, hoping foolishly that he had returned. He had been there earlier, standing near Alpha Joseph Hughes with that carefully neutral expression he wore when he was holding himself together by sheer will. Now there was no sign of him.

Fia was gone too.

The space she should have occupied felt conspicuously empty, like a missing note in a song that refused to resolve.

I moved through the crowd slowly. Deliberately. My heels clicked against the marble floor but the sound was swallowed by the whispers around me.

"Did you see what happened?"

"I heard it was quite the scene."

"Coming to this party was really a smart choice."

I paused near a group of women. They were huddled together, their faces animated with gossip. One of them was practically vibrating with the need to share what she knew.

"All the tea that came out today alone," she said. Her voice carried despite her attempt to whisper. "Turns out the Omega isn't a bitch after all. She's been surrounded by a snake for a sister all along."

Another woman nodded eagerly. "I just came back from the bathroom by the hallway and let me tell you, Hazel Hughes is such a snake. The things she said, the recording Fia played. It was insane."

Hughes.

The name caught my attention. I turned toward them and took a few steps closer. They noticed me immediately. Their conversation faltered.

"Hughes," I said. Kept my voice light. Curious. "Isn't that Silvercreek?"

The first woman blinked. Then nodded. "Yes. Alpha Joseph Hughes's daughters."

"You said something about her sister." I tilted my head slightly. "That's Cian's mate, right?"

"Yes." The woman leaned in like she was sharing a secret even though half the party probably knew by now. "Hazel tried to kill her own sister. Can you believe it? There was a recording. Proof of everything. She framed Fia into a marriage with Alpha Cian with help from the poor girl's ex and then murdered him when his guilt came to roost. It's insane."

The pieces clicked into place.

Aldric's message. Find Cian. Help the Omega if you must.

He was positioning me once more.

"Where did this happen?" I asked.

"The bathroom near the west wing." The woman gestured vaguely. "But I think people are dispersing now. The show's over."

I didn't wait to hear more. I turned and walked toward the west wing. My pace was measured. Controlled. I couldn't run. Couldn't draw attention. But inside my chest my heart was beating faster.

The hallway opened up ahead of me. People were streaming out of an area near the bathrooms. They talked in low voices. Some looked shocked. Others looked thrilled by what they'd witnessed.

I caught sight of Alpha Joseph Hughes. He was walking toward a woman who must have been his wife. His face was red. Mottled with anger or shame. Maybe both. His daughter, the one who wasn't Fia, was on her knees absolutely looking like she had lost it.

But Cian wasn't there.

Neither was Fia.

I stopped one of the passing guests. A young man who looked like he'd had too much champagne.

"Excuse me," I said. Kept my voice pleasant. "Do you know where Alpha Cian went?"

He blinked at me. Processed the question slowly. "Oh. Yeah. He carried his mate out. They went to one of the guest rooms I think. The healer followed them."

"Which direction?"

He pointed down the hall. "That way. Not too far from here."

I thanked him and moved in the direction he'd indicated. The guest rooms weren't far. There were several doors along this corridor. I checked each one quickly. Listened at the door for voices.

The third door was different. I could hear movement inside. The soft murmur of voices.

I knocked once. Then pushed the door open.

The scene inside made me pause.

Fia lay on the bed. Her body was too still. Too pale. A healer stood beside her, gathering supplies from a medical bag. And Cian sat in a chair pulled close to the bed. His hand wrapped around Fia's. His shoulders were tense. His jaw was tight.

He looked up when I entered.

"Seems like I'm late to the ruckus." I let a soft smile touch my lips. Tried to convey sympathy. Concern. "I heard what happened. Is she okay?"

"Yes." His voice was rough. Strained. He cleared his throat. "Yes. She is."

But he didn't look convinced. He looked like he was barely holding himself together.

I moved closer. Took in Fia's appearance more carefully. Her throat was bandaged but blood had soaked through the white cotton. It looked dark. Wet. Fresh.

The healer glanced at me but didn't speak. She was focused on her work.

I looked at Fia's face. She was unconscious. Her features were slack. Peaceful in a way that felt wrong given the blood and the bandages and the obvious trauma she'd just experienced.

"I can help," I said.

Cian looked up. "What?"

I took another step toward the bed. "Her injuries. They won't heal well on their own. She's not a Sentinel. Not a Delta. Not a Luna by birth." I gestured toward her throat. "There will be plenty of events in her future. High society functions. Gatherings where appearances matter whether we like it or not. Scarring tells a story. People will ask questions. They'll stare. What she survived... it's brave. But if we can avoid a scar, we should."

The healer had paused in her work. She was looking at me now. Assessing.

"You're good with healing magics?" she asked.

I nodded. "It's rare and hard but yes. I'm good at performing healing magic. Not many can do it properly. But it would be a significant advantage for Luna Fia. For her comfort and confidence."

The healer turned to Cian. "Alpha Cian, the witch is not wrong."

Cian didn't respond immediately. He looked at Fia. Really looked at her. His thumb brushed across her knuckles in a gesture so tender it made something twist in my chest.

Then he nodded. Looked at me. "Do it."

I smiled, small and practiced, the kind that came automatically after years of being useful. Then I moved to the other side of the bed and reached for the bandage at Fia's throat.

It was damp when my fingers touched it. Sticky. Warm. I peeled it back slowly, careful not to tug too hard, though the fabric still pulled away with a wet sound that turned my stomach despite myself. Blood had soaked through completely, the white long gone, and beneath it the wound gaped ugly and raw.

The cut was deep. Not clean. The edges were torn, as if whoever had done this had wanted it to hurt. Fresh blood welled up almost immediately and slipped down the side of her neck in a thin line.

I placed my hands on either side of the wound and let my fingers hover just above her skin. Close enough to feel her warmth, close enough to feel the tremor of her pulse. I took a breath and began to whisper the incantation.

The words were old. Older than most of what I used day to day. They came from somewhere buried deep, a place I did not like to visit too often. They sat heavy on my tongue, dense with intention, with weight. This was not decorative magic. This was work.

I felt the spell stir inside me, familiar and not at the same time. Power rose slowly, then all at once, flooding my chest and moving down my arms until it pooled in my hands. I guided it forward, into her flesh, into the torn places that needed mending.

That was when something pushed back.

At first it was subtle, just a faint resistance brushing against my magic, like running into a current you had not expected. I frowned but kept going, tightening my focus, assuming it would give way.

It did not.

The resistance grew sharper, more defined. It felt intentional, not like damaged tissue or lingering poison, but like something aware of me. A presence that noticed what I was doing and objected to it.

Pain flared behind my eyes, sudden and sharp, making my vision blur for a second. This was not physical resistance. It felt mental, invasive in a way that set my teeth on edge. Not violent, not chaotic, just there. Watching me. Measuring me.

I pushed harder.

I fed more magic into the spell, ignoring the throb in my head, refusing to let go now that I had started. The wound responded, slowly at first, then with that familiar sensation of flesh reaching for itself. Torn edges drew together. Skin knitted closed, smooth and seamless, like water filling a crack in stone.

The resistance never left. It stayed with me the entire time, coiled at the back of my mind, present and patient, as if it were waiting to see how far I would go.

Then it was over.

In less than a minute the wound was gone, the skin at her throat perfect and unmarked, as if nothing had ever touched her. I pulled my hands away and the pressure vanished instantly, the ache behind my eyes releasing so fast it left me lightheaded.

I stared down at Fia's throat.

What was that?

I had healed hundreds of wounds in my life. On Cian. On pack members. On strangers. I had never felt anything like that, never encountered resistance that felt so deliberate, so specifically aimed at me.

Was it her?

Did Fia have some kind of innate protection, some instinctive defense against magic?

That made no sense. She was an Omega. They were not built that way.

Unless...

No. I shoved the thought aside before it could take root. This was not the moment. I needed to stay present, to stay useful, to play the role I had been given.

I looked up at Cian and let my smile return. "There," I said lightly. "Much better, don't you think?"

The way he looked at me made the smile falter.

He was staring, his blue eyes locked on me with an intensity that felt wrong, that raised the fine hairs along my arms. He did not look angry. He did not look relieved.

He looked afraid.

The realization hit me hard enough to tighten my chest. Afraid of me. I did not understand it. I had helped him. I had healed his mate. This was supposed to earn trust, gratitude, something even more solid between us.

Instead, he looked like he was deciding whether to run.

"Cian?" I kept my voice soft, gentle, careful. "Are you alright? You look pale."

He blinked and the expression disappeared so quickly I almost convinced myself it had never been there.

"I'm fine," he said. His voice was flat, stripped of warmth. "Thank you. For helping her."

"Of course." I let my smile brighten again, tried to wrap reassurance around it like silk. "I'm happy to help anytime. You know that."

I did not know if he believed me.

And I did not know why he had looked at me like that.

Like I was dangerous.

Like I was something to fear.