

To ruin an Omega

#Chapter 171: Need 1 - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 171: Need 1

Chapter 171: Need 1

HAZEL

The car rolled through SilverCreek's gates and I watched the familiar landscape blur past my window. Pack members lined the streets. More than usual for this hour. Word had spread fast. Of course it had.

The sentinel killed the engine with more force than necessary. The silence that followed felt alive, breathing with all the things none of us wanted to say.

"Keep your fucking head down while I try to fix your fucking mess."

His words hit like stones. Each one sharp and deliberate. He didn't even look at me as he climbed out, slamming the door hard enough to make the whole car shake.

Mother turned in her seat. Her hand reached for me but I was already moving, pushing open my door before she could touch me again. The cool night air wrapped around my bare shoulders and I wanted to disappear into it.

My hand felt so much better now.

"Hazel, wait."

I didn't wait. My heels clicked against the pavement as I rounded the car.

Mother hurried after me, her fingers catching the fabric of my dress.

"I will escort you inside."

"No," Father's voice stopped us both. He stood by the hood, his face cast in shadows from the estate lights. When he looked at me, there was something in his expression I'd never seen before. Something that made my chest tight.

"She's not a child." His lip curled. "A plotter like her can take care of herself. Join me. The elders circle will want blood."

Mother's grip on my dress loosened. She looked between us, her mouth opening then closing. Hesitation flickered across her face.

"Go." The word scraped out of my throat. "I can manage."

She studied me for another moment before nodding. Her heels clicked as she crossed to Father's side. They walked away together, their figures growing smaller as they headed toward the elder's hall. Neither of them looked back.

I stood there until they disappeared around the corner. Then I turned toward the house.

The front steps felt longer than they should. Each one seemed to stretch as I climbed. The door opened before I reached it and I slipped inside, focusing on the marble floor beneath my feet. I just needed to get to my room. That was all I needed to do right now.

But... Whispers followed me down the hallway. Soft at first. Then louder.

Disgusting.

How could she?

Poor Milo.

My hands curled into fists and my fairly healed bones screamed in protest. The semi small stinging pain was good. It gave me something to focus on besides the voices that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

An Omega stood near the entrance to the west wing. She was cleaning one of the decorative vases, her movements slow and careful. Her eyes cut to me as I passed.

"Vile creature."

I stopped. The words rang clear in my head, sharp and condemning.

"What did you say?"

The Omega's hands froze. She looked up at me, her eyes wide. "I didn't say a thing, Luna Hazel."

"I heard you." My voice came out low. Dangerous. "You called me a vile bitch."

"No, I—"

My hand moved before I could think. The slap cracked through the hallway and her head snapped to the side. She stumbled backward, her shoulder hitting the vase. It wobbled but didn't fall.

"Luna, please—"

I hit her again. And again. Each strike felt like releasing poison from my veins. She tried to shield her face and I grabbed her hair instead, yanking her head back.

"Don't you dare lie to me. You fucking lowlife! Who do you think you are?"

My other hand found her throat and squeezed.

Her eyes went wide instantly. Her mouth opened, but only a broken, panicked sound came out. Her nails scraped uselessly at my wrist. Weak. Pathetic.

Good.

Let her feel it. Let her understand what it was like to be powerless while everyone else watched.

Footsteps thundered down the hall.

Two sentinels rounded the corner at a run. They did not hesitate. One grabbed my arm. The other reached for her, trying to pull her free.

I reacted on instinct.

I shoved them both back with a surge of power that rattled the walls. The girl collapsed to the floor, coughing violently as I turned on them, eyes blazing.

"Touch me again," I said, my voice low and shaking with fury, "and I will have your heads on the gates before morning."

They froze and that was enough for me to try to hurt the Omega bitch again. I went for her.

"Luna Hazel."

Baruch's voice cut through the red haze. His hand closed around my wrist, firm but gentle. "You have to stop."

I looked down at the Omega. Her face had gone purple, her hands clawing weakly at my grip.

When had that happened?

When had I started squeezing so hard?

I released her and she collapsed to the floor, gasping and sobbing. Baruch pulled me away, his body blocking my view of her. The two sentinels finally moved, one helping the Omega up while the other shot me a look I couldn't decipher.

"Come on." Baruch's voice was soft near my ear. "Let's get you to your room."

He guided me down the hall. My legs felt disconnected again, moving without my permission. We climbed the stairs to the second floor and he led me to my door, opening it and ushering me inside. The click of the lock sounded too loud in the quiet room.

I dropped my clutch on the bed and ran for the bathroom. My stomach heaved and I barely made it to the toilet before everything came up. The taste was bitter and wrong and I retched until there was nothing left.

The dress. I needed to get this dress off. My hands fumbled with the zipper but my healing hands wouldn't completely cooperate. The fabric felt like it was suffocating me, crushing my ribs until I couldn't breathe.

"You seem out of it."

Baruch stood in the bathroom doorway. His expression was worried but not afraid. Not disgusted. Why wasn't he disgusted?

"Doesn't everyone already know why?" I yanked at the dress again. The zipper wouldn't budge.

"But it isn't true."

I laughed. The sound was harsh even to my own ears. "Being gullible is not always hot."

"Hazel—"

"You should abandon me while you can." I turned to face him. "I could end up getting you killed too. Who knows?"

Chapter 172: Need 2 (M)

HAZEL

He crossed the bathroom in three steps. His hands were warm on my shoulders. "What I mean to say is that it's skewed. You would never hurt someone that willingly."

"You don't know that."

"He still forced himself on you. Didn't he?"

The question hung between us. I wanted to say yes. Somehow, I wanted this. I wanted to make him believe that was true. But I knew the truth. The tape had revealed everything. Had shown exactly what I'd done.

"And the rubbish spreading about your sister and how good she is" Baruch's voice hardened. "I've seen it firsthand. What kind of evil bitch she can be. I don't believe a thing they say."

His hands moved to the zipper. He worked it down slowly, carefully, until the dress loosened around my shoulders. The relief was immediate.

"I know she's making you an enemy as some sort of payback. Probably for what happened in the dressing room." He helped me slide the dress down my arms. "But I'm on your side."

"My parents aren't." The words came out flat. Empty. "They'll probably throw me to the beast's teeth if this gets too hard."

"Don't say that."

"It's the truth."

I stepped out of the dress and left it pooled on the bathroom floor. At the sink, I rinsed my mouth with water, swishing and spitting until the bitter taste faded. The mirror showed a stranger staring back at me. Pale skin, hollow eyes, bruised hands. Though much much better.

My phone sat in my clutch on the bed. I grabbed it along with the business card, the white rectangle bright against my palm. The number typed in easily despite my shaking fingers. I saved it under Gabriel.

"But I'm not going to take it without putting up a fucking fight."

"We could run away."

I laughed again, but this time it was genuine. Almost fond. "I love when you're such a dumb himbo."

"Hazel—"

"I'm not running." I stalked toward him, each step deliberate. "I'm taking this head on."

My hand slid down his stomach, feeling the muscles behind the fabric tense beneath my touch. His breath caught when I reached into his pants, into his briefs. His skin was warm and I pressed closer, my lips brushing his ear.

"Can you help me take my mind off things?"

"Tensions are high." His voice was strained. "Omegas and sentinels must be gossiping like crazy now. Especially about how I held you and brought you here. We shouldn't feed the rumors."

I smiled against his neck. "You're even hotter when you're being semi-smart." My fingers tightened. "But I much prefer Dumbo right now."

Before he could respond, I grabbed his collar and kissed him.

My mouth crashed into his, claiming, possessive, all teeth and heat at first before slowing into something deeper. I kissed him like I owned him, like the world outside this room did not exist. Like every whisper and judgment could burn for all I cared.

He groaned softly, hands coming up instinctively, fingers curling into my sleeves as if grounding himself.

I pulled back just enough to look at him, my forehead resting against his.

"Let them talk," I murmured.

I then pinned him against the wall, my hands fisting his shirt, and with a growl, I tore it open. Buttons flew, scattering like tiny, defeated soldiers across the floor. His eyes widened, surprise and panic flickering in them.

"Hazel, I still have to leave."

I hated when he was rational. So I silenced him with a kiss. A hard, demanding kiss that forced his lips apart, my tongue invading his mouth without invitation. He tried to take control, his hands gripping my hips, but I was having none of it. I was in charge here.

"Shut up, Baruch," I muttered against his lips, my hands already moving to his pants, popping the button open, yanking the zipper down. His breath hitched, but I didn't give him time to protest. My hand slipped inside, past the fabric of his briefs, finding him hard and ready. He moaned into my mouth, the sound vibrating against my lips, but I didn't let up. I stroked him, my grip firm, my movements sure. It must have burned, the friction of my hand against his skin, but he didn't pull away. Instead, he pushed into my touch, his body betraying his earlier protests.

"Hazel," he gasped, his hands moving to my wrists, trying to slow me down, to regain some semblance of control. But I was too far gone. I needed this, needed him, to silence the chaos in my head, to drown out the whispers and the accusations. I pushed him back against the wall, my hand moving faster, my kiss turning brutal. He groaned, his body tensing, his hands fisting in my hair. I could feel him getting closer, his breath coming in short gasps, his body trembling. But I didn't stop. I couldn't. Not until I'd chased away the demons, not until I'd claimed him, marked him as mine.

"Hazel," he panted, his voice ragged, his body arching into mine. I could feel him pulsing in my hand, could feel his release coming. And then he was there, his body convulsing, his mouth open in a silent scream. I swallowed his moans, my kiss never letting up, my hand never stopping until he was spent, until he was slumped against me, his body boneless, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

I pulled back, my hand leaving his pants, my lips leaving his mouth. He looked at me, his eyes glazed, his chest heaving. I smiled, a slow, satisfied smile. I'd claimed him, marked him as mine. And I wasn't done yet. I could see the fight in his eyes, the determination to regain control, to take back the reins. But I wasn't ready to let him. Not yet. Not until I'd had my fill. Not until I'd chased away the darkness.

"Now that the precum is out of your system. Fuck me senseless."

Chapter 173: Need 3 (M)

HAZEL

I grabbed his face between my hands and kissed him again. This time slower. Deliberate. I wanted to taste every part of his mouth, wanted to memorize the way he groaned when I bit his bottom lip. His hands came up to my waist but I pushed them away.

"No touching," I said against his mouth. "Not unless I say so."

He nodded, his breath coming fast. Good. I liked him like this.

Compliant.

Desperate.

Mine.

I kissed him again, walking him backward toward the bed. My tongue explored his mouth while my hands roamed his chest, feeling the hard planes of muscle beneath the torn fabric of his shirt. His knees hit the edge of the mattress and I shoved him. Hard.

He fell back onto the bed with a grunt, his chest still heaving, his ruined shirt hanging open. The buttons I'd torn off earlier were scattered across the floor like confetti. Evidence of my claim on him.

I stood there for a moment, just looking at him. His hair was mussed, his lips swollen from my kisses, his eyes dark with want. He was gorgeous like this. Undone. And I'd barely started.

I climbed onto the bed, crawling up his body like a predator stalking prey. My hands traced the contours of his torso, nails dragging lightly over his skin. He shivered beneath me, his muscles jumping at my touch.

When I straddled his hips, I felt him hard beneath me. Still ready despite everything we'd already done. The knowledge sent a thrill through me. This man wanted me. Needed me. And tonight, I was going to use that.

I leaned down and kissed his neck. His pulse jumped beneath my lips, rapid and strong. I bit down gently at first, then harder, feeling him tense beneath me. A small sound escaped his throat. Not quite a moan, not quite a whimper. Perfect.

I wanted to mark him. Wanted everyone who saw him tomorrow to know that someone had claimed him. That this pathetic loser was mine. I sucked at the spot until I was sure it would bruise, then I moved lower.

My mouth traced a path across his collarbone. I kissed and bit my way down his chest, pausing to circle one nipple with my tongue. He gasped, his back arching slightly off the bed. His hands came up instinctively, reaching for me, but I caught his wrists before he could touch me.

"What did I say?" My voice came out sharper than I intended, but I didn't soften it.

"Sorry." His voice was rough. Strained. "I forgot."

I pinned his wrists above his head, holding them there with one hand while the other continued its exploration of his body. "Don't forget again."

"I won't."

"Good."

I held his gaze for a long moment, making sure he understood. Then I released his wrists and continued my journey down his body. I traced the lines of his abs with my fingertips, feeling them contract beneath my touch. Watched goosebumps rise in the wake of my hands.

When I reached the waistband of his pants, still hanging open from earlier, I hooked my fingers into the fabric and looked up at him. His eyes were locked on me, dark and hungry. But his hands stayed where I'd put them, gripping the pillow beneath his head.

"Good boy," I murmured.

The words made him groan. I smiled and pulled his pants and briefs down in one smooth motion, freeing him completely. He sprang free, hard and flushed. Ready for me.

I wrapped my hand around him and he hissed through his teeth. His hips lifted slightly off the bed but I pressed my other hand against his stomach, holding him down.

"Stay still," I commanded.

He nodded, his jaw clenching with the effort of restraint. I stroked him slowly, watching his face. Watching the way his eyes squeezed shut, the way his mouth fell open, the way his throat worked when he swallowed.

"Look at me," I said.

His eyes opened. Met mine. The vulnerability there should have softened something in me, but it didn't. It only made me want him more. Want to push him further. See how much he could take.

I leaned down and took him in my mouth.

The sound he made was desperate. Broken. Beautiful. His hips jerked up involuntarily but I pulled back immediately, letting him slip free.

"I said stay still."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." His voice was ragged. "Please, Hazel. Please."

The begging sent heat straight through me. I took him again, deeper this time. I hollowed my cheeks and sucked, using my tongue in ways that made his whole body tremble. His breathing grew ragged. His thighs tensed beneath my hands where I held them.

I could feel every reaction. Every twitch. Every shudder. I paid attention to what made him gasp, what made him curse under his breath, what made his hands fist so hard in the sheets I thought the fabric might tear.

I took him deeper, relaxing my throat, letting him slide further in. He made a choked sound and I felt him throb against my tongue. I pulled back slightly, sucking hard, then took him deep again. Set a rhythm that had him panting.

"Hazel," he gasped. "Hazel, I'm—I'm going to—"

I pulled back completely.

He made a frustrated, almost pained sound. His hips lifted, seeking, but I just sat back on my heels and watched him. Watched him struggle for control. Watched his chest heave and his hands clench and unclench in the sheets.

"Not yet," I said. "I'm not done with you."

"Please." The word came out strangled. "Please, Hazel."

I ignored his pleading and reached behind me. My fingers found the zipper of my slip, the one I'd had on after he'd helped me out of the dress. I pulled it down slowly, deliberately, letting the fabric slide off my shoulders. I stood on the bed and let it fall, pooling at my feet before I kicked it away.

I was left in just my underwear. A lacy black set that I'd chosen that morning without knowing I'd end up here. His eyes roamed over me, hungry and reverent all at once.

Chapter 174: Need 4 (M)

HAZEL

I hooked my thumbs into the waistband of my panties and slid them down, stepping out of them. Then I reached behind me and unclasped my bra, letting it fall away.

Now I was completely bare before him.

"Fuck," he breathed. "You're so beautiful."

I didn't respond. I just positioned myself over his face, my knees on either side of his head.

"Open your mouth."

He did immediately. His tongue came out, eager, but I didn't lower myself yet. I hovered there, just out of reach, watching him strain upward. Watching him try to close the distance between us.

"Please," he said again. That word. That beautiful, desperate word.

The power I felt in that moment was intoxicating. I had him completely at my mercy. This strong, capable man reduced to begging. All because he wanted me.

I lowered myself slightly, not quite making contact. His breath was hot against me. His hands came up to grip my thighs but I grabbed his wrists immediately.

"I said no touching."

"I need to touch you," he said. "Let me—"

"No."

I moved his hands to the headboard. The wooden slats were carved and ornate, easy to grip. "Hold on to that. Don't let go."

He gripped the wood, his knuckles going white with the force of it.

"Good," I said. "Now stick out your tongue."

He did. I lowered myself onto his face.

The first touch of his tongue made me gasp. He licked me slowly, thoroughly, like he was savoring every taste. I rocked against him, using his nose, his mouth, his chin. Everything. The friction was perfect. The pressure exactly what I needed.

I ground down harder and his tongue moved faster, more insistently. He ate me like a man starving. Like I was the only thing in the world that mattered. His enthusiasm made me wetter, made me rock against him with more urgency.

His hands stayed on the headboard even though I could see the effort it took. His whole body was tense with restraint. Every muscle coiled tight. He wanted to touch me. I could feel it in the way he strained beneath me. But he didn't. Because I'd told him not to.

The obedience was almost as arousing as his tongue.

I used him shamelessly. Rode his face the way I wanted. Fast then slow. Hard then gentle. Chasing the pleasure building low in my belly. His tongue found my clit and I moaned, my head falling back. He circled it with the tip of his tongue, then flattened and licked broad strokes that made my thighs tremble.

"Yes," I breathed. "Just like that. Don't stop."

He groaned against me and the vibration sent sparks up my spine. I reached down and tangled my fingers in his hair, holding him in place while I ground against him harder. Used his nose to stimulate my clit while his tongue probed inside me.

The dual sensations were overwhelming. Too much and not enough all at once. I was soaking wet, could feel my arousal coating his face, dripping down his chin. And still he didn't stop. Didn't complain. He just kept licking and sucking and devouring me like he was meant for nothing else.

I changed the angle, grinding forward so his nose pressed directly against my clit. The pressure was perfect. I rubbed myself against him, shameless and desperate. His tongue worked inside me, fucking me in a shallow rhythm that made my legs shake.

"Baruch," I moaned. "Oh goddess, Baruch."

He made a muffled sound against me. Approval, maybe. Or desperation. I couldn't tell and didn't care. I was too close. Too far gone.

The pressure built and built. My movements became jerky, uncoordinated. I was chasing something just out of reach. Something that hovered at the edge of my consciousness.

"Make me come," I commanded. "Make me come on your face."

His tongue moved faster. More insistently. He found a rhythm that had me gasping. Had me grinding down so hard I worried I might hurt him. But he didn't push me away. Didn't try to stop me. He just kept going. Kept pushing me higher and higher.

And then I was there. Right at the edge. One more stroke and I'd tumble over.

"Don't stop," I said. "Don't you dare stop."

He didn't. His tongue kept moving, kept pushing me higher. And when I finally let go, when the pleasure crashed over me in waves, I cried out. My body jerked and pulsed and I felt wetness flood from me, more than usual. It coated his face, his mouth, dripped down his neck.

I was squirting. Actually squirting. Something I'd only done a handful of times before. The realization made the orgasm more intense. It made me grind down harder, chase every last wave of pleasure.

Baruch licked it all up. Every drop. His tongue was gentle now, soothing, as I came down from the high. He lapped at me like I was delicious. Like he couldn't get enough.

When the aftershocks finally subsided, I lifted myself off him and looked down. His face was soaked. His hair was wet. His lips were swollen and glistening. He looked absolutely wrecked.

And he was smiling.

"You can let go now," I said.

His hands dropped from the headboard immediately. They came to my thighs, my hips, stroking and squeezing. Finally he was allowed to touch. He pulled me down and kissed me hard, letting me taste myself on his tongue. The kiss was filthy, desperate and absolutely perfect.

I broke away and moved down his body again. He was still hard, painfully so. His cock was flushed dark, the tip leaking. He'd been so good. So patient. But I wasn't quite ready to give him what he wanted.

I straddled his chest, positioning my breasts near his face. "Suck them."

He didn't need to be told twice. His mouth latched onto my nipple and he sucked hard. The sensation shot straight through me, making me gasp. His tongue circled the peak before he pulled it into his mouth, sucking and biting gently.

Chapter 175: Need 5 (M)

HAZEL

His hands came up to cup my other breast, kneading the flesh, rolling the nipple between his fingers. The dual stimulation was incredible. My nipples had always been sensitive, but right now they felt connected directly to my clit. Every touch, every suck, every pinch sent pleasure radiating through me.

He switched sides, giving my other breast the same attention. His mouth was hot and wet and perfect. He sucked my nipple until it was hard and aching, then soothed it with his tongue. His fingers worked my other breast, pinching and rolling until I was gasping.

"Harder," I said.

He bit down on my nipple and I cried out. The pain mixed with pleasure in a way that made my head spin. He soothed the bite with his tongue, then did it again. Harder this time.

My pussy clenched around nothing. I was getting wet again. Ready again. My body was insatiable tonight.

I pulled away from him and moved down his body. His cock bobbed between us, hard and ready. I wrapped my hand around him and stroked once, twice. He groaned, his hips lifting.

"Please," he said. "Please, Hazel. I need to be inside you."

I looked at him. Really looked at him. His hair was a mess. His face was still wet from earlier. His eyes were glazed with lust and desperation. He was beautiful like this. Wrecked and mine.

My pathetic little slave.

"Say it again," I commanded.

"Please. I need you. I need to be inside you."

I straddled his hips, positioning myself over him. I rubbed the head of his cock through my folds, coating him in my wetness. He groaned, his hands coming to my hips.

"You want this?" I asked.

"Yes." The word was barely more than a growl. "Please, Hazel. I need—"

I sank down onto him in one smooth motion.

We both gasped. He filled me completely, the stretch almost too much after so long. I stayed still for a moment, adjusting, feeling his pulse inside me. His hands gripped my hips hard enough to bruise and I didn't stop him. Let him hold on. Let him ground himself.

"Move," he begged. "Please move."

I did. Slowly at first, rolling my hips, finding the angle that made stars burst behind my eyes. His hands guided me but I was still in control. I set the pace. Used him for my pleasure.

I rode him slow and deep, taking my time. Drawing it out. Making us both crazy with want. Every time he tried to speed up, tried to thrust up into me, I stopped completely. Waited until he stilled. Then started again at my own pace.

"Hazel," he groaned. "You're killing me."

"Good."

I leaned forward, changing the angle so he hit that perfect spot inside me. The spot that made me see stars. I ground down against him, rubbing my clit against his pelvis with every roll of my hips.

The pleasure built slowly this time. A gradual crescendo instead of the sharp peak from before. I savored it. Chased it. Let it consume me.

Baruch sat up suddenly, pulling me flush against his chest. One hand tangled in my hair while the other wrapped around my waist. He kissed me desperately, his tongue invading my mouth the way I'd invaded his earlier. The shift in power should have annoyed me, but I was too far gone to care.

His lips moved to my neck, my shoulder. Then lower. He found my breast and took my nipple into his mouth.

The sensation shot straight through me. I cried out, my movements becoming erratic. He sucked hard, his teeth grazing the sensitive peak, while his hand found my other breast. He rolled the nipple between his fingers, pinched it just hard enough to make me gasp.

"Baruch," I moaned. His name tore from my throat.

He switched sides, giving my other breast the same attention. His tongue circled my nipple before he sucked it into his mouth. The dual stimulation was overwhelming. Every nerve ending was on fire. My whole body was one exposed nerve.

I rode him harder, chasing the pleasure building again. His mouth on my breasts, his cock inside me, his hands holding me close—it was too much. I was going to come apart. Shatter into a million pieces.

"That's it," he murmured against my skin. "Come for me. Let me feel it."

His words pushed me over the edge. The orgasm tore through me, stronger than the first. I convulsed around him, my body clenching and releasing in waves that seemed to go on forever. He groaned, his hips bucking up to meet mine.

But I wasn't done. Not yet. Not until I'd taken everything I needed from him.

I pushed him back down onto the bed and began moving again. Faster now. Harder. Taking everything. Using him. His hands gripped my hips, helping me move, but I was still in charge. Still in control.

I watched his face as I rode him. Watched the way his jaw clenched, the way his eyes rolled back, the way his throat worked when he swallowed. He was close. So close. I could feel it in the way he throbbed inside me. In the way his fingers dug into my flesh.

"Hazel," he gasped. "I can't—I'm going to—"

"Not yet," I said. "Not until I say."

I changed the angle, grinding against him in a way that made him curse. His whole body was taut as a bowstring, every muscle straining. Sweat beaded on his forehead. His jaw was clenched so tight I thought his teeth might crack.

"Please," he begged. "Please, I can't hold on."

I leaned down, my lips brushing his ear. My hips never stopped moving. Never gave him a moment's reprieve. "Now. Come inside me now."

He came with a shout, his body arching off the bed. I felt him pulse inside me, felt the warmth of his release flooding me. His hands gripped me so hard I knew I'd have bruises tomorrow. Evidence of tonight. Evidence of us.

I kept moving through it, drawing out his pleasure until he collapsed back onto the mattress, spent and trembling. His chest heaved beneath me. His eyes were closed. His whole body was boneless.

I stayed where I was, still connected to him, feeling him soften inside me. Feeling his release leak out around him. The mess should have bothered me but it didn't. It felt like claiming. Like marking. Like proof.

His hands came up to my face, gentle now, and he pulled me down for a kiss. This one was different. Softer. Tender in a way that made my chest ache. Made something twist behind my ribs.

When I finally pulled away and rolled off him, he turned onto his side to face me. His hand found mine, our fingers intertwining. The gesture was simple but it meant something. Something I wasn't ready to name.

"Feel better?" he asked quietly.

I did. The chaos in my head had quieted. The whispers and accusations had faded to background noise. The tape, my sister, my parents' disappointment—all of it seemed manageable now. Not gone, but distant. Like problems that belonged to someone else.

"Yeah," I said. "I do."

He smiled and pressed a kiss to my forehead. Gentle. Sweet. "Good."

We lay there in silence, our bodies cooling, our breathing evening out. His thumb traced circles on the back of my hand. A soothing rhythm that made my eyes heavy.

Outside this room, the world was still waiting. The scandal, the tape, my sister's machinations—none of it had gone away. Tomorrow it would all come crashing back. Tomorrow I might have to face the consequences of my actions.

But for this moment, wrapped in Baruch's arms, I let myself forget. I let myself just be. Just exist without the weight of everything pressing down on me.

He somehow made that possible. He liked me for me. And I was starting to feel safe around him.

Chapter 176: This is me trying

CIAN

I pulled the blanket up over my mother's shoulders. Tucked it in around her sides. Her breathing was deep and even now. Peaceful. The kind of sleep that came from real rest, not from whatever dark place the poison had dragged her to.

The infirmary bed wasn't where she belonged. By morning... By morning, I'd make sure she was back in her own room. In her own bed. Where she could wake up to familiar walls and familiar light and know she was back. Fully.

I stepped back. Looked at her face. The color had come back to her cheeks. The gray pallor that had terrified me was gone. She looked like herself again. Like my mother. Not like something death had tried to claim and failed.

Thorne had left hours ago. I'd sent him away myself when his eyes started drooping and his words started slurring together. He'd argued. Of course he had. But I'd pulled rank and he'd gone. Reluctantly.

Maren was still here though. Hunched over the desk in the corner with papers spread out in front of her. Her pen scratched against the surface. Quick, efficient movements. She looked up when I moved away from the bed.

"She's good," I said quietly.

Maren nodded. Went back to whatever she was writing.

I pulled out my phone. The screen lit up bright in the dim room. I squinted against it and checked the time.

4:00 AM.

The numbers stared back at me. Four in the morning. I'd been here all night. We all had. Watching. Waiting. Making sure my mother kept breathing. Kept fighting. And that everything was alright.

I pocketed the phone and headed for the door.

"I'm leaving," I said.

Maren's head snapped up. She smiled. "You deserve some rest after all of this."

"I'm not resting."

Her frown deepened. "Cian—"

"I have to cook."

The silence that followed was almost funny. Almost. Maren just stared at me. Her pen had stopped moving. Her mouth opened slightly.

"You've never cooked," she said finally.

"There's a first time for everything."

"Well." She leaned back in her chair. Crossed her arms. "I guess miracles happen."

I shot her a look. "Hey. I'm still your Alpha. Watch your tongue."

Her hands went up in mock surrender. But there was a smile playing at the corner of her mouth.

I smiled back. I couldn't help it. Then I left.

The hallways were empty. Silent except for the sound of my footsteps on the stone floor. Everyone was asleep. As they should be. It was four in the goddamn morning.

But the kitchen wouldn't be empty. The kitchen never slept. Not really. There was always someone working. Always someone preparing the next meal or cleaning up from the last one.

I pushed through the door and sure enough, there they were. Three Omegas. Already moving around the space with practiced efficiency. Chopping. Stirring. The smell of bread hung in the air.

They all froze when they saw me. One of them nearly dropped the knife she was holding.

"Alpha Cian," the head chef said. She was older. Gray streaking through her dark hair. She wiped her hands on her apron and bowed slightly. "Do you need something?"

I swallowed. "No. The thing is—"

She didn't let me finish. "Oh. Perhaps Luna Fia—"

"Actually." I cut her off politely and started again. "I want to use the kitchen. Alone."

They looked at each other. They tried to make it seem like quick glances. But even those quick glances spoke volumes.

Did everyone in this estate believe that I could not cook? Damn.

The head chef turned back to me.

"Forgive my insolence." Her voice was careful. Measured. "But could we know why?"

"Why?" I repeated.

"I didn't mean to offend you Alpha Cian. This is just a surprise to most of us."

"I want to cook something."

"We can do that," she said immediately. "It is our job and it is no trouble at all."

"No." I shook my head. "It has to be me."

She studied my face. Whatever she saw there made her nod.

She turned to the others. "Pause everything you are doing and clear the kitchen."

They moved instantly. There was no follow up questions asked. There was no hesitation. All that followed next was just smooth, efficient motion as they set down their tools and filed toward the door.

The head chef went to a hook on the wall and pulled down a clean apron. It was plain white and simple. She held it out to me.

"Everything is labeled," she said. "And I will be just outside if you need help."

She bowed again. Then she was gone. The door swung shut behind her and I was alone.

I stood there for a moment. Just breathing. Taking in the space. It was bigger than I Remembered. I liked that it wasn't a mess too. It gave me space to work with. Everything had its place. Everything was organized. Labeled, like she'd said.

I tied the apron around my waist, rolled up my sleeves and pulled out my phone and opened the notes app.

The recipe glowed on the screen. Joseph's handwriting translated into typed text. Palm oiled beans. I'd asked for this. Demanded it, really. And now I had to actually do something with it.

I read the first four ingredients.

Black-eyed peas. Palm oil. Onions. Scotch bonnet peppers.

I looked up at the kitchen. At the rows of shelves and cabinets. At the labeled containers lined up with military precision.

Right.

I started with the beans. Found them in a large jar on the second shelf. Black-eyed peas. Dried. Hard. The recipe said to soak them first. I grabbed a bowl. A big one. Poured the beans in. They clattered against the ceramic. Loud in the quiet kitchen.

Water next. I filled the bowl until the beans were covered. Submerged. The recipe said overnight but it was already morning. I'd have to make do with what time I had.

I set the bowl aside and moved on.

Palm oil. I found it in a dark bottle. The label was worn but readable. I unscrewed the cap and the smell hit me. Rich. Earthy. Different from any oil I'd used before. Not that I'd used many.

Onions were easy. I found them in a basket near the counter. Big yellow ones. I grabbed two. Set them down. Stared at them.

I'd seen people chop onions before. Couldn't be that hard.

I found a knife. A big one. The blade caught the light when I pulled it from the block. I positioned the onion on the cutting board. Pressed the knife down.

The onion rolled. Nearly fell off the counter. I caught it. Tried again. This time I held it steady with my other hand. Cut down. The knife went through clean. Two halves.

Good.

I kept cutting. Slicing the halves into smaller pieces. The onion started to sting my eyes. Made them water. I blinked hard. Kept going. The pieces weren't uniform. Some were bigger than others. Some were tiny. But they were cut. That was what mattered.

The peppers were next. Scotch bonnets. Small. Orange-red. Innocent looking. I picked one up. Rolled it between my fingers.

The recipe said to remove the seeds. To chop them fine. To be careful.

I cut into the first one. The seeds were clustered in the center. Tiny. White. I scraped them out with the knife tip. Got most of them. Then I started chopping.

The smell hit me before I realized what was happening. Sharp. Burning. It went straight up my nose and into my lungs. I coughed. Stepped back. My eyes were streaming now. Not from the onions this time.

I wiped my face with my sleeve. Looked at the pepper. At the juice on the cutting board.

Careful. Right. That made sense now.

I finished chopping. Washed my hands. Twice. Then I looked back at the phone.

The beans needed to be rinsed. Three times. The recipe was specific about that.

I grabbed the bowl. Carried it to the sink. Poured out the water. It swirled down the drain. The beans stayed in the bowl. I filled it again. Swished the water around. Poured it out. Filled it again. Swished. Poured. One more time. Three rinses.

Then I needed to cook them. The recipe said to boil them until tender. To test them by pressing one between my fingers.

I found a pot. Large. Heavy bottomed. I poured the beans in. Added water until they were covered. Turned on the stove. The flame caught with a soft whoosh.

I watched the pot. Waited. The water started to move. Small bubbles at first. Then bigger ones. A full rolling boil. The beans danced in the churning water.

How long? The recipe didn't say. Just "until tender."

I grabbed a spoon. Fished out a bean. Waited for it to cool. Pressed it between my thumb and finger.

Still hard.

I put it back. Waited. The kitchen filled with steam. With the smell of cooking beans. It wasn't unpleasant. Just earthy. Simple.

I tested another bean. Still hard.

I kept waiting. Testing. The beans slowly softened. Took on water. Swelled. When I pressed the next one it gave. Not mushy. But tender.

Good enough.

I drained them. Set them aside. Turned my attention back to the stove.

The palm oil needed to be heated. The recipe said to use enough to coat the bottom of the pot. I poured. Watched it spread. Turned the heat to medium.

The oil started to shimmer. To move. I added the onions. They hit the hot oil with a satisfying sizzle. I stirred them with a wooden spoon. Watched them turn translucent. Soft. The smell changed. Became sweeter. Richer.

The peppers went in next. I added them carefully. The sizzle got louder. The smell intensified. That burn was back. But controlled now. Contained in the pot.

Tomatoes. The recipe called for crushed tomatoes. I found a can. Used the opener mounted on the wall. Poured the contents into the pot. Red. Thick. The oil and tomatoes mixed. Became something new. Something that smelled like it might actually be food.

Seasoning. Salt. Pepper. The recipe listed others too. Thyme. Bay leaves. A stock cube. I found them all. Added them one by one. Stirred. The smell was building now. Layering. Becoming complex.

The beans went in last. I poured them into the sauce. Stirred gently. The red coated the beans. Turned them from pale to dark. The recipe said to let it simmer. To let the flavors marry.

I turned the heat down. Covered the pot. Waited.

The kitchen was a mess. Cutting boards covered in onion and pepper remnants. Bowls in the sink. The counter splattered with oil and tomato. I'd clean it. Eventually. But right now I just stood there. Watching the pot. Listening to the gentle bubble of the simmer.

I'd cooked something. Actually cooked. From scratch. Following a recipe written by a man who'd failed his daughter in every way that mattered. But this recipe. This one thing. It was something Fia wanted. Something that connected her to her mother.

The pot bubbled. The smell filled the kitchen. Rich. Complex. Nothing like the simple ingredients I'd started with.

I lifted the lid. Looked inside. The beans sat in thick red sauce. Steam rose into my face. I grabbed a spoon. Took a small taste.

It was good. Better than I'd expected. Not perfect maybe. But good.

I smiled. I couldn't help it.

In a few hours, Fia would wake up. And when she did, I'd have this waiting for her. Her mother's recipe. Made by me. Made with my own hands because I'd listened when she'd talked. Because I'd paid attention to what mattered to her.

It was just food. Just beans and oil and peppers. But it was more than that too.

It was a promise. A tangible one. That things were different now. That I was different. That I'd do better.

I stirred the pot one more time. Then I turned off the heat and let it rest.

Chapter 177: Necessary Evils

HAZEL

We lay tangled together in the sheets, our breathing finally settling into something resembling normal. His arm draped across my waist, possessive even in the quiet. The room smelled like sex and sweat and something else I couldn't quite name. Something that made my skin prickle despite the warmth.

I turned my head to look at him. His eyes were closed, his face relaxed in a way I'd never seen before. Peaceful. Almost boyish. It didn't match the man who'd just fucked me like he was trying to erase every other touch I'd ever felt.

"You should prepare to leave soon." The words came out rougher than I intended. "I'm sure my mother will not take kindly to seeing you here. And she will come soon."

His eyes opened. A slow smile spread across his face. "But you ruined my shirt."

I couldn't help the small laugh that escaped. "I have a black shirt. I doubt anyone will notice the difference."

"Smart." He sat up, the muscles in his back shifting as he moved. I watched him reach for his briefs, then his pants. The dying moonlight through my window cast shadows across his body, highlighting every line and curve. His frame was toned in a way that spoke of discipline. Years of training. A sentinel's body, built for violence.

Something about the way he moved felt too practiced. Too perfect. Like he'd done this exact routine a hundred times before. It was hot to look at. No matter how many times I noticed it.

We could go again, I thought. It came unbidden and I had to push the thought away.

"So what is the plan?" He pulled his pants up, the button clicking into place. "How do you plan to fight this?"

"Awwwn, are you worried for me?"

He turned to face me, his expression serious. "Of course I am."

The words should have warmed me. Instead they sat heavy in my chest. Strange and foreign. I sat up, pulling the sheet around my body. "I have two charges against me. Murder and attempted murder. The most pressing one being Milo's death." I paused, choosing my words carefully. "I have to rise above it. And to defend myself, I have to make sure his family doesn't seek vengeance."

"That's smart." He nodded slowly. "Buy them out."

I smiled. The expression felt sharp on my face. "Buy them out? That's naive."

His eyebrows lifted. A question.

"You're a sentinel yourself. Aren't you?" I tilted my head, studying him. "You should know the art of war. You do not negotiate with people who have the stronger hand. It will bite you in the long run. In this case, it would probably bite me in the short run."

Baruch turned to face me fully. His jaw tightened. "What does that even mean?" He paused, then added, "Also, where is your black shirt?"

I pointed to the drawer across the room. He crossed to it, his bare feet silent on the floor.

He seemed awfully curious about this. I wasn't sure I liked being open about my struggles. But his genuine interest did make me want to talk. It was unnerving to see in real time. How much I wanted to talk to him.

"His family might be vengeful." I kept my voice steady. Measured. "When has a man ever paid for his crimes and the woman just gets to live?" The bitterness tasted familiar on my tongue. "I'm not a perfect victim. I cannot claim to be one. And if they see a chance to draw blood, I know in my heart that they will take it. I have to do what they will do to me before they have the opportunity to do it."

He pulled the shirt over his head. The fabric stretched across his shoulders. "Kill them?"

"I don't want to." The lie came easily. Too easily. "But it's a necessary evil."

I sensed the shift in him. A slight stiffening of his posture. The way his hands paused in smoothing down the shirt. It lasted only a second, but I caught it.

"Are you repulsed? Is it too dark for you to comprehend that I might want the people who want me dead.... dead?"

He crossed back to me in three strides. His hands cupped my face and he kissed me. Hard and deep and claiming. When he pulled back, his eyes searched mine. "No." His thumb traced my cheekbone. "I understand what leaders have to do to protect themselves and their positions."

The words were perfect. Too perfect. Like he knew exactly what I needed to hear. Like he'd studied me and memorized the script.

Not that I hated it. In fact, I much appreciated it.

I smiled. "Why didn't I meet you sooner?"

"Some might say fate."

I chuckled at that. The sound felt hollow in the quiet room.

His expression shifted. Grew more serious. "What about your sister? Fia? She's the attempted murder charge, right?" He paused. "With Skollrend behind her, if she wants you to pay, will she not succeed?"

I stood, the sheet falling away. His eyes tracked over my body but I ignored it. I crossed to him and started fixing his collar. The shirt did fit him well. Better than it should have. "Your body does make my shirt work."

His hand caught my chin. Gentle but firm. He tilted my face up to meet his eyes. "C'mon. Talk to me."

"My sister is sort of very forgiving if you stroke her patched ego." The words felt wrong even as I said them. "Perhaps I show her I can turn a new leaf. Be more submissive and on my knees for her."

"You don't really believe that."

I didn't.

"No. I don't." I pulled back slightly. "But don't worry. That bitch will not get me. I always rise above it."

"Is that what the business card is for?"

My stomach dropped. Just for a second. Just long enough for him to notice the flicker across my face. "Huh. I... I never realized you could be this curious."

"If it's about you, then I always am." He sighed. The sound seemed genuine. "I just want to protect you."

I hated that his stupid words melted me. I absolutely that those words made me feel safe, cherished and wanted. But it still made my skin crawl. Just a little. Just enough for him to probably notice.

I hated vulnerability.

I forced a smile. "You can help me by being proactive. Help me find Milo's fucking family. I'll deal with my narcissist of a sister."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." I met his eyes. "Narcissists are too busy thinking about themselves to realize they are being played."

He smiled then. A real one that reached his eyes. "I concur."

He winked at me. Then he was moving toward the door. The lock clicked. The door opened and closed. And he was gone.

I stood there for a long moment, staring at the space he'd occupied.

I shook my head and crossed to my nightstand. My phone sat there, screen dark and accusing. I picked it up and scrolled through my contacts until I found the one labeled Gabriel. My fingers hovered over the screen.

This was insane. Reaching out to someone I didn't know. Someone who'd given me their card at a gala where everything had gone wrong. But I needed this. I needed pieces to move on the board.

I typed quickly before I could talk myself out of it.

This is Hazel Hughes.

Send.

The message disappeared into the void. I set my phone down and turned toward my clutch. The business card. I should dispose of it properly. Make sure no one found it and started asking questions I didn't want to answer.

I rifled through the small bag. I saw lipstick. A few bills. But no card.

I checked again. Turned the clutch inside out. Nothing.

I must have tossed it somewhere during my time with Baruch. The thought made my cheeks heat. We'd been everywhere. The bed. The floor. Against the wall. It could be anywhere in this room.

I dismissed the thought. I'd find it later. Or I wouldn't. At this point, it didn't matter.

My phone chimed.

I grabbed it, expecting spam. Or maybe my mother with a quick lecture about propriety and family image as soon as she has gotten up. But the name on the screen made my breath catch.

Gabriel.

I stared at the notification. One new message. My thumb hovered over it.

Then I opened it.

Chapter 178: In good faith

ALDRIC

The bathroom mirror showed me exactly what I'd been fighting against for years.

I leaned closer, tweezers in hand, and plucked a stray hair from my cheekbone. The sharp pinch was familiar. Comforting, even. I'd done this every morning for the past decade. Each hair a small battle won against time's relentless march.

My reflection stared back. The salt and pepper at my temples had spread further than I liked. Distinguished, people called it. Handsome for your age. The compliments always had that little qualifier attached. For your age. As if youth was the only currency that mattered.

I hated it.

Not the gray itself. I'd kept it deliberately. Cultivated the look of wisdom and experience. But what I hated was what it represented. The slow decay. The body breaking down cell by cell. Every morning I saw new evidence that I was losing the war even as I won these small skirmishes with tweezers and expensive creams.

I reached for the cleanser. The cold gel spread across my skin in practiced circles. My fingers knew the routine by heart. Temples. Forehead. Down the bridge of my nose. Cheeks. Jaw. I worked it in until it foamed, then rinsed with water that was almost too hot.

The towel was soft against my face. Egyptian cotton. One of the few luxuries I allowed myself without guilt.

My phone buzzed on the counter.

I picked it up and saw Hazel's name. The message was simple. Direct. Exactly what I'd expected from her.

This is Hazel Hughes.

A smile tugged at my lips. She'd taken the bait faster than I'd anticipated. Ambitious or cornered women were always the easiest to predict. They saw opportunity and they grabbed it with both hands. And the latter has no choice in the matter. Consequences be damned.

I typed quickly.

Be meek but confident in the morning when you face the council. As long as you hold my hand, you will stand tall.

I then hit send.

I set the phone down and reached for a hand towel. Dabbed at the water droplets still clinging to my hairline. The cotton absorbed them easily.

A knock at the door interrupted my thoughts.

I crossed the room in measured steps. Whoever it was had better have a good reason for showing up this early. My hand closed around the doorknob and I pulled it open.

Ronan stood there. His eyes met mine and I saw something urgent lurking behind them.

I grabbed his wrist and yanked him inside. The door clicked shut behind him.

"What are you doing here?" My voice came out sharper than intended.

"I didn't think this was something that could be said on the phone." His tone was apologetic but firm.

I shot him a look. "Really?"

He didn't flinch. Neither did he back down. That was one of the things I liked about him. He had a spine even when it was inconvenient. That was very much me.

It was like looking at a mirror.

I shifted to give him more room to enter properly and closed the door with more care this time. Made sure the lock engaged. "What is it?"

"It's about Cian." Ronan's hands flexed at his sides. A nervous habit he'd never quite broken. "He suspects Madeline."

The words landed like stones in still water. Ripples spreading out in every direction.

I turned to face him fully. "Explain."

"He thinks she killed Ophelia. He says he smelled her magic at the scene." Ronan's voice dropped lower. "He's convinced she's working with Gabriel. Technically that is you. Which he doesn't know now but he might figure it out."

My jaw tightened. Of all the complications I'd planned for, Cian's powers of observation hadn't ranked high enough. I'd underestimated him. Again.

"How obsessed was he with that witch?" The question came out bitter. "And why didn't Madeline think this through when she was working?"

Ronan shook his head. "He came to me right after putting Fia to bed. He was wound tight. Paranoid. But also certain."

"Certain enough to do what?" I crossed my arms. The cotton of my robe felt suddenly too thin. Too vulnerable.

"He asked me to watch her. To look for proof." Ronan's eyes tracked my face. Reading me the way he always did. "He doesn't want it to be true. That's why he came to me instead of confronting her directly."

I processed that. Turned it over in my mind. Cian's hesitation was the opening I needed. His sliver of doubt was my advantage.

"I think it's time to abandon this ship." Ronan's voice was quiet. Almost gentle.

"Fuck no."

The words came out harder than I meant. But I couldn't help it. I'd worked too long. Planned too carefully. Made changes that I didn't even want to make. I wasn't about to throw this away because Cian had suddenly developed a sense of smell.

Madeline needed to exist to tear at whatever Fia had built with Cian because it would forever be shaky as long as she existed in between them.

Ronan reached for my hand. His fingers closed around mine and I felt the warmth of his skin. When I looked up, his eyes had gone soft. Concerned.

"I don't want you to get hurt."

The statement hung between us. Simple. Honest beyond ways. Dangerous.

I took a breath and let it out slowly. I forced my shoulders to relax. My jaw to unclench.

I squeezed his hand. "If Cian is confiding in you, it makes it clear that he doesn't want it to be true. What he will want now is to watch Madeline closely. Using you, mostly." I met his eyes. Held his gaze. "We have the advantage. As long as he believes he has a village in you, he will always see through rose colored glasses."

Ronan studied my face for a long moment. I could see him weighing my words. Testing them for cracks.

"If you're sure." His voice carried doubt but also acceptance.

"I am."

He nodded slowly. "I'll go then."

He turned toward the door but I moved faster. My hand caught his elbow and held him back.

"No. Wait."

He looked at me over his shoulder. Questioning.

"I got you something." The words felt strange on my tongue. It felt like I was trying to hard. I sounded too soft. Too revealing. "We haven't had time alone so I guess it's proper to give it to you now."

"What?" His eyebrows lifted slightly.

I crossed to the dresser and pulled open the second drawer. The watch box sat exactly where I'd left it. Black leather with gold embossing. I picked it up and turned back to him.

"I bought a similar version and I was thinking of you when I got it." I opened the box. The watch gleamed against the white satin interior. Silver and gold. Classic. Expensive without being ostentatious. "Want to try it?"

Ronan hesitated. His eyes moved from the watch to my face and back again. "I'm sure you have other business."

"Yes. I do." I stepped closer. Close enough to smell his cologne. It was woody and clean. Exactly the kind I would go for. "I have to reach out to the Strati family and undo years of resentment and estrangement in a few hours."

I held the watch out to him. Let it dangle from my fingers.

"But I always have time for you, Ronan." The words came out quieter than I intended. More honest. "Do not forget that."

His hand moved slowly. Like he was approaching something that might bite.

He turned it over in his hands and examined it from different angles. The light caught the crystal face and threw tiny rainbows across his skin.

"It's too much." His voice was rough.

"It's not nearly enough." I reached out and took his wrist. Turned it palm up. "Let me."

He didn't pull away. He didn't protest. Just stood there while I fastened the watch around his wrist. The leather band was supple under my fingers. I adjusted it carefully. Made sure it sat just right. Not too tight. Not too loose.

When I was done, I didn't let go immediately. My thumb rested against his pulse point. I could feel his heartbeat. Steady. Strong. Faster than it should be.

"There." I met his eyes. "Perfect."

He swallowed. I watched his throat work. Watched the way his jaw tightened and relaxed.

"Thank you." The words were barely audible.

I released his wrist and stepped back.

"Go." I turned away. Moved toward the window. "Pretend to do what Cian asks. Watch Madeline. Report everything to me."

"I will."

I heard him move toward the door. Heard the lock disengage. The door opened and I felt the change in air pressure.

"Alpha Aldric."

I looked over my shoulder.

Ronan stood in the doorway. The watch caught the light from the hallway. "I already told you. When we are together. You can call me—"

"I'm more comfortable calling you by your name." Ronan cut in.

"Okay then. What did you want to say?"

"Be careful."

"I never am. You should know that by now. I enjoy the thrill of danger and pushback. I'm sure you do too."

"I don't."

"Well, that is the one thing we do not have in common. What a shame."

Then he was gone.

Chapter 179: Unsworn

FIA (A few hours ago)

The hallway outside the infirmary felt cooler than the room we'd just left. I sucked in a breath and tried to steady myself. My legs weren't cooperating the way they should. Each step took more effort than it had any right to.

Ronan's arm was solid under my hand. I leaned into him more than I wanted to admit. The exhaustion had settled into my bones like lead. Everything ached. My wound throbbed with a dull persistence that made my teeth clench.

Elara walked ahead of us. Her posture was rigid. Alert. Like she expected something to jump out at us from the shadows. Madeline trailed slightly behind. I could feel her presence without looking. It made the space between my shoulder blades itch.

We'd made it maybe ten feet when I heard footsteps behind us. Quick. Purposeful.

I turned. Too fast. The world tilted sideways and I grabbed Ronan's arm harder. He steadied me without comment.

Madeline had closed the distance. She stood in front of me now. Her hands clasped together at her waist. Her expression was open. Friendly. Everything about her body language screamed harmless.

I didn't trust it.

"I didn't get to properly introduce myself." Her voice was soft. Melodic almost. "I'm Madeline."

She extended her hand.

I stared at it for a moment. My brain moved through sludge. Everything was taking too long to process. I reached out and took her hand. Her skin was warm. Her grip was gentle.

"Fia," I said.

"I know who you are." The words came with a smile. Small. Like we were sharing something.

I released her hand and let mine drop back to my side. "Thank you for helping me." The words felt heavy in my mouth. "Cian told me you helped heal my wound."

Madeline shook her head slightly. "It's no bother." Her eyes moved to where my hand had been pressed against my side. "It was mostly your energies that paid the price. That's why you're so depleted."

That explained the exhaustion then. The way my body felt wrung out like a wet cloth.

"Just rest," she continued.

"I will."

She took a half step back. Like she was about to leave. Then she paused. Her weight shifted forward again.

"Forgive me for being presumptuous." Her voice dropped lower. More intimate. "But I just wanted to add something."

Something cold settled in my chest. I knew what was coming before she said it.

"Oh?" I kept my voice neutral. "What?"

"I'm sure you know about the history that Cian and I have." She folded her hands in front of her again. The picture of demure concern. "But I want to assure you that there's nothing to fear or worry about."

The words landed exactly how she'd intended them to. They were supposed to make me feel reassured. Comforted. Like she was doing me a favor by drawing this boundary.

Instead they felt like a test.

"Oh." I met her eyes. Held her gaze. "I'm not worried."

For a fraction of a second, something flickered across her face. It was gone before I could fully register it. But I'd seen it. The tiny tightening around her eyes. The way her smile faltered just slightly at the edges.

She'd wanted me to be bothered. She'd expected me to react. To show jealousy or insecurity or fear.

I was all of those things. But my complete lack of concern had thrown her.

She recovered quickly. The smile brightened again. Became wider. More genuine looking.

"That's great to hear." Her voice had taken on a cheerful note that didn't quite reach her eyes.

Then she turned and walked away. Her footsteps were quiet against the stone floor. I watched her go until she disappeared around a corner.

Movement caught my attention. I looked down the hallway in the other direction.

There he was. Alpha Aldric.

He was already far down the corridor. His back was to us. He moved with the kind of confidence that came from never doubting your place in the world. His shoulders were set. His stride was measured. He didn't look back. He didn't acknowledge me at all.

He has made me the biggest threat in this building and he couldn't even be bothered to spare me a glance.

I turned to Ronan. The words came out before I could stop them.

"Would you believe me if I told you I have a feeling he is responsible for making sure Madeline ended up right back here?"

Ronan's expression didn't change. He guided me forward gently and started walking again.

"I do find Madeline being here odd," he said after a moment. His voice was careful. Measured. "And honestly, her willingness to help Cian makes her look like a divine saint given how things ended between them."

I waited. There was more coming. I could feel it.

"But Madeline could never have a vile thought regarding Cian."

The words settled between us. They were meant to be reassuring. To put my suspicions to rest.

Instead they made something tighten in my chest.

Because if Madeline couldn't have vile thoughts about Cian, that left one person completely open. One person vulnerable to whatever plans she might have.

Me.

Fresh stabbings and new attacks. That was what I was open for.

"Something happened." The words came out quieter than I intended. "You know."

Ronan looked down at me. "What?"

"Back at the party." I swallowed. My throat felt dry. "Aldric said something. Something he wasn't supposed to know. Something I told you back at the sentinel training ground. Away from most of the Sentinels."

Ronan's steps slowed. Just slightly. "What are you getting at?"

I caught it then. The brief flash in his eyes. Tension. There and gone in a heartbeat.

"It's like he has eyes everywhere." I forced myself to keep walking. To act normal. "When he said it, it felt like my phone was bugged. Or like someone with keen ears must have been listening to us."

"You think there are more spies?"

"Is it not possible?"

Ronan was quiet for a long moment. We'd reached my door. He helped me stop without making it obvious that I needed the help.

"Most of them were killed," he said finally. "All of them were after they retook their oaths to this pack and its Alpha. Perhaps you read deeply into it because it was something he said."

Perhaps.

The word sat in my mouth. I didn't voice it. Just nodded once.

"Perhaps," I finally agreed.

He opened my door for me. I stepped inside and the familiar space wrapped around me. My bed looked impossibly inviting. Every muscle in my body screamed for me to collapse into it.

I turned back to face him. "Thank you."

"This is my job." His expression softened. "I still have my eyes out for Aldric. So just be at ease."

Something in my chest loosened. Just a fraction. "Thank you."

He nodded and started to turn away.

"Wait."

He stopped and then looked back at me.

"Can I get an omega here?" I gestured vaguely at myself. "I feel mostly sore and I can't run a bath myself. Cian said he would get one but his mother is probably priority now." I managed a small laugh.

Ronan's mouth quirked up at the corner. "Of course."

"Thank you."

He left. The door clicked shut behind him.

I stood there for a long moment. Just breathing. Just existing in the silence.

Then I sighed. Long and heavy. Let all the air leave my lungs in one go.

I would be damned if I didn't read deeply into this.

The thought crystallized in my mind with perfect clarity. Sharp edges but it was just as undeniable.

Ronan was the one who conducted the weeding of the traitors. He'd overseen the whole operation. Made sure every spy was found. Made sure they all took their oaths again.

But he sure as hell hadn't taken one himself. He was the conductor after all.

I moved to the bed and sat down carefully. My body protested every movement. I ignored it.

I didn't believe in coincidences. Never had. And this whole situation was screaming alarm bells at me. Loud enough to make my ears ring.

There was something off about Ronan.

Unlike Cian, I didn't have the privilege of turning that part of my brain off. I didn't have years of friendship and trust built up. I didn't have memories of growing up together. Of training together. Of bleeding beside each other.

I barely knew him.

But I did know something for sure.

Ronan was shady as hell.

A knock at the door interrupted my thoughts.

"Come in," I called.

An omega entered. Young. Her eyes downcast. She carried towels and what looked like bath oils.

"Beta Ronan sent me," she said quietly. "To help you with a bath."

"Thank you."

She moved past me toward the bathroom. I heard water start running. The sound was soothing in a way I hadn't expected.

I pushed myself to standing. Every muscle protested. I made my way slowly toward the bathroom.

The omega had her back to me. She was testing the water temperature with her hand.

"Is there anything specific you'd like?" she asked without turning.

"Just hot," I said. "As hot as I can stand."

She nodded.

I watched her work. Watched the steam start to rise from the tub. Watched her add oils that made the air smell like lavender and something else. Something earthy.

My mind kept circling back to the same thoughts.

Ronan. A traitor?

The omega straightened. "It's ready."

"Thank you." I managed a smile. "You can go. I can manage from here."

She hesitated. "Are you sure? Beta Ronan said to help you."

"I'm sure."

She was about to leave when I finally got a breakthrough in my mind.

"Wait," I said instead.

She stopped.

"Can you help me get someone?"

"Who?" She asked.

"Garrett. Sentinel Garrett."

Chapter 180: Loyalty

FIA (A few hours ago)

The omega nodded and slipped out of the bathroom. I heard her footsteps retreat toward the door. Then silence.

I peeled off my clothes slowly. Each movement pulled at muscles that felt like they'd been wrung out and hung to dry. The fabric stuck to my skin in places. When I finally got everything off, I looked at some of the bloodstains on my body.

It needed to come off so I got in the water.

The heat hit me like a wall. I sucked in a breath through my teeth and kept going. Lowered myself inch by inch until I was sitting. The water came up to my chest. Steam rose around me in lazy curls.

I leaned back against the tub and closed my eyes.

The heat worked its way into my muscles. Loosened them. Made the ache recede to something manageable. I stayed like that for a while. Just breathing. Just letting the water do its work.

When I opened my eyes again, I noticed something.

The water had turned pink.

Not bright red. Just a soft pink tinge that spread out from where I sat. I looked down at my side. The stains were leaving my skin. I saw tiny beads of dried blood mixing with the bathwater.

I watched it for a moment. Watched the pink swirl and dissipate. Then I pushed myself up.

Time to get out.

I stood carefully. Water sluiced off me and back into the tub. I grabbed one of the towels the omega had left and wrapped it around myself. My legs felt steadier now. The bath had helped more than I'd expected.

I dried off slowly.

The night robe hung on a hook by the door. It was a soft fabric and it was dark blue. I pulled it on and tied the sash at my waist.

When I walked back into my bedroom, I felt almost well again.

I was halfway to the bed when I heard the knock.

"Come in," I called.

The door opened. The omega entered first. She stepped aside and held the door.

Behind her was Garrett.

He looked the same as I remembered. Tall. Broad shoulders. Dark hair pulled back from his face. His sentinel uniform was pristine. His expression was neutral but his eyes were sharp. Taking everything in.

"Luna Fia." He inclined his head slightly. "It's been a while."

I gestured for him to come in properly. "I was surprised you came this quickly."

"I was surprised you asked for me." He stepped inside and the omega closed the door behind him. She stood there. Waiting.

I turned to her. "Can you leave us?"

She bowed. Lower than before. "Of course, Luna."

The door clicked shut behind her.

Garrett and I stood there for a moment. Just looking at each other. The silence stretched but it wasn't uncomfortable. More like we were both taking measure.

I broke it first.

"I reached out to you because I remembered something." I moved toward the chair by the mirror and sat down. My legs were grateful for it. "You were the first person who really lent a hand to me when I first came here."

He didn't respond. He just watched me.

"You told me why Cian was the way he was." I folded my hands in my lap. "You explained things when no one else would. And you're also the reason we didn't die from Mourning Moon poisoning after I ran off."

Something flickered across his face at that.

"A mistake that still keeps me up till today," I added quietly.

Garrett shifted his weight. "I'm a sentinel." His voice was even. Calm. "It is my job to save my Alpha."

"I wasn't a part of the job description."

The words hung between us. He knew what I meant. He'd saved me too that day. Helped me even though I'd been the one who'd caused the problem in the first place. More than once. Like what he had told me while I was in that cell.

I leaned forward slightly. "Why did you help me out at the time? Pity?"

"No." The answer came quickly. Firmly. He crossed his arms over his chest. "You were this pack's Luna and Alpha Cian was hurting. I don't think he meant the hurt he put you through at the time. But he still took a lot of it out on you. You didn't know why." He paused. "It was the right thing to do."

I waited. There was more.

"Plus, you were his fated mate." He uncrossed his arms and let them fall to his sides. "The goddess saw it fit to put you two together. If I, a lowly sentinel, could help my Alpha in any way, even with his mate, why shouldn't I help?"

The words settled into my chest. Warm and solid.

"I do not know you too much," I said slowly. "But I know some people would have been fine with Cian dying that day. I know a lot of people didn't like how and when I came into Cian's life."

Garrett's jaw tightened but he didn't interrupt.

"So it makes me know I can trust you."

His expression shifted. Became more alert. More focused. "What could this be about?"

I took a breath. Let it out slowly. This was it. The moment where I either made a huge mistake or took the first step toward protecting what mattered.

"What if I told you there are enemies in Skollrend?" I kept my voice low. Steady. "Enemies in high places. Enemies that Alpha Cian trusts with everything he has."

Garrett's posture changed. Became rigid. His hand moved to his side like he was reaching for a weapon that wasn't there.

"I watched people die when we Sentinels and the Omegas retook their oath to this pack." His voice had gone hard. "You cannot deceive the goddess. Our enemies are dead."

"Did the Elder circle, the Beta of this pack, or other Lunas and Alphas of this pack do the same?"

The question landed like a stone in still water. Ripples spread outward. I watched them cross Garrett's face. Watched understanding dawn.

"Luna Fia." His voice dropped lower. "You cannot be—"

"I am."

The words came out firmer than I felt. I pushed myself to standing. Faced him directly.

"I suspect Beta Ronan is a threat to the life of my mate." Each word felt like pulling teeth. "So is his uncle, Aldric."

Garrett stood completely still. He didn't move. Didn't blink. Just stared at me like I'd grown a second head.

"Why are you telling me this?" The question was barely above a whisper.

I moved closer. Close enough that he had to look down to meet my eyes.

"Because you took an oath and you didn't die." I held his gaze. Didn't let myself look away. "Because I know you are loyal. Because I trust you."

His throat worked. Like he was swallowing something down.

"And I need you to now be Cian's eyes and his ears." My voice didn't shake. I was proud of that. "I need you to watch Beta Ronan and Alpha Aldric."

The silence that followed was thick enough to cut. Garrett's expression had gone through about six different emotions in the span of three seconds. Now it had settled on something that looked like determination mixed with fear.

"You're asking me to spy on the Beta." It wasn't a question.

"I'm asking you to protect your Alpha."

"From his best friend."

"From whoever means him harm."

Garrett ran a hand over his face. Rubbed at his jaw. When he looked at me again, his eyes were troubled but clear.

"What makes you think it's them?"

I told him. I told him everything I knew. The poisoning. Alpha Aldric. About the party. About what Aldric had said. Information he shouldn't have known. Things I'd only told Ronan in private. Away from listening ears. About how Madeline had appeared. About how convenient her timing was. About how Ronan had been the one to weed out all the traitors but had never taken an oath himself.

Garrett listened without interrupting. His expression grew darker with each piece of information I laid out.

When I finished, he was quiet for a long moment.

"This is dangerous," he said finally. "If you're wrong—"

"If I'm wrong, then nothing changes." I cut him off. "But if I'm right and we do nothing, Cian dies. This pack falls. Everything we've been fighting for is gone."

He closed his eyes. Took a breath. Opened them again.

"You understand what you're asking." It wasn't a question but I answered anyway.

"I do."

"If anyone finds out—"

"They won't. Not from me."

He studied my face. Looking for something. I didn't know what. After what felt like an eternity, he nodded once.

"I'll do it." His voice was low but certain. "I'll watch them. Both of them. Report back to you."

Relief flooded through me. My knees went weak but I locked them. Refused to show it.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me." His mouth quirked into something that wasn't quite a smile. "This is what I was born for."