

To ruin an Omega

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HAZEL

The knocking wouldn't stop.

Each rap against the door drove deeper into my skull, pulling me from sleep I barely remembered finding. I rolled over and grabbed my phone. It was Five thirty in the morning. The knocking continued, insistent and aggressive.

"Come in." My voice came out rough. "This better be fucking good."

The door opened and Delta stepped inside. My personal Omega looked pale even in the dim light filtering through my curtains. Her hands twisted together at her waist.

"Luna Hazel." She swallowed hard. "Two sentinels are here. They're demanding to escort you to the elders circle. For trial."

The words hit me like cold water. I sat up slowly, keeping my face blank even as my heart kicked against my ribs.

Trial.

Already.

I'd thought I'd have more time to prepare. To position the pieces. To reach out more to Alpha Aldric and figure out in greater detail what kind of leverage I could buy.

"Get me something modest to wear."

Delta didn't move. She stood there, her eyes wide and wet. "Luna Hazel, we can help you run. There are tunnels beneath the estate. Old ones that lead past the territory borders. We can get you out before they realize."

I looked at her. Really looked at her. She meant it. And it sickened me to think I would cover like her and run with my tail between my legs. I wasn't that kind of girl.

"I have nothing to hide, Delta." The lie tasted metallic. "Dress me."

She looked at me. In the way that told me she knew me. She knew what I had done. The ones she had helped me with even. But she knew not to linger on it.

"Of course."

She obeyed immediately, crossing to my wardrobe and pulling out a jade green dress. The fabric was flowy and soft, the kind of thing that would photograph well. Make me look innocent. Vulnerable. I let her help me into it, her fingers quick and efficient with the buttons.

"Your hair, Luna?"

"No." I caught her hand. "I cannot look completely put together."

She nodded and stepped back. I checked my reflection in the mirror. The dress hung right. My hair was messy from sleep, tumbling over my shoulders in waves that looked artfully disheveled rather than neglected. Dark circles shadowed my eyes.

Good.

They needed to see what their accusations had done to little ol' me.

I turned toward the door. "I'm ready."

The sentinels waited in the hallway. Different ones from earlier. Older. Their faces carved from stone as they watched me approach.

"Luna Hazel." The taller one reached for something at his belt. Silver glinted in the low light. "Protocol requires restraints."

The cuffs closed around my wrists before I could respond.

Pain exploded up my arms. Silver burned against my skin, sinking deep into flesh that was still healing from the bathroom encounter. I screamed. The sound ripped from my throat unbidden and I couldn't stop it. My knees buckled and one of the sentinels caught my elbow, keeping me upright.

"Please move." His voice held no sympathy.

They led me down the hallway. Each step sent fresh waves of agony through my wrists. The silver felt alive, eating through skin and muscle. My vision blurred at the edges.

A figure appeared at the end of the corridor. Mother. She wore a dark blue gown, her hair perfectly styled despite the hour. Her eyes locked on my wrists and her face went white.

"Uncuff my daughter right now." Her voice cracked like a whip. "She is not guilty."

"Luna Isobel, this is protocol for all—"

Mother moved faster than I'd ever seen her move. Her hand connected with the sentinel's face hard enough to snap his head sideways. The sound echoed down the hallway.

"I said uncuff her."

The other sentinel fumbled with his keys. The silver fell away and I bit down on my tongue to keep from crying out again. Red welts circled my wrists, the skin already blistering where the metal had touched.

Mother pulled me into her arms. Her perfume wrapped around me, familiar and suffocating. "We tried our best."

Her lips brushed my ear. The whisper came so soft I almost missed it.

"Deny any involvement in Milo's death. I sent assassins to kill his family. They will get there before the Elder's circle men. His grandmother and half brother will never have a chance to come for you. For the other... Plead for leniency. Attempted murder is not the worst thing that can happen."

I went rigid in her embrace. Assassins. She'd actually done it. Moved pieces on the board before I'd even woken up. Part of me wanted to thank her. Because she wasn't as useless as I thought and she could actually be just as ruthless if she put her mind to it.

But I said nothing. I didn't nod or shake my head or give any indication I'd heard. Because I wouldn't plead for mercy. I wouldn't take accountability for things they wanted to pin on me. If Mother thought her confession would make me grateful enough to play the victim, she didn't know me at all.

The sentinels waited. Patient as death.

I pulled away from Mother and held out my wrists. They didn't cuff me again. Small mercies I guess. They simply held on as we walked together through the estate, past windows that showed the sky just starting to lighten. Dawn was coming. Perfect timing for a trial.

The elders circle building rose ahead of us. It was completely made of stone and wrought iron. The weight it carries alone made my stomach twist. The doors opened as we approached, yawning wide like a mouth. Inside, the circular chamber stretched upward. Seats lined the walls, rising in tiers until they nearly touched the ceiling. Old

wolves filled those seats. The elders circle. Twenty of them, maybe more. Their faces blurred together, weathered and hard and convinced of their own righteousness.

I stood in the center of the room. Alone. The floor beneath my feet had been polished to a mirror shine and I could see my reflection staring back up at me.

Small.

Isolated.

Exactly how they wanted me to feel.

The doors slammed shut behind me. The sound reverberated through the chamber.

The lead elder leaned forward in his seat. He was ancient, his face a map of wrinkles and liver spots. But his eyes were sharp. Focused. He looked at me like I was something he'd scraped off his shoe.

"You stand accused of three charges, Luna Hazel."

Mother's voice rang out from somewhere above me. I looked up and saw her taking her seat among the elders. Her face was composed now, every trace of emotion locked away.

"No. It is two."

The lead elder spared her a glance. Nothing more. "It is three."

He began to list them. His voice echoed off the stone walls, each word precise and damning.

"Callously putting this pack in danger to avoid an arranged marriage."

My jaw tightened. This wasn't supposed to be part of them. Not anymore.

The way they twisted it too. That wasn't how it had happened. But they would twist everything. Make my fucking survival look like selfishness.

"Wrongfully accusing Sentinel Milo of rape in the sadistic hope to get him murdered."

The words hit like physical blows. Wrongfully. Sadistic. As if I'd orchestrated it for my personal enjoyment. Milo had to go because he was going to let his empathy endanger me.

"Attempting to spill kinblood."

I looked at Mother. Her face had gone white again, her eyes wide with something that might have been genuine shock from the first charge. She hadn't known about it. Neither had I.

The lead elder's gaze found mine. For just a second, something flickered across his face. His eyes widened slightly. His jaw tensed. Then it was gone, replaced by that same cold judgment.

He flinched. Just barely. Just enough.

If I survived this, he was going to do more than flinch at my glare. I would demand blood.

"How do you plead?"

The question hung in the air between us. Every eye in that chamber fixed on me. Waiting. Expecting tears maybe. Or rage. Or a desperate plea for understanding.

I lifted my chin. Met the lead elder's gaze without blinking. Let him see exactly what I was.

"Not guilty."

Chapter 182: Not guilty 2

HAZEL

The silence that followed my plea stretched taut as wire.

"Not guilty."

The lead elder repeated my words slowly, like he was tasting something foreign on his tongue. His eyebrows drew together. "Not guilty?"

Around the chamber, murmurs rippled through the tiers of seated elders. I caught fragments of whispered conversations, saw heads turning toward one another. Even Mother shifted in her seat above me, her composure cracking just enough that I could see the white of her knuckles where she gripped the armrest.

The lead elder leaned further forward. "Are you certain of this plea, Luna Hazel?"

I held his stare. I didn't let my voice waver. "Why would I go back on the truth?"

The murmuring grew louder. Someone coughed. Another elder whispered something sharp to their neighbor.

I raised my voice just enough to cut through the noise. "I thought this circle called me here to know the truth." I swept my gaze across the tiers, making sure they all saw me looking at them. "Have you already judged me at the back of your minds?"

The lead elder's jaw worked. For three heartbeats, he said nothing. Then he straightened in his seat and inclined his head. "You are correct. I apologize for my... surprise." He cleared his throat. "If that is the stand you choose, then there is no problem at all."

He settled back, his fingers steeping beneath his chin. The chamber quieted. Everyone waited.

"The accusation upon you," he began, his voice formal again, "that you callously put this pack in danger to avoid a marriage to Alpha Cian is being thoroughly investigated. A message has been passed to Luna Fia, requesting her presence."

My stomach tightened. Fia. Of course they'd bring her into this. Of course she'd come running with whatever story served her best.

The lead elder continued. "As for you accusing Milo of rape to get him murdered, we asked the one close witness that was there. The Omega Delta."

My pulse kicked up. Delta. They'd questioned Delta while I was here or before? She hasn't mentioned.

"But she claims you are innocent."

Relief hit me so hard I nearly swayed. Delta had protected me. Even under questioning from the elders, she'd held the line.

"The family of the sentinel have been reached out to," the lead elder said, "for any information regarding the extent of your relationship with the sentinel."

I blinked. "What does that mean?"

The lead elder's expression remained neutral, but something cold flickered in his eyes. "From what the recording mentioned, you seemed to imply Sentinel Milo and yourself had a..." He paused. "A sexual relationship, if not more."

Heat flooded my face. Not from embarrassment. From rage. They were digging through my personal life like scavengers picking at a carcass. Looking for anything and everything I had said that they could twist into evidence.

"There was no such thing." My voice came out harder than I intended. I forced myself to soften it, just slightly. "Fia Donlon was rude to Father. Our father. And I simply wanted to hurt her." I let a thread of shame creep into my tone. "Yes. It was stupid. But everyone

knows I have always been family oriented. Take anything I said in that recording with a grain of salt."

The lead elder regarded me for a long moment. "That will be for us to decide." He gestured to one of the younger elders in the second tier. "We have also sent messengers to Skollrend to retrieve the audio recording."

Perfect. More evidence gathering. More time for stories to shift and change.

The lead elder's attention fixed back on me, and this time his expression hardened. "For the attempted murder of Fia Donlon, ruling Luna of Skollrend pack, there is definitive proof that you attempted to kill her."

My breath caught. Definitive proof. What proof could they possibly have?

"Why would you lie before this court and claim innocence?"

I let the question hang there for just a second. Let them think I was considering it. Then I met his gaze head on. They had nothing. They are simply sounding me out.

"Because I did not do it."

More murmurs came. Louder this time. Someone scoffed from the upper tiers.

I pushed forward before they could interrupt. "Have you all forgotten how insane my sister can be?" I looked up at the faces surrounding me, making sure my voice carried to every corner. "She beat me up to a pulp to take over my place at the altar. To marry Alpha Cian when it should have been me." I paused, letting that sink in. "Is it really a stretch that she hurt herself to pin it on me?"

The lead elder's expression didn't change, but I saw his fingers tighten against each other. "But if you deceived the pack and made your sister the villain because you did not want to marry Alpha Cian, if that can be proven to be true, how can we believe these words of yours now?"

The trap closed around me so smoothly I almost admired it. Almost.

He leaned forward again. "We distinctly remember Luna Fia on the altar that day, claiming that you ran away. That was why she had to take your place. If it is true, she was a matryr who wanted to protect this pack. At the risk of her life."

My throat went dry. But I'd played this game too many times to freeze now.

I turned slowly, deliberately, until I was looking up at Mother. Her eyes had gone wide. Her face had lost all color.

Then I looked back at the lead elder.

"That would mean you are implying my mother helped deceive everyone that day."

The chamber went absolutely silent. Not a whisper. Not a breath. Every eye turned toward Mother's seat.

I kept my voice steady. Clear. I joined them. I looked at my mother who now had wide horrified eyes." I gestured up at her. "Is the wife of the ruling Alpha a traitor? Is that what you are saying?"

The lead elder's jaw tightened. For the first time since I'd entered this chamber, he looked uncertain. His gaze flicked to Mother, then back to me.

"The truth is the truth," he said finally. But his voice had lost some of its edge.

I lifted my chin. "Well, I stand my ground. I am innocent of everything."

The lead elder stared at me. I stared back. Neither of us blinked.

Finally, he straightened and addressed the chamber at large. "So be it."

He turned to confer with the elders on either side of him. Their voices dropped too low for me to hear, but I saw them nodding. Gesturing. Coming to some kind of consensus.

When the lead elder faced me again, his expression had smoothed back into that cold, official mask.

"You will be called to this circle again once the evidence is gathered." He raised one hand, and the gesture felt final. Absolute. "Sentinels, take her to a holding cell for the time being."

The doors behind me groaned open. Footsteps echoed across the polished floor.

I didn't turn around. Didn't give them the satisfaction of seeing me flinch.

The sentinels appeared at my sides. Different ones this time. Younger. They didn't reach for cuffs this time, but their hands closed around my upper arms with enough force to make their point.

Mother rose from her seat. "This is unnecessary. She can wait at the estate under guard."

The lead elder didn't even look at her. "Protocol dictates otherwise."

I let the sentinels turn me toward the door. My reflection in the polished floor followed me, a dark smudge against all that brightness.

As we crossed the threshold, I glanced back one last time.

The lead elder watched me go. His face remained impassive, but I caught that flicker again. That tiny flinch when our eyes met.

Good.

Let him remember it.

Because when I got out of here—and I would get out—he'd learn exactly what happened to people who tried to bury me.

The doors slammed shut behind us with a sound like thunder.

Chapter 183: Softer, Harder, In-between

CIAN

The kitchen at six in the morning never smelled the way it did during the day. The bread was long gone from the ovens. That warm, soft scent had faded. What took its place was coffee. Sharp. Bitter. It cut through everything and sat heavy at the back of my throat.

I stood in the doorway with the pot in my hands and waited.

The head chef noticed me almost at once. Her gaze dropped straight to what I was holding.

"Alpha Cian," she said, setting aside the bowl she had been working with. "You finished?"

"I need help plating it."

That earned a small smile. Nothing exaggerated. Just knowing. "Of course."

She wiped her hands on her apron and crossed the room. Took the pot from me carefully, like it mattered. Like she understood that it did. She lifted the lid and steam rolled up between us. She leaned in without thinking and breathed it in.

"This is unique," she said after a moment. "I do not recognize it as one of the Grand Luna's favorites."

"It's not for my mother."

Her brows lifted. She looked at me properly then. Looked back at the pot. I watched understanding settle across her face.

"For your mate."

"Yes."

Her smile widened. Genuine. Warm. "I am sure she will be touched."

I hoped she would be. I had been at this for hours. My hands still smelled like peppers no matter how many times I scrubbed them. My eyes were raw from onions and lack of sleep. None of that mattered if Fia smiled.

"Should we carry it up to her room?" the chef asked.

"I'll take it."

She nodded and reached for a tray. White ceramic. Small handles on either side. She ladled the beans into a proper serving bowl, placed the lid on top, and arranged everything neatly. Spoon. Cloth napkin. A small glass of water.

"There," she said, offering it to me.

The tray felt heavier than it should have. Maybe my arms were tired. Maybe my nerves were worse. Either way, I had it.

"Thank you."

"Good luck, Alpha."

I took the stairs slowly. Each step made the beans shift just enough to remind me they were there. The smell followed me up, rich and earthy, familiar in a way that made my chest tighten.

Her door was closed when I reached it. I knocked three times.

"Come in," she called.

I pushed the door open with my shoulder.

Fia was half propped against the bed, hair loose around her shoulders, wearing a dark blue cotton nightgown. Simple. Soft. She looked at me and smiled, already moving to sit up more.

I crossed the room and set the tray on the dresser. Then I went back to her and rested my hand on her head. Gentle. Careful.

"How are you?"

Her smile widened. "I'm more than great."

Her eyes drifted past me to the tray. She tilted her head slightly.

"What's that? You brought food?" She inhaled slowly. "It smells familiar."

"Because it is."

"Really?"

I went back for the tray and carried it to the small table by the window. Set it where she could reach without straining. She swung her legs out from under the covers, bare feet touching the floor. She looked at me, then at the covered bowl. Hope crept into her expression like she was afraid to trust it.

I lifted the lid.

Her eyes went wide. Her mouth parted. She looked at the bowl, then up at me, then back again.

"Beans," she whispered.

"Yeah. I might have threatened your father with a war if he didn't give me the recipe."

She laughed softly.

"It might not taste the same," I started, already bracing myself, "but you should know I have never been—"

She hugged me.

Hard. Sudden. Her arms wrapped around my middle and knocked the words straight out of me. She pressed her face to my chest and her shoulders shook.

She was crying.

"Thank you," she said, voice muffled. "Thank you so much."

I held her. Just held her. "This feels nice."

She laughed again, wet and broken, then pulled back and wiped at her eyes.

I picked up the spoon and offered it to her. "Judge my cooking."

Her fingers brushed mine as she took it. She dipped the spoon into the bowl and brought it to her mouth. I watched her chew. Watched her face.

It was small. Easy to miss if you weren't looking for it. The way her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. The way she swallowed too quickly.

"Hmmm," she said.

"You like it?"

"I do."

The bond shifted between us. Not subtly. Not gradually. It just went quiet. She closed it, sealed it off completely, and the absence hit me at once. It felt like a door slamming somewhere deep in my chest, the echo sharp enough to make me inhale.

"Goddess," I said, rubbing a hand over my face. "Shutting the mate bond does not sell your case at all."

She laughed. A real laugh this time, not the careful kind. "I swear it's good."

"Then stop shielding."

"It's lazy to seek answers from the bond when you can just believe me."

I crossed my arms and leaned back against the table. "Be honest. I will not get better."

She bit her lip and looked down at the bowl. The steam had thinned now, drifting upward in lazy curls. When she looked back at me, there was apology written plainly in her eyes.

"It's not bad," she said, choosing her words. "But it's not the best either." She hesitated, then added, "It seems like a great first attempt though."

I let out a slow breath. That was something.

"The problem is the beans aren't that soft." She scooped up another spoonful and held it out toward me. "Here. Try."

I leaned forward and let her feed me. The beans hit my tongue and I understood immediately. Too firm. Too much bite. They should have melted more, turned creamy instead of holding their shape so stubbornly.

"Oh," I said. "Yeah. I agree."

She pulled the spoon back, narrowing her eyes. "You didn't even taste it."

"I didn't want to be the first to."

She shook her head, but she was smiling. "You know what? This can be fixed. Let's go to the kitchen."

"Now?"

"Right now."

We went together. Down the stairs, the bowl cradled carefully between us like it was something fragile. She carried it with both hands, steady and reverent. When we pushed into the kitchen, every Omega inside turned at once. Surprise flashed across their faces before they masked it.

"Alpha. Luna," the head chef said, bowing. "Is something wrong?"

"The beans need more cooking," I said. "We're here to fix them."

"Oh." She glanced at the others. "We can clear out."

"No," Fia said quickly. "Please keep working. We won't be in the way."

They hesitated, then returned to what they were doing, though I caught more than a few curious glances thrown our way. I couldn't blame them. It probably wasn't every day they saw their Alpha hovering uselessly in the kitchen while his mate took charge.

Fia found a pot and poured the beans in, adding a bit of water before turning on the heat. Her movements were easy, practiced. She stirred without thinking, tested the beans between her fingers, nodded to herself. This wasn't new to her. This was memory. Muscle and instinct and something deeper.

I stood behind her and watched. The way she moved, the way she hummed softly under her breath without realizing it. Her shoulders had relaxed. She looked... happy.

That was when I noticed the tears.

They gathered quietly at the corners of her eyes and slipped down her cheeks. She didn't wipe them away right away. Just let them fall into the steam.

"Are you alright?"

She startled, bringing her hand up to her face and wiping quickly. "Yeah." Her voice was thick. "This just reminded me of my mom."

Guilt twisted sharp in my chest. "I wanted this to be a good memory."

She laughed softly, watery and fragile. "But it is." She turned to me then, eyes red but bright. "This was very kind. I'll never forget it, Cian."

The way she said my name did something to me. Soft. Careful. Like she was holding it gently in her mouth. My chest tightened.

I stepped closer until I was right behind her, close enough to feel her warmth. "Your mother would be proud of you."

"I hope so." She stirred again. "She loved cooking. Said it was how she showed love. Through food. Through feeding people." She paused. "I think she would have liked that you tried to do this for me."

"Even though I failed?"

"You didn't fail." She leaned back against me, just enough to let me feel the weight of her. "You tried. That matters."

The beans were softening now. I could see it. They broke apart more easily under the spoon, the sauce thickening, clinging better.

"There," she said finally. "That's better."

She turned off the heat and looked up at me. We were closer than I'd realized. Close enough that I could see the gold flecks in her eyes, the tears still caught in her lashes.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You already said that."

"I know." She placed her hand on my chest, right over my heart. "But I mean it. This meant everything."

I covered her hand with mine and held it there. "You mean everything."

The words slipped out before I could stop them, before I could second guess myself. I didn't try to take them back. They were already true.

Her breath caught. She searched my face, then smiled. The kind of smile that reached her eyes and made something warm unfurl in my chest.

"We should eat while it's hot," she said.

"Lead the way."

We took the beans back upstairs. Back to her room. She sat on the bed while I pulled the table closer. We shared the bowl, trading the spoon back and forth. She was right. They were better now. Softer. Deeper in flavor.

"My mom would've added more pepper," she said between bites. "She liked it spicy."

"I'll remember that."

"For next time?" She raised her brows.

"You think this is my last attempt at cooking?"

She laughed. "I think the kitchen might need a warning."

"I only set off one smoke alarm."

"You what?"

"I'm kidding." Mostly.

She shook her head and took another bite. "This really is good though. Thank you."

"Stop thanking me."

"Never."

We finished the bowl together as the morning light crept in through the window, turning everything gold and warm. When it was empty, she set the spoon aside and looked at me like she was seeing something new.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing." She smiled. "Just thinking."

"About?"

"How lucky I am."

I reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, my hand lingering against her cheek. "I'm the lucky one."

I meant it. Every word.

Chapter 184: Hidden among wolves 1

FIA

The knock came sharp and sudden, three quick raps that cut straight through the quiet warmth Cian and I had built between us. It startled me enough that my shoulders tensed before I could stop it.

Cian turned his head toward the door. "Who is it?"

"I apologize for disturbing you, Alpha." The voice belonged to one of the sentinels. Young. Nervous in that way that always made his words come out too fast. "But we have emissaries from the Silver Creek pack. They're requesting an audience with both you and the Luna."

Cian muttered a curse under his breath as he stood, the chair scraping softly against the floor. He crossed the room in long strides and pulled the door open. The sentinel snapped to attention.

"Emissaries?" Cian asked. "What do they want?"

The sentinel shifted his weight, eyes flicking down the hallway before returning to Cian. "They didn't say, Alpha."

Cian dragged a hand down his face. The lines around his eyes were deeper than usual, exhaustion finally catching up to him after a night spent cooking and hovering and pretending he wasn't running on fumes. "I'll go see to them." He glanced back at me. "You should rest."

"No."

The word came out steady. Surprising even me.

He stopped mid turn and looked at me fully then.

I set the empty bowl aside and stood, half expecting the familiar dizziness to hit. It didn't. My legs felt steadier than they had in days. "They're probably here for one reason and one reason alone," I said, my voice calm even as something sharp twisted low in my chest. I looked from Cian to the sentinel. "Hazel is finally getting her karma."

The words tasted strange. Bitter and sweet tangled together until I couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

I reached for my phone on the nightstand more out of habit than need. "I should change into something presentable."

Cian studied my face for a long moment. Whatever he saw there made him nod. He turned back to the sentinel. "Lead them to the sitting area. We'll be down shortly."

"Yes, Alpha."

The sentinel's footsteps faded down the hall. Cian closed the door and leaned against it, arms crossed, watching me like he was memorizing the way I stood.

"You don't have to do this," he said quietly. "Not if you're not ready."

"I'm ready. More than ready even." I crossed to the wardrobe and scanned the contents without really seeing them at first. Nothing too formal. Nothing that looked like I'd been waiting for this moment. I settled on a cream blouse and dark pants, simple enough to pass as everyday but deliberate all the same. "Besides, if this is about Hazel, they'll want to hear from me."

He didn't argue. He just waited while I changed in the bathroom, splashing cold water on my face to chase away the lingering redness around my eyes. When I stepped back out, he was still by the door. Still watching.

"Let's go," I said.

We went down the stairs side by side. Halfway down, my hand found his without thinking and he squeezed gently, grounding in the way only he ever managed. The sitting area at the front of the house was already flooded with morning light, tall windows turning everything soft and bright.

Four figures stood as we entered. Three men and one woman, all dressed in the formal, careful way pack representatives favored. Dark suits. Neutral expressions. Polished shoes that didn't quite belong on our floors.

The tallest man stepped forward. Gray threaded through his dark hair, his face all sharp angles and practiced authority. "Alpha Cian. Luna Fia. Thank you for receiving us on such short notice."

"Of course," Cian said, gesturing toward the chairs. "Please, sit."

They took their seats across from us. I smoothed my hands over my pants, more to give them something to do than out of nerves, and focused on keeping my breathing even. Whatever they'd come for, I needed to stay collected.

The tall man spoke again. "I am Elder Matthias Hale." He gestured to the woman beside him. "This is Elder Vera Cross."

She inclined her head slightly. Blonde hair pulled back tight, eyes sharp enough to miss nothing.

"Sentinel Marcus Reid," said the third man, broader and younger than the others. He nodded once.

The fourth man cleared his throat. He was the youngest of them all, maybe twenty, with brown hair and olive skin that made the tension rolling off him impossible to hide.

I could not pinpoint where I had met him. It slowly clicked. Hazel's Sentinel.

"Baruch Ashford." He finally spoke.

The name hung in the air longer than it should have. Long enough for my body to go completely still.

He flinched. "Sorry," he said quickly, forcing a laugh that didn't land. "Nerves. It's Baruch Ackers."

It should have been easy to dismiss. A simple slip. People misspoke all the time when they were anxious. But the moment that first name left his mouth, something inside me locked tight.

Baruch Ashford.

I knew that name. I had never met the person who carried it. Had never seen a face attached to it. But I knew it the way you know a scar you've lived with for years, something buried deep and permanent that never quite fades.

Milo had made sure of that.

Late nights stretched out on his small bed, the city outside the estate quiet beyond the windows, when he talked about his family in pieces rather than stories. The brother he'd lost touch with because they drifted apart. The half brother, really, because their father had been the kind of man who left fragments of himself scattered across other lives.

Baruch Ashford. Milo's brother.

My gaze snapped back to the young man sitting across from me. He was already looking at me, not with polite curiosity but with something intent and searching, like he was trying to say something without opening his mouth.

And suddenly, I knew this visit was about more than Hazel. At this for this man.

Chapter 185: Hidden among wolves 2

FIA

His eyes held mine for a beat too long. Then he glanced away, mouth pressed into a thin line.

No one forgot their surname because of nerves. Not when introducing themselves in an official capacity. Not when representing their pack to an Alpha and Luna.

This was intentional.

Cian then started speaking. "What brings you to Skollrend?" Professional. Measured.

Elder Matthias leaned forward slightly. "We come on behalf of the Silver Creek Council. There have been developments in an ongoing investigation that concern your pack."

"Hazel," I said. My voice came out steadier than I expected.

All four of them looked at me. Elder Vera's expression shifted. Just a fraction. Recognition, maybe. Or respect.

"Yes, Luna," Matthias confirmed. "The investigation into Luna Hazel Hughes has reached a critical stage. The council has and is gathering considerable evidence and testimony. We've been asked to inform you that your presence may be required at the next hearing."

"My presence?"

"As the victim of the attempted murder." Elder Vera's tone was clinical. Detached. "Your testimony would be invaluable."

Cian's hand found mine again. His thumb traced small circles against my palm. Grounding.

"When?" he asked.

"The hearing is scheduled for a few hours from now," Matthias said. "We understand this is short notice, but the council is moving quickly. There are concerns about the integrity of the evidence if we delay."

"What kind of evidence?" I kept my eyes on Matthias, but I was hyperaware of Baruch. He'd shifted in his seat. Uncomfortable. Or maybe just careful.

"Witness testimony. Medical records." Matthias ticked them off like a grocery list. "The case against her can be substantial. So the council wants to ensure all perspectives are heard before rendering judgment."

"Will she be convicted?" Cian's voice had dropped. Harder now. Protective.

"That's not for us to determine," Elder Vera said. "We're simply messengers."

Silence settled over the room. Heavy. Thick. I could feel Cian waiting for me to speak. Could feel all four emissaries watching. Waiting.

"I'll testify," I said finally. "Whatever the council needs from me."

The words settled into the room like something final. I felt Cian's thumb slow against my palm, his grip firming just a little, not to stop me but to let me know he was there. Elder Matthias nodded once, as if he had expected nothing else.

"There is one more thing," he said. "We will need the recording you made of Luna Hazel during the altercation the night before the incident."

I didn't hesitate. "No problem at all. I still have it."

Relief flickered across his face, brief but real. Elder Vera relaxed back into her chair, hands folding neatly in her lap.

"Would you like anything to drink?" I asked, partly out of courtesy and partly because the air had gone too tight. "Water. Tea."

"We're fine, Luna," Matthias said smoothly.

"Water would be sufficient," Elder Vera added.

Marcus nodded in agreement, already reaching for the glass carafe on the table.

"I'd like some coffee."

The voice cut through the small chorus of refusals. Baruch's voice. Quiet but clear.

Three heads turned toward him at once.

"There's really no need for that," Elder Vera said, her tone sharper now. "We don't want to trouble them."

I looked at Baruch. He met my gaze again, steady this time, something unreadable sitting behind his eyes.

"He said coffee," I said calmly. "He'll get coffee."

Cian's mouth twitched at the corner, but he said nothing.

I turned toward the door and caught the attention of the nearest sentinel. "Please go to the kitchen and get a cup of coffee."

"Yes, Luna."

I looked back at Baruch. "How do you like it?"

"With milk," he said.

"With milk," I repeated to the sentinel as he left.

The room shifted after that. Not dramatically. Just enough to make the silence feel more aware of itself. Elder Matthias cleared his throat.

"So," I said, folding my hands together. "Who will be collecting the file?"

"I will," Baruch said.

He stood and reached into the inner pocket of his jacket, pulling out a small drive. Black. Unremarkable. A type C connector glinted briefly in the light as he walked toward me.

I unlocked my phone and opened the recordings app, already scrolling. "It's dated from one night ago. About twenty minutes in. I can point it out."

He took the phone from my hand. His fingers brushed mine, warm and unsteady for just a fraction of a second. Instead of scrolling where I indicated, he exited the app.

I stiffened.

He opened my notes.

My pulse picked up, sharp and sudden, but I didn't move. I didn't say anything. I just watched as his thumbs hovered, then began to type.

I'm sure you've figured it out already.

But I am Milo's brother.

And I need your help.

The words stared back at me from my own screen.

For a moment, the room faded. The emissaries. The morning light. The quiet weight of the hearing only hours away. All of it fell back as something old and unfinished rose up instead.

I looked up at Baruch. He wasn't watching the others. He was watching me, carefully, like he was braced for impact.

I took the phone back from him without comment, closed the notes app, and reopened the recording. My hands were steady when I passed it back, even if something inside my chest had gone tight and sore.

"There," I said evenly. "That's the file."

He nodded and transferred it to the drive quickly, professionally, like nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

The sentinel returned a moment later with the coffee. I took it and handed it to Baruch myself.

"With milk," I said.

His fingers curled around the cup. "Thank you, Luna."

His voice carried something careful now. Not gratitude. Not relief. Something closer to restraint.

I sat back beside Cian, my posture composed, my hands folded neatly in my lap. If anyone in the room sensed the shift, they were polite enough not to acknowledge it. Elder Matthias resumed discussing logistics. Elder Vera asked procedural questions about the hearing. Marcus listened, silent and observant.

I heard them all. I answered when required. I did everything right.

But inside, my thoughts had already moved elsewhere.

Milo and I had never ended cleanly. There had been too many sharp edges, too much hurt left unspoken, too many things I had learned too late. His death has still been vile and horrible. But... the idea that his blood had now walked into my home and asked me for help, quietly and without warning, sat wrong in my chest.

Whatever Baruch wanted from me, it was not simple. And it was not something I would give lightly.

Chapter 186: The Benefactor

HAZEL

The sentinels kept their hands locked on my arms as they dragged me through corridors that seemed to narrow the farther we went. The marble floors ended somewhere behind us, replaced by rough stone that scraped under my boots. The air changed too. It grew damp and sour, heavy enough that it sat on my tongue. I wrinkled my nose before I could stop myself.

We went down a staircase that felt carved straight into the earth. Each step pulled the warmth out of my bones. By the time we reached the bottom, my breath fogged faintly in front of my face.

A thick wooden door waited there, already half open. One of the sentinels kicked it the rest of the way. The hinges shrieked.

"Inside."

They shoved me forward. I stumbled and caught myself on the wall, my palm sliding over stone slick with moisture. I pulled my hand back fast and stared at the dark smear on my skin, trying not to think too hard about what it might be.

The cell was barely big enough to turn around in. No windows. No bed. Just a bench bolted to the wall and a bucket in the corner that I refused to look at for longer than a heartbeat. The floor glistened with something wet. Water, maybe. I told myself it was water.

The smell said otherwise.

It hit me fully once the door loomed behind me. Rot. Waste. Old fear that had soaked into the stone and never left. My stomach rolled hard enough that I had to clamp a hand over my mouth and breathe through my nose. That only made it worse. The stink crawled down my throat and lodged there, thick and cloying.

I turned back toward the sentinels. "You cannot be serious."

The younger one hesitated. Just a flicker. Sympathy, maybe. He did not say a word. His hand closed on the door instead.

Panic crept up my spine, cold and sharp. The walls felt closer already. I wanted to shout, to demand something cleaner, brighter, anything. I swallowed it all down. The bile. The pride. The urge to beg.

The door was almost shut when a voice echoed down the corridor.

"Wait."

The sentinels froze.

I knew that voice. I had known it all my life.

My mother's footsteps rang out as she approached. The sentinels stepped aside without argument. She swept past them and into the cell, the door swinging partway closed behind her. Torchlight flickered through the bars, painting her face in moving shadows.

I opened my mouth, not even sure what I meant to say.

Her palm struck my cheek before I could get a word out.

The force snapped my head to the side. Pain flared hot and bright, my eyes stinging with tears I refused to let fall. I stayed where I was. Did not lift a hand. Just turned my face back toward her slowly and met her stare.

"That hurt, Mother."

"Are you out of your mind?" Her voice shook with fury, not sorrow. "I told you to confess. I told you to beg for leniency. I told you exactly what to do."

"I know what you told me," I said, keeping my voice steady even as my cheek burned.

"If Fia is summoned here," she went on, stepping closer, her finger jabbing into my chest, "if her idiotic mate, who already wants your father and me ruined, sets foot in this place, you are finished. Do you hear me? Finished."

"I am not."

She laughed sharply. Bitter. "You are not what?"

"Finished." I held her gaze. "I made a deal. With someone who can actually offer me something. I am not backing down."

Her anger faltered, confusion sliding into its place. "What are you talking about?" She grabbed my shoulders, fingers digging in. "Who did you make deals with?"

I smiled. It felt wrong on my face. "Wouldn't you like to know."

"Hazel."

"Do you know what he promised me?" I leaned in, close enough that she could see every line of my face in the low light. "Protection. For your family."

The color drained from her face. Her hands fell away as if burned. Then she laughed again, hollow and cracked, soaked in pity that made my skin crawl.

"You are a bigger fool than I ever imagined."

I said nothing. I watched her instead.

"My family disowned me when I chose your father," she said, her voice flattening into something dead. "They were not there for our union. Or your birth. Or anything after."

They have a son. That was enough for them. They do not need me. They do not need us."

"I know liars," I said quietly. "This man was not one. He knew me. Really knew me. He knew your family too. And he promised they would be the ones to save me."

She went still. Slowly, she turned back to me. Her hand came up to my face again, but this time there was no violence in it. Just fear, naked and unmasked.

"Who," she whispered, "is this man?"

I opened my mouth to answer her. His name rested on my tongue, heavy and certain, like it would sink straight to the bottom once spoken and change the shape of everything around it.

I never got the chance.

Footsteps thundered down the corridor. Fast enough to echo. Urgent enough that my pulse jumped.

"Luna Isobel!"

The voice cut through the cell. Sharp. Breathless.

We both turned toward the door as Delta came into view, hands braced on the bars, chest rising and falling like she had sprinted the whole way.

"Luna Isobel."

Mother moved first. She stepped closer to the door, shoulders squared. "What is it."

Delta swallowed, dragging in air. "The Strati house is here." She hesitated, like she needed to say it twice to believe it herself. "Your parents, Luna Isobel. They have arrived."

The silence that followed was complete. It pressed against my ears until they rang.

Mother stood with her back to me, frozen halfway between the door and the bars. I watched the line of her spine stiffen, watched her hands curl slowly at her sides like she was bracing for a blow that had not landed yet.

Then she turned.

Her face was empty. Not angry. Not afraid. Just wiped clean. She looked at me the way someone looks at a stranger wearing a familiar face.

I smiled.

"See," I said softly. "I told you."

Her mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. Nothing came out. One hand lifted to her throat, fingers pressing against her pulse as if she needed proof that she was still breathing.

Delta shifted her weight outside the cell. "They arrived with a full entourage. Guards. Legal counsel. Elders." Her gaze slid to me through the bars. "They are asking for Hazel. Specifically."

"That is impossible," Mother whispered.

But there was no strength behind the words. She already knew better.

I pushed myself off the wall. The stone no longer felt like it was leaching the heat from my bones. My legs held me without shaking. Even the stench of the cell had faded into something distant and irrelevant.

"You should go see them," I said, keeping my voice easy. Almost polite. "It has been what, twenty years. Maybe more. They might not even recognize you at first."

Her head snapped toward me. "What did you do."

"I made a deal," I said, the same way I had before.

"With who." Her voice climbed, sharp with panic now. "Who could... Who has the power to drag my family here after all this time."

I tilted my head and studied her. Let the question hang. Let it burn. I wanted her to sit in it the way I had sat under the elders' stares, being weighed and measured and quietly condemned.

"Someone who knew which strings still mattered," I said. I stepped closer, close enough to see the fine cracks beneath her composure. "Someone who understood that your family might not care about you anymore, but they care very much about appearances. About reputation. About the idea that one of their bloodline is being discussed in an elder circle for crimes she may or may not have committed."

Her breathing quickened. "That cannot be true. No one could do that."

"And yet." I nodded toward Delta. "They are here. Right now. Upstairs. Waiting."

Delta cleared her throat. "Luna Isobel. The lead elder has requested your immediate presence. Your parents are demanding an explanation as to why their granddaughter is being held in a cell."

Mother turned back toward the door. She stared past Delta, up the corridor, toward the stairs and the promise of light. Her fists clenched so tightly I could see the tendons stand out.

"This changes everything," she said under her breath.

"That was the point," I replied.

She looked back at me one last time. The fear was still there, but it was no longer alone. Calculation had settled beside it, cold and familiar. She was already rearranging the board in her head.

"We will discuss this later," she said. "All of it."

"I look forward to it."

Chapter 187: On Neutral Ground

FIA

For a moment, it looked like the meeting was ending.

Elder Matthias gathered his papers with slow, deliberate movements. Marcus shifted in his chair like he was already halfway out of the room. Elder Vera's attention softened, her gaze drifting, the way people did when a matter had been decided and filed away in their minds.

Cian spoke before anyone could stand.

"Give us time to prepare," he said.

It was not a command. Not quite. It landed more like a careful request, measured and controlled, though I knew the restraint it took for him to phrase it that way. "A few hours. My mate has been through enough already. I need to be there."

Elder Matthias paused. His fingers stilled on the edge of the table. He did not sit back down.

"That will not be possible," he said.

Cian turned his head toward him, slow and precise. "The hearing is scheduled in a few hours. That is time."

"It is not about time," Elder Vera said.

Her voice slid into the space between them, smooth but stripped of warmth.

"It is about presence."

The word settled heavy in the room, like it carried more weight than it should have.

Cian's eyes sharpened. "Explain."

"There are concerns," Matthias said, choosing each word like it might cut him if he moved too fast, "that extended proximity between you and the council may complicate matters."

"Complicate," Cian repeated.

"In matters of judgment," Elder Vera continued, "power has weight. And your presence carries considerable influence. You are Alpha of Skollrend."

I felt Cian go still beside me. Not rigid. Not tense. It was something quieter than that. Something held back so tightly it bordered on dangerous.

"You are saying," he said slowly, "that my existence is inconvenient to your sense of fairness."

"We are saying," Matthias replied, "that justice must not be swayed by strength, authority, or fear. Especially not in a world like ours."

The meaning was clear enough.

Too much power warped outcomes, even when it was well intentioned. Especially when it was well intentioned.

Cian's hand closed around mine, firm and grounding, like he was anchoring me to the present.

"Then my mate will remain here," he said.

The room stilled.

Not sharply. Not all at once. Just enough that every movement stopped halfway through happening.

"She will not be rushed," Cian continued. "She will not be isolated. And she will not be paraded to reassure a council afraid of its own resolve. You have enough evidence already. That audio recording alone should be sufficient."

Elder Vera's gaze flicked to me. Not unkind. Not sympathetic either. Measuring, like she was calculating how much of me was person and how much was liability.

I could not speak yet. Not while Cian's presence rolled off him in steady waves, possessive without being loud, protective without apology.

"That is not enough," Matthias said. "There will be another hearing in a few hours. One that requires her presence."

I lifted my chin. "Another?"

"Yes, Luna," he said. "Another."

"And why the urgency," Cian asked, his voice cooler now, stripped of warmth, "if not fear that time might restore balance instead of disrupting it."

Matthias hesitated.

"Justice," Elder Vera said, clipped and deliberate, "can only prevail when evidence remains uncompromised."

Silence pressed in from all sides.

I felt it in my chest, the way my breathing narrowed without me meaning it to, the way every gaze in the room stayed trained on me without quite daring to linger. They were waiting.

Not for Cian.

For me.

I turned my head slightly toward him. His jaw was set, his posture unyielding, like the ground beneath my feet had decided it would rather break than shift.

"I will go," I said.

The words were quiet, but they cut anyway.

Cian turned to me immediately. "No."

"This is not a demand," I said. "It is my choice."

"You are not obligated to meet their fear halfway," he said. "They can wait. They can sit with it."

"They will not," I replied. "These are the same people who judged quickly when Hazel framed me. Time will not soften them. It will only harden them further."

"You should not care what they believe," Cian said, and he was right.

He was painfully right.

But there was something else at play here, something older and sharper. I had something to prove, not to them, but to the story they thought they already understood. This was retribution long delayed. If my face had to be the one Hazel fixated on while the hammer finally came down, then so be it.

I faced the emissaries again.

"You want my presence because you believe time changes outcomes," I said. "It does. Just not in the way you think."

Cian's fingers tightened around mine. "Fia."

"If I stay," I continued, "you will say I am being shielded. If I delay, you will say I am avoiding scrutiny and must have something to hide myself. And if I arrive flanked by my mate's authority, you will question whether my words carry my own weight at all."

I let the silence stretch after that.

"I will go," I said again. "On my terms."

Elder Vera's expression did not change. But her eyes sharpened, just a fraction, like something had clicked into place.

"I will go," I continued. "Because I will not have my testimony reduced to a question of proximity."

Cian shook his head once. It was a small movement, restrained, but it carried everything he did not say. "You do not have to do this alone."

"I am not," I said quietly. "I am choosing it."

He studied my face longer this time. Not looking for resolve. He already knew I had that. He was searching for something else, for any sign that this would cost me more than I was ready to pay. For fear. For doubt. For harm waiting just under the surface.

Whatever he found made his grip loosen, just slightly.

"This is not over," he said.

"No," I agreed. "It is not."

"I am not fine with this."

I reached up, cupped his face, and smiled at him anyway. "I know."

Elder Matthias inclined his head. "Then we should proceed."

"There are conditions," Cian said. His voice did not rise, but it carried. "I have conditions."

All of them turned toward him at once.

"My mate will not be escorted by sentiment," he said evenly. "Nor by intimidation. If you insist on separating her from me, then it will be done by protocol alone."

"That is understood," Matthias replied without hesitation.

"She will not be accompanied by your high pack authority," Cian continued. "Nor by family."

"No one here is direct blood." Matthias inputted.

"Extended then." He quickly quipped. "She will be driven in one of our own cars and of course a sentinel capable of protection from your end is demanded. One from my pack will be given as well."

Elder Vera nodded once. "Neutral escorts," she said. "As procedure dictates."

Cian's gaze cut to her. "Truly neutral."

"Yes," she replied. "Someone answerable to the council and another answerable to you."

I felt the shift then. Subtle, deliberate, like a door closing softly somewhere behind me.

Cian exhaled slowly through his nose. "Very well."

It was not surrender. It was a concession, given with teeth still bared beneath the calm.

"I will escort her."

Baruch's voice entered the space without force. Calm. Unassuming. Certain.

The words settled rather than struck.

Matthias glanced toward Vera. Vera did not object.

The other sentinel whose name I remembered to be Marcus only watched, his expression giving nothing away.

Cian's eyes finally moved to Baruch. Measuring. Assessing. Weighing the balance of risk and control.

"You," Cian said.

"Yes," Baruch replied.

"I see."

There was no challenge in it. No triumph either. Cian was mostly apathetic. At face value at least. The mate bond that flared between us told a different story however.

"I will accompany her to the council chambers alongside whoever is charged with me," Baruch continued. "Ensure procedure is followed. Ensure neutrality is maintained."

Silence stretched around us, thick but not hostile.

Then Matthias nodded. "That will suffice."

Cian turned back to me. His hand lifted, brushing over my knuckles once, deliberate and grounding, like he was imprinting himself there so I would not forget where I belonged when the doors closed behind me.

"I will be waiting," he said.

"I know," I replied. I looked past him, back to the council. Then back at him again "And I want Garrett assigned as the pack sentinel from Skollrend that escorts me."

The request landed cleanly.

"Garrett?" Cian mused. "Is there a reason why you chose him?"

"Because I trust him." I said.

And I did.

Baruch stepped aside then, already positioning himself for departure, professional and composed, as if this were any other assignment. But this was an avid opportunity for us to talk.

Chapter 188: The Inheritance

MADELINE

The ringing pierced through my sleep like needles driving into my skull. I groaned and buried my face deeper into the pillow, but the sound kept going. Relentless. Stabbing. My head throbbed with each shrill tone.

"Stop," I mumbled into the fabric.

It didn't stop.

My hand shot out from under the covers and grabbed the phone. I didn't open my eyes. Didn't check the screen. I simply swiped to end the call and held down the power button until the vibration told me it was off.

Silence.

Fucking finally.

I let out a breath and started to sink back into the warmth of sleep.

Then my body lifted.

One second I was horizontal on my mattress, and the next I was flying backward through the air. My back slammed into the wall hard enough to knock the wind out of my lungs. Pain exploded across my shoulder blades and I dropped to the floor in a heap.

"What the—" I gasped, trying to pull air back into my chest.

"How dare you!"

The voice boomed through the room, and I knew that voice. I looked up, still on my hands and knees, and there he was. My father's apparition shimmered in the middle of my bedroom, translucent but solid enough that I could see every line of fury etched into his face.

"What the fuck!" I pushed myself up, my legs shaking. My shoulder screamed where it had hit the wall.

"Your audacity knows no bounds." His form flickered, making him look even more unhinged. "Cutting me off and switching your device—"

"Like attacking your daughter is any better!" I cut him off, straightening up despite the pain radiating through my back. "I told you to stop using your stupid voodoo with my hair."

"Well, I wouldn't be here or being a horrible father like you now want to claim if you had just fucking picked up your call!"

I sank back onto the edge of my bed, rubbing my shoulder. Blood roared in my ears. My whole body felt like it had been through a meat grinder, and now I had to deal with this.

"Why did you call?" I asked through gritted teeth.

"What the hell is Aldric doing?" His apparition moved closer, and I could see the veins standing out on his neck even though he wasn't really there. "When will this noose on her necks loosen?"

I frowned. "He hasn't done anything."

"He hasn't—" My father's laugh was bitter and sharp. "I just got threatened by the Strati household right now because Aldric used the hold he has against me against them as well. That is one of the biggest packs. What the fuck does he think he is doing? Does he believe he is really that invincible?"

The Strati household. I knew the name. Everyone did. They were old blood, old power, and they were definitely the type that wouldn't take threats lightly.

"In case you haven't noticed, Father," I said slowly, "he kind of is."

My father's form flickered again, and for a moment I thought he might disappear entirely. Good riddance. But he solidified again, his jaw tight.

"And what business could you have with the Strati?" I leaned forward, ignoring the protest from my bruised muscles. "What else does Aldric have on you?"

"Not your business."

"Except it is." My voice rose, and I stood up again. "I am here for that sole reason. To save our family. And you tell me there is more?"

His apparition started to fade. In and out. In and out. Like a dying light bulb. When he came back into focus, something in his expression had changed. Not softer, exactly, but different.

"No," he said. "That is not it."

I waited.

"It is still the matter of fleshcraft."

Fleshcraft. The word sat heavy in the air between us. The illegal magic that had gotten him into this mess in the first place. The reason Aldric had leverage over our entire family.

"What could an old werewolf bloodline want one have with fleshcraft?" I asked.

My father was quiet for a long moment. His apparition drifted slightly to the left, then corrected itself. When he spoke, his voice had dropped lower.

"It is better you do not know."

"Father." I took a step toward him even though I knew I couldn't touch him. "There can be no secrets between us. Not now."

He sighed. The sound was hollow, coming from something that wasn't quite there.

"They helped with my research."

I felt my stomach turn.

"Their pack wanted strengths incomprehensible." He wouldn't meet my eyes now. "If their goddess thought the age of the healers of legend was done, we could force it back to existence."

No. No, no, no.

"They gave us guinea pigs."

The room tilted. I grabbed the edge of my nightstand to steady myself. Guinea pigs. He said it so casually, like he was talking about lab rats. But I knew what he meant. Who he meant.

"I don't want to hear more," I said quickly.

"Okay."

I pressed my palm against my forehead. The headache from earlier was nothing compared to what pounded there now. "Why? Why would you even stoop so low?"

"This is the way I am." His apparition shrugged, and the casual gesture made me want to throw up. "You have your quirks too."

"Nothing like this."

"The point is this insanity has to end." He moved closer again, and even though he wasn't solid, I took a step back. "You have proximity to Aldric right now. Find out who he trusts badly to keep his deadman switch against us."

The deadman switch. The only reason that mad man was still alive if we were being frank. All that mess was set up to release and wreck us all if anything happened to him. It was exactly the kind of precaution someone like him would take.

That and the powerful spell he'd weaved to protect his mind.

"He can be vindictive," I said carefully. "It is better we do not egg him."

"Fuck that." My father's form blazed brighter for a moment. "This is too much to let go of."

I shook my head. "You don't understand what he's capable of—"

"Help save this family." His voice dropped again, but there was something pleading in it now. Something almost human. "Save yourself and your love."

My love. He meant Cian.

But before I could respond, before I could tell him exactly what I thought of his plans and his research and his complete lack of moral boundaries, his apparition vanished. One second he was there, desperate and angry and flickering. The next, just empty air.

I stood in the middle of my bedroom, breathing hard. My shoulder still throbbed. My head still pounded. And now I had information I never wanted.

Guinea pigs. The Strati had given him guinea pigs.

I walked to the bathroom on unsteady legs and turned on the cold water. Splashed it on my face. Looked at myself in the mirror. Dark circles under my eyes. Hair a mess. A bruise already forming on my shoulder where it had hit the wall.

This was my family. This was what I was trying to save.

My father had experimented on people. Omegas maybe. But still living people. He had tried to force some kind of legendary healing magic back into existence through torture and flesh magic. And the Strati, one of the most powerful werewolf packs in existence, had helped him do it.

No wonder Aldric had such a strong hold over him. Over us.

I gripped the edges of the sink and stared at my reflection. Water dripped from my chin. My hands were shaking.

Find out who Aldric trusts with his deadman switch. That was what my father wanted. That was how he thought we would solve this.

But I knew Aldric better than my father did. Aldric didn't trust anyone badly. He was methodical. Careful. Whatever system he had set up, it would be airtight. And if we went poking around trying to dismantle it, he would know and he would retaliate.

We would all pay the price.

I turned off the water and walked back to my bed. I sat down carefully, testing my shoulder. It hurt, but nothing felt broken. Just bruised. Just another reminder of the kind of family I came from.

The sun was starting to come up outside my window. Gray light filtered through the curtains. A new day.

I lay back down and stared at the ceiling.

There was also the matter of the magical blood test Aldric wanted us to run on Cian's new Omega mate.

What a day.

Chapter 189: Card

FIA

The door opened.

Ronan stepped through it without knocking, his movements brisk and purposeful, like he had been waiting just outside for his moment to enter. His gaze swept the room once, taking inventory of faces and positions before settling on Cian.

"I heard about the emissaries," he said. "So I came as quickly as I could. What is going on?"

I turned toward him. "They came to get me."

His brow lifted slightly. "Get you?"

"Hazel is facing a trial in the elder circle for what she did to me... among all her other crimes," I said. "They need me there."

Something shifted in Ronan's expression. Not surprise exactly. More like recalibration, like he was adjusting the weight of information he had already suspected. He straightened, then turned toward the emissaries and bowed with measured politeness.

"Welcome to Skollrend," he said.

Elder Matthias inclined his head. Elder Vera mirrored the gesture without speaking. Marcus remained still, his posture neutral but watchful.

Cian's voice cut through the exchange. "Ronan. I need you to get Garrett prepped. He will be escorting Fia."

Ronan's head snapped back toward Cian. "Surely a sentinel is not enough."

Baruch stepped forward slightly, his tone even and professional. "It is protocol, Beta."

Ronan's jaw tightened. His gaze flicked between Baruch and Cian, searching for something that would give him leverage to argue. "A Luna of your pack attempted to murder our Luna," he said. "Forgive us for being safe. Who knows what else could happen?"

I held up a hand before Cian could respond. "I appreciate the concern," I said, keeping my voice calm but firm. "But I have agreed to this. Also... my birth pack is not out to get me. Even if there are bad actors. It is just a trial. Sentinel Garrett is more than enough to protect me."

Ronan turned fully toward Cian, his frustration barely contained beneath his controlled exterior. "Cian, you cannot possibly be—"

"It is fine," Cian interrupted. "She is right."

Ronan stared at him for a long moment. I could see the tension coiling in his shoulders, the way his hands flexed once at his sides like he wanted to push back harder but knew better. There was something too eager in his concern, something that made the hair on the back of my neck prickle.

It was almost like he wanted to be in vicinity with me at Silver Creek.

I still did not have concrete proof that Ronan was a traitor. But I did not trust him one bit.

"Just help me get Garrett," Cian said.

Ronan nodded once, stiff and mechanical. Then he turned and left without another word, the door closing behind him with a soft click.

Cian turned back to me. His hand found mine again, his thumb brushing over my knuckles in slow, deliberate strokes. "Be safe," he said.

"I will," I replied. "After all, it will only be a day."

He leaned down and pressed his lips to my forehead, lingering there for a breath longer than necessary. When he pulled back, his eyes searched mine one last time, looking for

cracks he could shore up before I left. He would not find any. Not because they were not there, but because I had learned how to hold them closed.

Garrett arrived within minutes. He stepped into the room with quiet efficiency, his expression professional and alert. He nodded once to Cian, then to me, and positioned himself near the door without needing instruction.

The emissaries moved first. Elder Matthias and Elder Vera rose together, their movements synchronized in a way that spoke of decades working side by side. Marcus followed without fanfare, his gaze sweeping the room one last time before he stepped through the door.

Garrett glanced at me. "Ready, Luna Fia?"

I nodded.

We moved as a group toward the exterior of the estate. The air outside was crisp and cool, carrying the scent of pine and damp earth. The emissaries' car sat waiting, its engine already humming softly. Elder Matthias and Elder Vera climbed inside without ceremony. Marcus closed the door behind them and moved to the driver's seat.

Garrett turned toward the garage. "I will get the car," he said.

That left Baruch and me standing alone.

The silence stretched between us, not uncomfortable but weighted with things unsaid. I turned toward him, measuring him the way he had been measuring me since he arrived.

"So," I said. "Milo's brother."

Baruch nodded once. "I heard a lot about you from my brother."

I laughed, short and sharp. "Did he also tell you what he did to me?"

Baruch's expression did not change, but something flickered behind his eyes. "He sent a voicemail after," he said. "Said he regretted what he put you through."

I waited.

"At the time, I did not know why he sent a remorseful message to me saying he was going to make what he did to you right," Baruch continued. "But once my grandmother got his decapitated body to bury, I realized something was amiss."

The words landed cleanly. No embellishment. No attempt to soften them.

"You became a Silver Creek sentinel to get justice," I said.

"Revenge," Baruch corrected.

His gaze held mine, steady and unwavering.

"I wanted to get close to your sister," he said. "Gain her trust. Her love. Use her list. Then ruin her."

I tilted my head slightly. "My sister is not capable of love."

"You will be surprised," Baruch replied.

I looked at him for a long moment. "That is where you would be a fool."

He frowned slightly, the first crack in his composed exterior.

"I am sure that is what Milo thought too," I continued. "That Hazel loved him. That she was capable of it. But I grew up with her. She is not."

Baruch's jaw tightened. "I do not love her. But I wanted her to trust me. Before I gutted her and betrayed her in the worst way possible."

"I got to her first," I said. "So what could you possibly need my help for?"

I paused, then added, "Because for all I know, you could be working for her and this is simply trickery."

The sound of an engine approaching interrupted whatever Baruch might have said. The car rolled toward us slowly, its headlights cutting through the dim morning light.

Baruch stepped closer, his voice dropping lower. "I would never be that way."

The car continued its approach.

"With the charges put against Hazel, she wants to escape some of it," Baruch said quickly. "The Milo part of it. By exterminating me and my grandmother."

I stilled.

"Assassins were sent to our home early today while people still slept," he continued. "If I had not gotten it out of Hazel yesterday, my grandmother would have been tortured to reveal my identity and then killed."

His eyes searched mine.

"I need your help to save myself and my grandmother," he said.

The car pulled to a stop directly in front of us. Garrett climbed out and moved around to open the back door for me.

"We should probably get in," I said.

Baruch nodded and opened the door wider. I slid into the back seat, the leather cool against my skin. Baruch closed the door behind me and moved to join Garrett in the front seat.

The car settled into silence for a moment. Garrett adjusted the rearview mirror, his gaze flicking to me once before returning to the road ahead.

I leaned forward slightly. "You can continue," I said to Baruch.

He glanced at Garrett, then back at me.

"It is fine," I said. "Garrett is no problem. It is why I chose him."

Baruch exhaled slowly, then shifted in his seat to face me more directly.

"Hazel or your parents do not know yet that I am Milo's half brother," he said. "But they will eventually piece it together somehow."

"So you want to strike now?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "I want to strike while it is hot and never give her a chance to recover. That is why I need your help. You are her kryptonite right now. But you are not enough to run her to the fucking ground and ensure she never recovers."

"Well... I guess I was wrong about you," I confessed. "It would also make sense why Hazel wants you dead. Attempted murder is a horrible charge. But she did not quite follow through. The worst she will suffer from me is demotion. It will still hurt her fucking pride. But I am sure she will be more than glad to be alive."

"It was sick seeing how rotten her nature was and being unable to just strangle her right there," Baruch said. "She even smiled when she said it. That same smile you probably know well. She seems to believe the world is against her for crimes she willingly committed."

I did know the smile. The one that said she had already won and was just waiting for you to realize it.

"You could run and hide, you know," I spoke. "If I am being frank with you, I am not keen on touching anything regarding Milo."

"I am not running," Baruch replied. "She wants me and my grandmother dead before the trial. Before I can testify about what I know. About what my brother told me. You might fucking hate Milo for the atrocities he committed towards you. But... this doesn't have to come from a high ground and a beautiful moral compass. Use me. Use me to take Hazel down."

Garrett's hands tightened on the steering wheel. He did not speak, but I could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his jaw clenched slightly.

"What exactly did he tell you?" I asked.

Baruch turned fully in his seat now, his gaze locking onto mine. "Everything," he said.

"Everything?"

"Yes," he confirmed. "About how she manipulated him. How she used his feelings to control him. How she laughed when he started believing his own lies about being important to her."

My chest tightened.

"And I have the voicemail too," he added. "I can give it to you. It would help the case. Greatly."

I said nothing.

The silence stretched. His gaze drifted, unfocused at first, then calculating, like he was rifling through options in his head. I watched the exact moment he found one. His eyes sharpened. Brightened. Like he had struck gold.

He slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out a small white card, holding it up between two fingers before angling it toward me.

"Hazel had this."

It looked like a business card.

My stomach tightened as I reached for it. The card was smooth and stiff between my fingers, too clean to be meaningless. I lowered my eyes and read it, already knowing whatever was printed there was not meant to be in my hands at all.

Two words did stick out.

Gabriel Donlon.

Chapter 190: Like a swift 1

HAZEL

Mother swept out of the cell without another word. The door clanged shut behind her, and I heard her footsteps recede up the corridor with Delta's quick pace beside her. The echo faded. Then nothing. Just the drip of water somewhere in the darkness and my own breathing.

I could not sit. The bench looked like it would crumble under my weight, or worse, leave something clinging to my clothes that I would smell for days. Standing was its own kind of torture though. My legs ached. The cold had worked its way into my joints, settling there like it had always belonged.

I leaned against the wall instead. The stone bit into my shoulder blades through my shirt. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, trying to ease the pressure building in my calves. My right leg cramped. I bent down and pressed my thumbs into the muscle, kneading until the knot loosened enough that I could breathe through it.

That was when I heard them.

Footsteps again. Multiple sets this time. They came from above, filtering down through the ceiling in bursts of muffled sound. Voices followed. I could not make out words, just the rise and fall of conversation. Someone laughed. It sounded wrong down here, too bright for a place that smelled like rot.

I straightened and tilted my head, trying to catch more.

The voices grew louder. Closer. They were descending the stairs now, the same ones the sentinels had hauled me down earlier. I counted the footfalls. Three people. Maybe four. The rhythm was uneven, like one of them moved faster than the others.

Then I heard a woman voice go: "Open the door."

The command cut through everything else. It was not loud, but it did not need to be. The voice carried weight the way a blade carries an edge. Sharp. Certain. Used to being obeyed.

I held my breath.

Another voice answered. Softer. Familiar.

"This is my mother. Do as she says."

That voice was my mother. She sounded smaller than I had ever heard her.

Metal scraped against metal. The lock turned and the door swung open with a groan that set my teeth on edge.

Light spilled into the cell. Torchlight, warm and flickering, but after the dimness it felt like the sun itself had walked in. I squinted against it and raised a hand to shield my eyes.

A figure stepped through the doorway.

I lowered my hand slowly.

The most beautiful woman I had ever seen stood in front of me.

Beautiful in the way a painting was beautiful. Perfect and just as untouchable. She wore a suit tailored so precisely it might have been sewn onto her body. The fabric was dark, expensive, the kind that whispered money when it moved. Her hair fell in blonde waves that caught the torchlight and threw it back, too bright to be natural. Her lips were painted a deep red that made me think of blood on snow. Everything about her was calculated. Polished. A weapon dressed up as elegance.

She looked at me the way someone looks at a stain on their floor.

"This is her, I assume."

Her voice matched her appearance. Cold. Controlled. Every word clipped at the edges.

My mother stepped into view behind her. She looked diminished next to this woman, like someone had drained half the color from her face. "Yes, Mother."

The word hung in the air.

Mother? Was this... My grandmother?

I stared at her. She stared back. Her eyes were pale, almost gray in the low light, and they tracked over me with the precision of someone cataloging inventory. She took in my face. My posture. The dirt on my clothes. Her expression did not change.

I bowed. It felt ridiculous, but I did it anyway. "It is nice to put a face to the name, grandmother."

She laughed.

It was not a kind sound.

"Spare me the pretentiousness." She took a step closer, her heels clicking against the stone. "You get that beast to threaten us into submission and now you want to pretend this is a giddy family reunion."

I straightened but said nothing.

Her lip curled. "You and your mother are still dead to me. You are Joseph's blood after all. Just call me Pauline."

The words landed like stones. Goddess, did they hurt. I wasn't even sure why.

My mother flinched beside her.

Pauline Strati did not seem to notice. She turned slightly, her gaze sweeping the cell with obvious distaste. "I am merely here to save your life. And save..." She paused. Her eyes flicked back to me. "I will."

"Thank you," I started to say.

"Your father." She spoke over me without hesitation. "If he is still a father to you at this point. Because if this mess happened in our place, any of the elder circle that stood against us would fall with their tongues ripped out."

"Mother." My mother's voice cracked on the word.

Pauline rolled her eyes. The gesture was so casual it almost made me laugh. Almost.

"What I was saying," she continued, her tone sharpening, "is if you can get put on a murder charge, it is off with your head. The safe choice anyone can make, including your father, is getting you into a stronger pack. A murder charge will not come if the high moral court here believes war could come for them. Blood reminds people of mortality. So the judgment will be kinder. It is not the first that has happened. Neither will it be the last."

I watched her speak. Every word came out smooth and practiced, like she had given this speech a hundred times before.

"The problem, however." She stepped closer again. Close enough that I could smell her perfume, something floral and cloying. "Your rank will be demoted before goddess and wolves. And whatever you have going for you right now is your pure ranks, which is debatable by the way, and your..."

She paused.

Her gaze dropped to my face. Then lower. To my chest.

"Your boobs."

The word sounded obscene coming from her mouth. Clinical. Like she was discussing livestock.

I felt my cheeks heat, but I kept my expression neutral.

"With your ranks in the gutter for deceit and attempted murder," she went on, "whatever game your father is currently struggling to pull will fall. No one will want a Luna demoted to a Gamma or a Delta." She tilted her head, her eyes narrowing. "Or worse, if the heavens are set against you. An Omega."

Cold washed over me. Full body. The kind of cold that started in your gut and spread outward until your fingertips tingled with it.

Omega?