

To ruin an Omega

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HAZEL

The word echoed in my skull.

Pauline's mouth curved into something that might have been a smile if it had contained any warmth. "Big boobs or a palatable face will not be enough then. Then the murder charge will stick. After all, there are no consequences coming."

I swallowed hard. My throat felt tight, like someone had wrapped a hand around it and squeezed. "You have been saying a lot of words. But not how I get out of this unscathed."

Her smile widened. It was worse than her frown.

"The worst thing you could have done," she said slowly, "is involve yourself with that man. You have no idea the fresh hell that has just befallen you."

My stomach twisted.

"But I also am a slave of his. For the time being at least." She said it like it meant nothing. Like admitting to being controlled by someone was no different than commenting on the weather. "So I will tell you how we save you. Because with me here, there will always be consequences."

I waited. My pulse hammered in my ears.

"Why? Because I have something your father does not." She gestured vaguely, her hand cutting through the air. "The Strati name actually has weight and value. Your bitch of a mother let love blind her to what really mattered. Power."

My mother made a soft sound. I did not look at her.

"If you are nothing like her," Pauline continued, "we will have no problem moving forward."

"Try me."

The words came out before I could think them through. Steady. Sure. I met her eyes and did not blink.

Something flickered in her expression. Approval, maybe. Or interest.

"You will not get beheaded." She paused, letting the words settle. "Because you now inherit the betrothal of your mother to the Lily of the Valley pack."

My eyes widened.

Betrothal.

The Lily of the Valley pack?

That name meant something to me, and the weight behind them was unmistakable. This was not a suggestion. This was a lifeline. A noose. Maybe both.

Pauline's smile returned. "I like that look. Hunger. You might be worth a shot after all."

She turned away from me, her attention shifting to my mother. "This place sickens me. We should go and wait for the trials to commence."

My mother stepped forward, her hands clasped in front of her like a supplicant. "I need to speak to my daughter."

Pauline paused mid-step. She did not turn around. "You know. She wanted to know who this benefactor of yours is."

The words were directed at me, not my mother.

I kept my mouth shut.

"I can tell he has just taken interest in you. Whatever his reasons are." Pauline glanced back over her shoulder. Her eyes locked onto mine. "But the best thing you can do for my foolish daughter right now is keep her in the dark."

"Mother!" My mother's voice rose, sharp with panic.

Pauline turned. Her hand moved so fast I almost missed it.

The slap cracked through the cell.

My mother stumbled back, her hand flying to her cheek. Her eyes were wide. Wet.

"Do not raise your voice at me, you little shit."

Pauline stepped out of the cell without looking back. Her heels clicked down the corridor. I heard her muttering something under her breath, too low to make out, but the tone was clear. Disgust.

The cell felt smaller without her in it. Quieter. My mother stood in the doorway, one hand still pressed to her face. Her chest rose and fell in quick, shallow breaths. She swallowed hard.

Then she looked at me.

"Do not take anybody's hands."

Her voice was hoarse. Desperate.

I frowned. "What?"

"My men will find Milo's family." She stepped closer, her words spilling out faster now. "Only little is known about them. But my men are capable. They will find and kill them. The words on the recording can be shrunk to words said in anger. The elders cannot do much after all. They helped kill him too. It was their sentencing. Fia can come for blood. But a demotion is not so bad. You will find an Alpha. It is not the first or last time it has happened."

I stared at her.

She kept going.

"Whoever this person you have made a deal with is, if they have this much sway over my family..." She trailed off. Her hand dropped from her face, revealing the red mark Pauline had left behind. "I am afraid of them. No one threatens a Strati and lives after all."

"I want power, Mother."

The words came out flat. Final.

She blinked. "Hazel—"

"My reputation is in shambles." I stepped forward, closing the distance between us. "And a demotion would ruin me even if I am not beheaded. A dead social life is still suicide. I will take both their hands. Your mother's and my benefactor's."

"No." Her voice cracked. "Please listen to me this one time. You have to know when to soar and when to land."

I smiled. It felt sharp on my face. "I will become a swift then. I will keep my weak feet useless and soar till I die."

She reached for me, her fingers brushing my arm. I did not pull away, but I did not lean into the touch either.

"I have made up my mind." I met her eyes. "There is no stopping this."

"Are you certain?"

I thought about the cell. The stench. The way the elders had looked at me. The recording. Milo's blood on my hands, metaphorical or not. I thought about power. About what it meant to have it. To lose it. To claw it back with broken nails and bloodied fingers.

"You have not gotten the heads of Milo's surviving family yet." My voice was quiet now. Steady. "And Father has been nowhere to be found since I was packed. That tells me all I need to know."

Her hand fell away.

She stared at me for a long moment. Then she nodded once, jerky and reluctant, and turned toward the door.

She paused in the doorway. "I hope you know what you are doing."

"So do I."

She left.

The door did not close all the way. A sliver of light remained, cutting through the darkness. I looked at it for a while. Then I turned away and pressed my back against the wall again.

My leg cramped. I ignored it.

I had made my choice. Now I just had to survive it.

Chapter 192: Old Things 1

MADELINE

I picked my phone up from the floor where I had thrown it earlier and held the power button until the screen came back to life. The glow felt too bright for the gray light leaking in through the curtains, like it was accusing me of being awake when I should

not have been. My shoulder protested as I shifted, a deep, pulsing ache that had settled into the muscle and made itself comfortable there.

I scrolled through my contacts without really seeing the names. My thumb slowed when I reached Wilhelm. I hesitated, not because I doubted what I was about to do, but because I knew exactly how this would go. Then I pressed call before I could talk myself out of it.

It rang. Once. Twice. Three times.

"Madeline." His voice was thick, rough with sleep and irritation. "Do you know what time it is?"

"I need you at the Donlon estate," I said. I did not soften it. I did not explain. I had learned a long time ago that giving Wilhelm too much too early only gave him room to push back.

Silence stretched on the line, just long enough to be deliberate. I could picture him sitting up in bed, probably running a hand through his hair, already smiling bitterly to himself.

"You and Father suddenly need me now?" he said, amusement bleeding into every word. "After years of pretending I didn't exist unless something went wrong?"

I clenched my jaw and shifted my weight, the movement sending a sharp flare of pain through my shoulder. I sucked in a breath through my nose and kept my voice even. "This is family business."

A soft laugh followed, low and pleased. "My point still stands."

I pressed my free hand against the bruise, feeling the heat under my skin, the tenderness that made me hiss despite myself. I was tired of being in pain, tired of reacting instead of acting, tired of everyone assuming I would fold if they waited long enough.

"If you want to matter to Father," I said, "and to me, then you'll come. I have something that needs to be delivered to him."

That got his attention. I could hear it in the way his breathing changed, the way the humor thinned out. I crossed the room slowly, my bare feet cold against the floor, and stopped at the antique dresser by the window. The wood was smooth from age and use, cool under my fingers as I pulled open the second drawer.

The vial sat exactly where I had left it, tucked between silk scarves that smelled faintly of old perfume. The blood inside looked almost black in the low light, thick and slow

when I tilted the glass. It was starting to cuddle I guess. Just looking at it made my stomach twist, a sick blend of satisfaction and unease curling together in my gut.

"There's an added incentive," I said lightly, even as my fingers tightened around the edge of the drawer. "Ronan is here. Beta Ronan. And before you ask, yes, he somehow looks even better than the last time you saw him."

Wilhelm did not respond right away. The silence this time was different, weighted, thoughtful. When he finally spoke, his voice had smoothed out, all sharp edges carefully filed down.

"That won't work," he said, too quickly to be convincing.

I closed the drawer and leaned back against the dresser, the wood pressing into my spine as I smiled despite myself. "It already has. Call when you are close."

I ended the call without replying and stood there for a moment, staring at the faint reflection of myself in the darkened window. I did not like the person looking back at me, but I also did not look away.

I ended the call before he could respond. But I made sure to keep the phone powered on. Just in case Father decided to make another appearance. My body couldn't take being thrown into another wall today.

The vial stayed in the drawer. Hidden. Safe.

I caught my reflection in the full-length mirror across from my bed. Hair tangled from sleep. Eyes still puffy. The bruise on my shoulder was already turning a deep purple, spreading out from the impact point like spilled wine. I turned slightly, examining it. The skin was raised and tender.

It was a shame I couldn't use my healing spell on myself. The magic didn't work that way. Never had. I could knit together someone else's broken bones, close wounds that should have been fatal, but when it came to my own body? Nothing. Just pain and the slow, natural process of healing.

So covering up would have to do. Again.

I stretched my arms above my head, testing the range of motion. Everything hurt, but it was manageable. A hot bath would help. I needed to wash off the night, wash off the conversation with Father, wash off the feeling of his words crawling under my skin.

Guinea pigs. The Strati had given him *guinea pigs*.

I started toward the bathroom, already thinking about the temperature of the water, when someone knocked on the door.

I froze.

It was early. Too early for housekeeping. Too early for anyone to have business with me.

Another knock came. It was firmer this time.

I crossed the room and pulled open the door.

Grand Luna Morrigan stood in the hallway, and behind her were two sentinels. The guards stood at attention, their expressions blank and professional. Morrigan herself looked immaculate despite the hour. Her hair was pulled back in an elegant braid, and she wore a deep blue dress that probably cost more than my entire wardrobe.

I bowed my head quickly. "I'm surprised to see you here."

"Don't be." Her voice was kind, but there was something underneath it. Something deliberate. "I'm just grateful, and I wanted to talk."

"About what?"

"Can I come in?"

I stepped aside and gestured into the room. "Of course."

Morrigan turned to the sentinels. "Stay outside."

They nodded in unison, and she swept past me into the bedroom. I closed the door and turned to face her, suddenly very aware of how I looked. Rumpled nightclothes. Messy hair. The bruise peeking out from under my sleeve.

I put my hands awkwardly at my sides. "Well..."

"You saved my life." Morrigan's gaze was steady on mine. "I'm beyond grateful for that. Because truth be told, after the way you and Cian ended things, it wouldn't be cruel if you were resentful."

"You already thanked me yesterday." I swallowed. The words felt thick in my throat. "Whatever this is about, it's not about thanks. And I have a feeling I already know what this is about."

Chapter 193: Old Things 2

MADELINE

Morrigan sighed. It was a small sound, almost sad. "Did you do it completely out of the good of your heart?"

"You know me." I met her eyes. "Of course I did. I never want to see Cian in pain."

"There." She took a step closer. "Right there. That's the issue. When you say that, it tells me you didn't do it purely because it was the right thing to do. You did it because this concerned Cian. Someone you once loved." She paused. "Someone you still love. Am I wrong?"

I didn't say anything at first. Couldn't. The words were there, locked behind my teeth, fighting to get out. Finally, I managed, "Am I supposed to feel guilty?"

"Of course not." Morrigan's expression softened. "But things are not the same anymore. Cian is not the same anymore."

"Neither is any of us."

"He has a mate now."

I scoffed. Actually scoffed. The sound came out harsher than I intended, echoing in the quiet room. "You're afraid I'll get between them and ruin what they have?"

"You might have had a past with him." Morrigan's voice stayed level. Calm. Like she was explaining something simple to a child. "But it's not fair to ruin his present because of old things."

"Old things?" My voice rose. "Cian didn't end things with me. Not really."

Morrigan waited.

"If we're being real, I ended things with him because he wouldn't choose me."

"You wanted him to choose you over his father's legacy." Morrigan shook her head slowly. "That would never have worked. Ever."

The memories hit me like a physical blow. Aldric's face, cold and calculating. His voice, smooth as silk and twice as deadly. The way he'd backed me into a corner, made it impossible for me to stay without destroying everything Cian had worked for. Make my nephew choose, he'd said. Make it easy on everyone and just let him choose.

So I had.

My voice cracked. "Do you really believe I wanted to put Cian between a rock and a hard place?"

"Madeline—"

"I had no problem being his Luna." The words tumbled out now, faster, harder. "Even if I had my fears. Like his court wanting a proper werewolf Luna. After all, interspecies marriage still has a long way to go." I laughed, but there was no humor in it. "A fear that actually happened regardless. Even if he only did it because he was afraid you would die."

Morrigan was quiet for a long moment. When she spoke again, her voice was gentler. "Regardless, he loves Fia."

"Then you shouldn't be worried, I guess." I crossed my arms over my chest, wincing as the movement pulled at my bruised shoulder. "No matter what I do, he won't fall. Right?"

"So I do have your confession then." Morrigan's eyes searched my face. "You're also back to fight for his love."

"It's not the first time an Alpha has had multiple wives."

"It was a thought that killed you before." Morrigan took another step closer. Close enough that I could see the fine lines around her eyes, the slight shadows underneath them. "It's why you made Cian choose. Why settle for it now if it repulsed you so much before?"

I thought about my father. About the guinea pigs. About the deadman switch and the blood in my drawer and everything that had brought me to this moment, standing in this room, having this conversation.

"Perhaps I know the depths of my love now."

Morrigan shook her head. The movement was slow, deliberate, almost pitying. "I say this because of how greatly you have helped me and what once was." She turned toward the door. "Disengage before you break your heart for the second time."

She put her hand on the doorknob.

"Because you will lose."

The door opened. Morrigan stepped through it without looking back. The sentinels fell into step behind her, and then they were gone. The door clicked shut.

I stood there in the middle of my bedroom, breathing hard. My hands were shaking again. Everything was shaking.

The sun was higher now. Real light streamed through the windows, turning everything golden and warm. It should have been beautiful. Should have been the start of a good day.

Instead, I walked to the mirror again. Stared at myself. At the bruise. At the dark circles. At the woman who had saved a dying Luna only to be told she had no place in the life of the man she still loved.

You will lose.

Maybe Morrigan was right. Maybe I would.

But I had come too far to stop now. Too much had happened. Too much was at stake.

I touched the bruise on my shoulder gently. The pain was sharp and immediate, radiating out through the muscle and bone. Physical. Real. Something I could point to and say, this hurts.

Not like the other pain. The one that lived deeper. The one that had been there since the day I walked away from Cian. Since the day I chose for both of us because he couldn't choose for himself.

The hot bath could wait.

I needed to think. Needed to plan. Needed to figure out what came next in this impossible situation I'd found myself in.

My father wanted me to find Aldric's weakness. To dismantle the deadman switch. To save the family.

Morrigan wanted me to leave. To give up. To let Cian have his new life with his new mate.

And what did I want?

I looked at myself in the mirror. Really looked. Past the bruise and the exhaustion and the mess. Down to whatever was left of the person I used to be.

I still wanted Cian. I had always wanted Cian.

But wanting something and being able to have it were two very different things.

The drawer with the vial pulled at my attention. Fia's blood. Another piece in whatever game Aldric was playing. Another complication in an already complicated situation.

Wilhelm would come. He'd take the vial to Father. And then what? What would Father do with it? What could he possibly learn from Fia's blood that would make any of this better?

I didn't know.

I didn't know anything anymore except that I was tired. Bone-deep, soul-crushing tired. Tired of the secrets and the lies and the violence. Tired of being thrown into walls by my own father. Tired of being virtually told I wasn't good enough, wasn't the right species, wasn't wanted. Tired of playing games.

But being tired didn't change anything.

The world kept spinning. The problems kept piling up. And I kept moving forward because that was all I knew how to do.

I turned away from the mirror and started gathering clothes for after the bath. Something with long sleeves. Something that would hide the bruise. Something that would make me look put together even though I was falling apart inside.

You will lose.

Morrigan's words echoed in my head.

Maybe she was right.

But I'd lost before, and I was still here.

Still breathing.

Still fighting.

And I wasn't done yet.

Chapter 194: Hazel must die

FIA

Gabriel Donlon...

The name sat in crisp black lettering on the card, plain and unadorned, like it had no idea what it was capable of doing to me.

There was no title at the top. There was no address either. What was present was just the name and a phone number printed beneath it. It looked neat and something about

its simplistic nature screamed confident. The kind of confidence that came from knowing doors would open if you knocked on the right ones.

My fingers curled around the card before I realized what I was doing. The edge bent under the pressure, just a little, enough to leave a crease.

I had braced myself for Aldric. I had rehearsed that betrayal to continue in my head so many times it almost felt inevitable, something I could survive because I had already mourned it in advance. But Gabriel was different. Gabriel was the uncle I had never met, the one Cian never spoke about unless it was to warn someone away, the one whose name always ended conversations rather than starting them.

I had never met this great villain.

How did Hazel get this?

The question refused to leave me alone. It circled and circled, picking at me slowly. When had she gotten it? Had he been at the party, drifting through the crowd while Cian and I danced and laughed and pretended the world was not sharpening knives behind our backs? Or had it happened earlier, somewhere quieter, somewhere more deliberate? What plans were forming while we were still blissfully unaware that anything was wrong.

My heart was pounding hard enough that it felt intrusive, like it was trying to claw its way out of my chest. I swallowed, once, then again, trying to force air down into my lungs in a way that felt normal. Were Aldric and Gabriel working together? Because if I tossed the thought around, it made sense that Aldric would be the one to hand something like this over. And if he was in cohorts with his brother, which he probably was, then it was not wrong to assume.

The thought made my stomach roll, slow and sick. I tried to imagine what Gabriel Donlon or Aldric would want with Hazel and came up with nothing that ended well.

The pieces were fitting together whether I wanted them to or not. If Hazel had Gabriel's card, if there had been communication, then this was not just pack politics, Hazel's strange rivalry or petty ambition anymore. This was personal. This could touch me. Hell, this would touch Cian. And if I was right, then demotion was not even close to enough.

Hazel could not survive this. I could not let that happen.

The realization landed hard. It was an ugly and undeniable conclusion. Bile crept up the back of my throat and I fought the urge to gag. The fact that I was even capable of thinking this way, of weighing her death like a strategic move instead of the end of a life, made my skin itch with something like shame. But if Hazel was aligning herself with Gabriel Donlon, then trouble would come for Cian and for me whether we invited it or not.

I looked up at Baruch, forcing my expression into something steady. "Did she say anything about this?"

"No." He shook his head. "But I saw how she treated it. I have watched her long enough to know when something matters to her. And the name Donlon..." He hesitated, studying my face. "That is your husband's house, is it not?"

"It is," I said. The words felt thin in my mouth. "Cian's uncle. A vile man. One who vanished after everything he did."

Baruch absorbed that without visible reaction, but I saw understanding settle in his eyes, quiet and heavy.

I let out a long breath, slower than the one before it, feeling the weight of the decision I was about to make settle across my shoulders. "I will help you," I said. "But understand this clearly. I am doing it to protect myself. And because your grandmother has no part in this. She does not deserve to suffer for pack games and ambition."

He nodded once, sharp and decisive, like a man who had already accepted the cost.

"Send me the audio," I said. "I will need it as a trump card."

He did not argue. He pulled out his phone, fingers moving quickly. "Give me yours."

I passed it to him and watched him work. When he handed it back, it felt heavier in my palm, like the recording had added weight to it, like proof always did.

I turned toward the front seat. "Garrett."

He met my eyes in the rearview mirror, attentive, unreadable.

"Did you find anything on Madeline or Ronan after we spoke yesterday?"

His grip tightened slightly on the steering wheel. He kept his gaze on the road, but his jaw worked, a small tell that told me everything I needed to know.

"There was nothing with the witch," he said. "She was asleep the entire time."

I waited. The silence stretched, thick and deliberate. There was more. I could hear it in the way he drew breath, like he was bracing himself.

"But?" I said.

"There was something else."

"What?"

The car leaned into a turn, trees blurring past the windows, the world outside feeling oddly distant.

"Beta Ronan," Garrett said. "He visited Alpha Aldric."

Ice flooded my veins. The chill started at the base of my skull and raced down my spine, spreading through my limbs until my fingers felt numb. It was confirmation. All my suspicions, all the small moments that had not quite fit together, crystallized into certainty.

I had been right. All along.

"What did they say?" My voice came out steadier than I felt.

"I could not get close." Garrett's tone was apologetic but firm. "It was risky enough that I was tailing him. I would have given myself away if I tried to get closer or fish for more information."

He took a deep breath, and I saw his shoulders rise and fall with it.

"But it is odd," he continued. "Beta Ronan's mother hates Alpha Aldric. She has never made any attempt to hide it. So the fact that Alpha Aldric and Beta Ronan could have any kind of relationship..." He trailed off, but the implication hung in the air between us.

"I agree," I said. "It is very odd."

Too odd to be coincidence. Too convenient to be innocent.

My eyes drifted back toward the front windshield. The landscape had changed while we talked, shifting from the wild forests of Skollrend territory to something more cultivated, more controlled. Stone walls lined the road now, marking boundaries I had not thought about for a while now.

We were arriving at Silver Creek.

My intestines tightened, twisting into knots that made it hard to sit still. We passed through the gate, the iron bars swinging open with practiced ease, and I realized with sudden, crushing clarity that I was back home.

Or what used to be home.

The estate spread out before us, exactly as I remembered it and completely different all at once. The main house stood tall and proud, its stone facade gleaming in the morning light. Gardens stretched out on either side, perfectly manicured hedges and flowering plants arranged with deliberate care. It should have felt welcoming. It should have felt like coming back to something safe.

Instead, my chest felt tight.

I had grown up here. Run through these halls as a child. Sat at the long dining table and pretended to be part of a family that had never quite wanted me. Every stone, every tree, every carefully placed flower bed held memories I had spent weeks trying to forget.

And now I was back.

The car rolled to a stop in front of the main entrance. The engine died, leaving us in sudden silence. Through the windshield, I could see figures moving towards us.

The emissaries from before.

Chapter 195: Stepmother Dearest 1

FIA

They told me I would wait in a private lounge.

Elder Matthias delivered the information with the same neutral efficiency he had shown since arriving at Skollrend. There was also talk about how they needed time to verify the voice recording, to cross-reference what I had provided with whatever evidence they had already compiled. The trial would not begin until everything was in order.

But even then, it seemed like they were working against time.

"Sentinel Baruch will escort you," he said.

I nodded. There was nothing else to do but wait.

Baruch moved ahead of us through the entrance, his posture military-straight as we crossed the threshold. The marble floors gleamed under the morning light streaming through tall windows. Everything looked exactly as I remembered. The same portraits of past Lunas and Alphas stared down with painted eyes that followed movement. The same cold elegance that had always felt more like a museum than a home.

It was nothing like Cian's home though. Nothing like my home now.

I kept my gaze forward. I would not let myself reminisce. Not here. Not now.

We climbed a flight of stairs, turned down a hallway I had walked a thousand times as a child. My feet knew these paths better than my mind wanted to admit. Baruch stopped in front of a door I recognized immediately. The private lounge. My father used to bring important guests here, the ones who required discretion and comfort in equal measure.

Baruch opened the door and stepped aside.

The room was smaller than I remembered, but everything from the past always shrank when you returned to it. Dark wood paneling covered the walls. A leather sofa sat against one side, flanked by matching armchairs. Bookshelves lined the far wall, and a small table near the window held an array of drinks and snacks arranged with deliberate care.

"I will be stationed outside," Baruch said. "If you need anything, I will be right here."

"Thank you."

He left, closing the door with a soft click.

Garrett moved to the window first, checking the sight lines, the distance to the ground, all the things a good sentinel was trained to notice. When he finished his assessment, he turned back to me.

"I will stay in here with you," he said.

"That works."

The silence that followed felt heavy but not uncomfortable. I walked toward the table, suddenly aware of how dry my throat had become. A crystal pitcher of water sat beside glasses that caught the light. There were also small plates of fruit, cheese, crackers. Things meant to make waiting more bearable.

I reached for the pitcher.

Garrett moved faster.

His hand closed around the handle before mine could touch it. "Wait."

I pulled back. "What?"

"It could be poisoned for all we know." His tone was matter-of-fact, clinical. He poured water into one of the glasses and lifted it to his lips. "I will do the tasting."

"Garrett—"

He drank before I could finish the protest. I watched him take a long swallow, then another. He then set the glass down and waited, his expression unchanged.

I leaned closer to the pitcher and inhaled. The scent was clean. It was just pure water. There was no bitterness, no chemical undertone, no herbal edge that would signal something dangerous.

"It is not poisoned," I said. "I have a keen nose. There are not a lot of poisons I do not know."

Garrett looked at me for a long moment, then nodded. "Better safe than sorry."

I poured myself water and drank. The cool liquid soothed my throat, washed away some of the tension that had been building since we arrived. I was reaching for a piece of cheese when I heard it.

A creak. Coming from the wall of bookshelves.

Garrett's hand moved to his hip. The gun cleared its holster in one smooth motion and the barrel aimed directly at the source of the sound.

His body shifted into a defensive stance, placing himself between me and whatever was about to emerge.

The bookshelf swung outward. Not just a section of it. The entire middle panel moved as one piece, revealing a hidden passage I had never known existed here.

Though I knew Silver Creek had hidden tunnels built into the estate for escape when necessary.

Isobel then stepped through.

She gasped when she saw the gun pointed at her chest. Her hand flew to her throat, eyes widening in genuine shock.

"I did not think there would be anyone else in here," she said quickly. "Considering there was a sentinel outside your door."

Garrett's aim did not waver. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He cocked the gun. The sound was sharp and final in the quiet room.

"Stay right where you are," he said. "Or you die."

Isobel straightened, some of her composure returning. "I am a Luna. How dare you point your gun at me?"

"And I am a sentinel." Garrett's finger moved to the trigger. "And you are not my Luna. Leave."

The door burst open.

Baruch came through fast, his gaze sweeping the room before landing on Isobel. Recognition flashed across his face. He bowed immediately, muscle memory overriding whatever confusion he felt.

"Luna Isobel." He straightened. "What are you doing here?"

"What does it look like?" She gestured toward me. "I want to talk to my daughter."

The word landed like a slap.

"I am no daughter of yours," I said.

Baruch stepped further into the room. "Luna, this is against the laws of the elder circle. You should not be here."

"Don't quote law to me." Her voice sharpened. "I will be talking to Fia."

I walked forward and pushed Garrett's gun down gently. His arm resisted for a moment before lowering.

"What do you want?" I asked.

Isobel looked at Garrett, then at Baruch. "Can they leave?"

"No."

Her jaw tightened. "This is a private matter."

"What you are doing right now is breaking the law of the elder circle," I said. "So whatever you have to say, say it here with them present. Or are you trying to murder me?"

Something crumbled in her expression. She sank to her knees, the movement graceless and desperate.

"No." The word came out ragged. "I am trying to sway you."

I stared down at her. "Breaking the biggest law of the circle?"

"I do not care." Her hands pressed flat against the floor. "I am a mother. I cannot let my daughter... I cannot let my baby die or be permanently shackled to my family."

The shackled to my family part confused me but I decided to pay it not much mind.

"What has that got to do with me?" I kept my voice level. "She did the crime. It is best she does the time."

Isobel crawled forward. Actually crawled, her knees scraping against the wooden floor as she closed the distance between us.

"I know I have wronged you." Her voice broke. "I know."

"Which one?" I tilted my head. "The murder of my mother? Or the fact that you helped your daughter frame me for being a jealous bitch who wanted to steal her happiness?"

Chapter 196: Stepmother Dearest 2

FIA

"All of it." Tears streaked down her face now, cutting paths through carefully applied makeup. "I will pay for all of it."

I said nothing.

"Hazel was raised wrong." The words tumbled out faster now. "I will admit it. I raised her a spoiled brat who thought life should be handed to her. It is why she is the way she is. But she doesn't deserve to be punished for my sins."

She reached for me.

"Fia. For your father. For old time's sake and any good time you had at all. Forgive Hazel. Do not pursue the attempted murder charge. Beg the elders to drop the pack endangerment charge."

"Why?" I looked down at her. "Because you have tears running down your eyes and you are on your knees? What is so special about something that has come natural to me here all my life?"

"What do you want me to do?" Her voice pitched higher, desperate. "Tell me. I will do anything."

"I don't want anything from you."

She slammed her head against the floor. The sound made Garrett flinch. Her hands grabbed at my legs, fingers digging into the fabric of my pants.

"There is nothing special about my tears or getting on my knees." Her voice muffled against my shin. "I just ask for mercy. If not for Hazel, for your father's sake."

I ripped my legs free from her grip. "You never had mercy on us once."

She looked up at me.

"If not for the fact that my mother was a fish out of water," I continued, "An Omega with no family and nowhere to go... At least for the fact that I was a child... You could have had mercy. But no. No, you made sure I knew my place in this world and how much better off your daughter was always going to be."

My hands curled into fists at my sides.

"Yesterday, you gloated about murder in my ear because you wanted me to hurt instead of calling your daughter to order."

"Please—"

"You are begging me because I hold power over you right now." I leaned down slightly. "Hazel also has a murder charge. Milo. What about his family? Will you cry and get on your knees like this for them?"

"Milo betrayed you." Isobel's face twisted. "He shattered his mate bond to you and broke your heart. Why would you care about him?"

I caught the flex of Baruch's hand in my peripheral vision. A barely contained reaction to hearing his brother's name thrown around like it meant nothing.

"Perhaps because I am not you," I said.

"But I will beg." She grabbed at me again. "I will ask for forgiveness. I would do anything."

I let the silence stretch. Let her hope build in the quiet.

"Okay."

Her head snapped up. "What?"

"I will let the charge against her go." I kept my tone even. "I will beg the elders for leniency. The Milo situation can be explained away. I can tell from how sane you still are that his family isn't here. And if there is no proof of foul play in the charge Milo caught because of Hazel or the sentencing. There is a chance this can be put behind her."

Hope blazed in her eyes.

"But will you sacrifice for her?" I asked.

"Yes." The word came out breathless. "I will use everything I have to make amends to you. To Milo's family if I find them. Till the end of my time."

"Good." I straightened fully. "Confess about what you did to my mother in the same graphic detail you used when you whispered it in my ear. With the pillow. Until she stopped struggling."

The color drained from her face. "What?"

"Too hard?" I tilted my head. "Does your motherhood have its limits?"

"It doesn't." She swallowed hard. "But how do I know you will keep your own word?"

"I will go first." I shrugged. "Once I do that, you follow suit. That is all the push you need."

"That is..." She nodded quickly. "Good."

I watched the light return to her eyes. Watched her drink in the possibility of winning this with tears and a promise to confess. She probably thought she had me. That I would hand over my cards and give her the higher power. That tears and maternal desperation could move me.

Foolish. But it showed me how terrified and powerless she now was. She has not a card to play against me.

I smiled. "The hope you have in your eyes is lovely. But goddess, is it foolish."

The light died.

"What?"

"I'm not making any deal."

She stared at me.

"I want Hazel to die," I said clearly. "And she will."

I leaned down until my mouth was close to her ear.

"I promise you, stepmother. You will hold your daughter's beheaded head."

When I pulled back, Isobel shuddered, her whole body trembling.

"I do not need your confession." My voice came out cold. "I do not need your penance. All I want is your suffering. And I promise you. Oh, I promise you, stepmother. I am going to enjoy this. Like you enjoyed watching me and my mother suffer."

I reached down and wiped the tears from her cheeks with my thumb.

"We are done here. Scurry away before a new charge is added to the noose on Hazel's neck because of you."

Something snapped.

Isobel's face contorted. "You bitch! I should have killed you before you even grew. What a great mistake we made to trust that fuckass Alpha to ruin and end your life."

Baruch moved toward her. She slapped his hand away hard enough that the sound cracked through the room.

"I will leave on my own accord."

She stood slowly, unsteady on her feet. Her gaze locked onto mine.

"You had a chance to fix this chasm between us. But no."

She laughed. The sound was sharp and bitter.

"My daughter will live regardless, you know. And you will be reminded at the end of the day. Your bitch of a mother is still six feet under."

"Time will tell," I said even if I had the urge right there to slit her throat.

Isobel turned back to the hidden passage. She disappeared into the darkness beyond the bookshelf as the panel swung shut behind her with a heavy thud.

The room fell into silence.

My heart was pounding. All I felt now was certainty. It settled into my bones, cold and absolute.

There would be no mercy. Not for Hazel. Not for Isobel. Not for father. Not for anyone who had spent years making sure I knew exactly how worthless I was supposed to be.

They had made their choices. Now they would live with the consequences.

Or die with them.

Chapter 197: Dark Horse

CIAN

The door closed behind Fia with a soft click that I felt more than heard.

I stood there longer than I should have. Staring at the closed door like I could will it back open. Like I could reverse the decision she had made and bring her back to where I could actually protect her instead of trusting protocol and neutral escorts to keep her safe.

My hands flexed at my sides.

She chose this. I had to respect that. But respect did not mean I liked it. It did not mean the primal part of me that screamed at separation was suddenly quiet and understanding. It was not. It was loud and insistent. In fact, every instinct I had demanded I follow her. Make sure she arrived safely. Make sure no one laid a finger on her.

I forced myself to turn away.

There were other matters that needed my attention. Things I had set aside while the emissaries were here. Things that would not wait just because my mate had left for Silver Creek.

My mother.

I needed to get her back to her room. She had been in the infirmary long enough and Maren had been clear about her recovery. She had rest. Proper rest. Now, she needed to be in her own space where she could live without the clinical atmosphere of medical observation weighing on her.

I moved through the halls with purpose. The estate was quieter now. The morning was still early enough that most of the pack had not fully woken yet. The silence suited me. It gave me space to think.

The infirmary doors opened before I reached them. One of the younger healers stepped out carrying linens bundled in her arms. She saw me and immediately bowed her head.

"Alpha."

I nodded once and stepped past her into the infirmary proper.

The space was nauseously bright. It did help that the morning light filtered through the high windows and cast everything in soft gold. It made the harsh white light less monotone.

But something felt off.

I scanned the room quickly. The bed where my mother had been was empty. The sheets were now pulled tight and neat.

There was also no sign of her anywhere.

Elder Thorne stood near the far wall organizing supplies on a shelf. He glanced over his shoulder when he heard my footsteps and straightened immediately.

"Alpha Cian," he said. "I did not expect you back so early."

"Where is my mother?" I asked.

He blinked at me. Then frowned slightly. "She left."

"Left?"

"Yes." He set down the jar he had been holding and turned to face me fully. "Some time ago actually. She said she was feeling well enough to return to her room and did not want to be coddled any longer."

I felt my jaw tighten. "How long ago?"

"Perhaps an hour? Maybe more." He tilted his head slightly. "Is something wrong?"

I did not answer. I turned and walked back out the way I came. My strides were longer now. Faster. Something cold was settling in my chest. Something that felt too much like dread.

From our conversation the night before, it was clear that mother had woken with fear in her eyes. Fear about Madeline. She had made it clear the second she could speak that she did not want Madeline here. She did not want her anywhere near me or this pack. And now she was up and moving around when she should have been resting.

I knew exactly where she had gone. But first, I needed to confirm.

The walk to my mother's room felt longer than it should have. The halls stretched and twisted and every second that passed tightened the knot in my chest. I reached her door and pushed it open without knocking.

The room was chaos.

Not the broken kind. There was nothing smashed or overturned. What did have was uncoordinated movement everywhere. Omegas filled the space, crossing paths with rags in their hands, buckets at their feet, brooms scraping softly against the floor. The room has long lost its herbal scent and now smelled sharp and clean.

Also, The giant herb capsule that had dominated the center of the room was gone, leaving empty space where it had been. The floor beneath it was being scrubbed clean by two Omegas on their hands and knees.

Another was wiping down the windows with careful precision.

They all looked up when I entered. Their eyes went wide with surprise.

"Good morning, Alpha Cian," one of them said quickly. The others echoed the greeting in a scattered chorus of voices.

I waved a hand absently. "Is my mother here?"

They exchanged glances. The one closest to me straightened and shook her head. "No, Alpha. She left."

"Left where?"

"To see your guest," another Omega said from near the window. "Lady Madeline Blossom."

The words hit me like cold water.

My blood went cold. Actually cold. Like ice spreading through my veins and freezing everything in its path.

If my mother had gone to see Madeline then I was right. Mother would have an agenda going to see her first thing in the morning. And considering how vocal she had been about her fears the second her eyes opened, I knew it was not going to be anything good.

I turned and left without another word.

The guest wing was on the other side of the estate. Far enough that it gave me time to think. To prepare. To figure out what I was going to say when I got there. But my mind was moving too fast. Racing ahead of itself. Imagining confrontations and arguments and my mother saying things she could not take back.

When I reached Madeline's door, I did not stop. I did not knock. Neither did I announce myself.

I simply forced it open.

The door swung wide and I stepped through expecting to see my mother mid-conversation. Mid-tirade. Mid something that would require damage control.

But it was just Madeline.

She was standing near the bed wrapped in a towel. Just a towel. White and damp and clinging to her in ways that made my brain stutter for half a second before I processed what I was actually seeing.

Her hand flew to her chest. Gripping the towel tighter even though it had not been in danger of falling.

"Cian!" Her eyes went wide.

Chapter 198: Two can tango

CIAN

I looked away immediately. Goddess, I turned my head so fast I felt something in my neck protest. Heat flooded my face. The embarrassment that clawed over me was immediate.

"I am sorry," I said quickly. "I thought... I thought my mother was here."

I heard her shuffle. Heard fabric moving and her breathing evening out.

"I will go out," I added.

"No." Her voice was steady now. "It is fine. You can turn back now."

I hesitated. Then slowly turned my head back toward her.

The towel was secured properly now. Tucked tight against her body. She looked composed despite everything.

"Is there a valid reason why you barged into my room," she asked, "or did you just miss me that much?"

The words landed wrong and made my spine go rigid.

"I thought my mother was here to give you hell," I said. "I guess I was wrong."

Then the second part of what she said registered. The joke about missing her. About wanting to see her.

"And please," I added quickly. "We should not joke like that. I am married."

Her eyes widened. Just slightly. Like she was surprised by the direction I had taken it. Like I was the one making it weird.

"Well," she said slowly, "you know my humor. And I am well aware you are married. I am not that desperate."

I felt heat crawl up the back of my neck. "I apologize."

"I hear you. I get it." She crossed her arms loosely over her chest. "But I do not understand why everyone believes my life should revolve around wanting you back."

I frowned. "What?"

"Your mother was indeed here to go ham on me."

I rubbed my forehead, feeling the tension building there like pressure behind my eyes. "I apologize."

"You do not even know what she said."

"Whatever it is—"

"No." She cut me off cleanly. "I will tell you exactly what your mother said."

I waited.

"She practically believes I will ruin your relationship with the new girl." Madeline's voice was even. She did not seem angry. "Fia seems lovely but I do not think I have that power."

She took a few steps closer.

I took a step back instinctively.

Madeline stopped and her gaze sharpened as they dug into the depths of my soul. "I wonder why your mother sees me as a threat." She paused. "Are you still in love with me, Cian?"

The question hung in the air between us. Then I realized my silence would be sending a different message.

I straightened my posture immediately and looked her directly in the eye.

"No," I said. "Not anymore."

She nodded slowly. "You should tell your mother that. You know."

"I have and I will reiterate." I took a breath. "Again, I apologize for what happened."

She gave me a polite smile. "That is fine."

The silence stretched once more.

"My brother will be visiting," she said after a moment. "He has something to take from me considering my father does not want me anywhere near him now."

I caught that. I felt it snag on something in my mind. "What?"

She chuckled. It was low and tired sound. "It is nothing. I have just been practically disowned."

"What?" The word came out even sharper this time around. "Why would he..."

"Because I helped you." She said it simply. Like it was obvious. "My coven is not happy about that. And my father's hand was forced. He has to punish me somehow."

I walked closer to her. Close enough to see the lines of exhaustion around her eyes. "I am so sorry."

"It is what it is."

"I will talk to your father," I said. "And maybe the heads of your coven. Set this right."

"You mean threaten."

I opened my mouth. But then closed it. Because she wasn't entirely wrong.

She shook her head. "No. Do not worry about it. It is just coven business." She waved a hand dismissively. "Just tell me when I can leave and I will be out of your hair and facing my business."

"No." The word came out firm. "I cannot allow that."

She looked at me. Really looked at me.

"You know I cannot allow that," I continued. "What the fuck? Why would your father do this?"

"Mostly, the same reason your mother came." Her voice softened just slightly. "He believes I am here to do some minor mending. Fix things between us." She paused. "That and the coven of course is pressuring him. There is a lot even the father supreme cannot overcome. It is the price to pay for holding such a high position in magical dealings."

Magic.

The word made my brain click at something.

Ophelia. The witch whose head had exploded.

It somehow sort of reminded me of how Madeline was still a suspect. About how I had to psychoanalyse every and anything she was saying.

My mind immediately went through the motions. What could Madeline gain if she was ostracized by her coven?

The answer came unbidden.

Proximity.

Everyone seemed worried that she and I would inadvertently get back together. Madeline could see that staying here would not be viable unless she made it so.

It sounded crazy to consider. Because the Madeline I knew was not like this. She was not manipulative or calculating in that way.

But I had made a promise to question everything odd. And my instincts did not seem like they would be wrong.

"I will get you a place," I said.

"I am an independent woman." Her tone was polite but firm. "I will handle it and I am not so comfortable with you handling that. You do not owe me because I saved your mother."

"I do though." I kept my voice steady. "And this pack... everyone in it does. They will when I tell them what you have done for us."

"It is fine."

I knew what she was gently nudging at. What she was not saying outright but wanted me to offer.

"Then stay here," I said. "Stay for a while. It is big. It is free. You will be safe and comfortable here."

She hesitated. Just for a moment. "I should not. Your mother is already bothered and your mate probably does not say it. But I am sure she feels the same way as well."

"Oh I insist. Fia isn't like that and I will make sure my mother stops her tirade."

Madeline seemed to think about it. Her gaze drifted like she was deeply considering it.

Then she smiled once more. "Okay. Only for a month at worst."

I managed a smile back. "No problem."

But inside, things were a lot more different. I was measuring every word and every gesture for signs of deception.

Because if Madeline was playing a game, I needed to know. Uncle Gabriel was still a threat to my stability as Alpha.

Chapter 199: Divine Demotion

FIA

A sentinel appeared in the doorway. He was young and he has this nervous energy that radiated off him in waves.

"Luna Fia." He bowed his head. "The elder circle is ready for you. The trials are about to continue."

I stood. "Alright."

My legs moved mechanically. One foot in front of the other. Garrett and Baruch fell into step behind me.

The corridor stretched ahead. Cold stone walls pressed in from both sides. The air felt thick as well.

Someone rounded the corner ahead.

I didn't see her until it was too late. My shoulder connected with hers and the impact jolted through me.

"I'm sorry," I said automatically the second we made eye contact.

She shuddered. Her entire body went rigid. Her mouth opened, closed, opened again.

"Athena?"

The word came out strangled. Barely more than a whisper. Her eyes were wide and her pupils dilated.

She looked at me like I was a ghost. Like I had crawled out of her worst nightmare and materialized in front of her.

She was dressed well. A dark suit that probably cost more than most people made in a month. Her lips were painted ruby red. But beneath the polish, beneath the carefully constructed appearance, I saw something raw. Something that looked almost like terror.

"I'm sorry," I said again. "I'm not Athena. My name is Fia."

Then I moved past her.

But her scent lingered. The expensive perfume was cloying.

I glanced back once. She hadn't moved. She stood frozen in the middle of the corridor, staring after me with that same horrified expression etched across her face.

What was that about?

The question circled in my mind. Who was Athena? Did I look like her? Had she done something to this woman? The reaction had been visceral. Immediate. Like seeing me had physically hurt her.

I pushed the thought away. Filed it somewhere in the back of my mind to examine later. Right now, I had bigger concerns.

The door to the elder circle building loomed ahead. The sentinel pushed it open. I stepped through.

The room was already occupied.

Elders sat in their designated places. The semi-circle formation made the space feel like an arena. Like I was stepping into something designed to devour me whole.

My father sat off to one side. His face was carefully blank. The mask he always wore when he wanted to pretend he didn't feel anything.

Isobel was next to him. Her eyes found mine immediately. The hatred there could be seen from a mile away. It rolled off her in waves so thick I could almost taste it.

I didn't look away. I held her gaze until she broke first.

The lead elder stood. He was older than time itself, or at least he looked it. Gray hair. Deep lines carved into his face. Eyes that had seen too much and judged even more.

He walked toward me.

That was when I saw her.

Hazel.

She stood below the semi-circle. Her eyes locked onto mine. The arrogance that usually defined her was gone. In its place was something easier to read. At face value, it might look like defiance. But I knew very well that this was desperation wearing defiance's mask.

I almost smiled.

Almost.

"Please." The lead elder's voice pulled my attention back. "Have your seat at the witness corner."

I moved to the designated spot. The chair was simple. Wooden. Uncomfortable by design. Just as everything in this room was designed for a purpose.

Baruch and Garrett positioned themselves opposite me. Their presence was a reminder that I wasn't alone in this. That I had people who would stand with me regardless of how this played out.

Not that the script was going to change right in front of my face. I looked back at Isobel who was playing with her fingers at this point because what else could she do?

Her daughter was finished.

The lead elder returned to his seat. He settled in with the careful movements of someone whose bones ached.

"The case against Hazel Hughes continues."

The back door opened.

I turned.

The woman from the corridor entered. The one who had called me Athena. She walked with purpose now, the shock from our encounter seemingly tucked away. But I could still see it in the tightness around her eyes. The way her jaw was set just a fraction too firm.

A man walked beside her. He looked roughly the same age as her. But where she moved with practiced grace, he carried himself with the unmistakable confidence of an Alpha. Power rolled off him in quiet waves.

Visitors, probably.

Though why they were here, I couldn't guess.

The man's eyes swept the room and they landed on me.

I watched in real time as he froze.

It was brief. For a fraction of a second, his face went cold.

More like completely blank. Like someone had flipped a switch and shut down every emotion he possessed.

But I had seen it.

The woman noticed too. She has noticed him staring and she immediately jabbed him by the hand to break him out of the trance he was in.

She alsoeaned in and whispered something I couldn't hear.

He blinked. The mask cracked and then he nodded once as they continued walking.

What the hell was that?

Did I really look that much like this Athena person? And who was she to inspire that kind of reaction? Had she hurt them? Betrayed them? The woman had looked horrified. The man had looked... I wasn't even sure what that was.

"Hazel Hughes stands accused of pack endangerment, attempted kin slaughter, and murder."

The lead elder's voice cut through my thoughts like a blade.

"She has pleaded not guilty. Evidence and witness testimony was given time to be gathered and now, we can begin."

I forced myself to focus. To push aside the mystery of Athena and the two strangers who seemed to have a bad memory of her face.

"On to the matter of pack endangerment..."

The process was methodical. Clinical. They called witnesses. Omega Delta went first. She recounted what she had seen with the careful precision of someone who knew every word mattered.

My stepmother was questioned next. Isobel's performance was masterful. She played the concerned parent. The Luna who only wanted truth and justice. Her voice never wavered. Her expression stayed perfectly controlled.

I wanted to laugh.

Others were called. Their testimonies built on each other. Piece by piece. Fact by fact. They did not call me though.

Me who suffered the brunt of it. I guess that would have been a conflict of interest maybe.

But... they did play the recording.

My recording.

My voice filled the room. Hazel's responses echoed back. The lies were obvious now. Glaring. The inconsistencies in her story and those of the witnesses whether true or fabricated unraveled in real time as the recording played.

I watched Hazel's face. I watched the moment she realized how badly she had miscalculated. How thoroughly I had documented her failure.

The recording ended.

Silence stretched across the room like smoke.

"Hazel Hughes." The lead elder's voice was grave when he finally broke the silence. "You endangered this pack. The evidence is clear. The punishment for this crime is that you must remember that the privilege you were born with can be taken at any time."

He paused.

"Your ranking will drop by one standing. You will be demoted from the ranks of Luna to that of Beta."

Another elder stood.

I recognized her. Like Elder Moira back at Skollrend, she was a spiritual guide. One of the few that still has a semblance it connection to the goddess Selene.

She began to pray.

The words were in the old language. The sounds rolled through the room like thunder. Like the earth itself was speaking.

I watched Hazel dropped to her knees.

Her hands clutched at her chest. Her mouth opened in a silent scream. The air around her shimmered. Visible power wrapped around her body like chains.

The goddess was answering the prayer.

My eyes were glued to what was happening and so was everyone. There was something primal about witnessing divine punishment. Something that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Hazel gasped. Her whole body convulsed. Then she went still.

The shimmering stopped and the Elder sat right back down.

Hazel was gasping. Her face was pale. Sweat beaded on her forehead. She looked smaller somehow. Diminished. The invisible weight of her Luna status had been stripped away and everyone in this room could feel its absence.

"It seems the goddess agrees with your punishment."

The lead elder's tone was matter of fact. Like he had just commented on the weather instead of watching divine intervention reshape reality.

He leaned forward slightly.

"Do you still hold to the stance that you are not guilty? There are two charges left."

Hazel looked up. Her eyes were glassy. Unfocused. She was still reeling from what had just happened.

But still, her audacity had no bounds.

"I am not guilty."

Her voice shook. The words came out weak and unconvincing.

But she had said them.

"Very well." The lead elder settled back in his chair. "On to the matter of attempted kin slaughter."

Chapter 200: I love your tears

HAZEL

The pain lingered in my chest like a brand.

It wasn't sharp anymore. The white-hot agony that had forced me to my knees had faded to a dull, persistent ache. But it wasn't the physical sensation that gutted me. It was everything else.

The air tasted different. Thinner somehow. Like I was breathing through a filter that hadn't been there before. My skin felt wrong. Too tight in some places, too loose in others. I looked down at my hands and they looked the same. Same pale skin. Same carefully manicured nails. But they didn't feel like mine anymore.

Everything was different.

I lifted my gaze and found my mother. Tears brimmed in her eyes. She wasn't crying yet but she was close. Her lips pressed together in a thin line. Her hands were clasped so tightly in her lap that her knuckles had gone white.

She looked like she was mourning.

Maybe she was.

My attention drifted to my grandmother. She sat with a rigid posture. Her face gave nothing away. But her eyes weren't on me. They were locked on something across the room.

I followed her line of sight.

Fia.

That useless, pathetic little bitch sat in the witness corner like she belonged there. Like she had any right to be in this room at all. My grandmother stared at her with an intensity that made no sense. Why? Why was she fixated on that girl? What could possibly be so interesting about Fia that it warranted that kind of attention?

I wanted to ask. Wanted to demand an explanation right where I was.

But I couldn't speak. I couldn't even move. The lead elder's voice cut through the room again and I had no choice but to listen.

"You, Hazel Hughes, in another pack territory, attacked your sister physically and even slit her throat." His words were measured. Clinical. "Is that true or not?"

My throat tightened. The accusation hung in the air like smoke. Heavy and suffocating.

"I verbally abused her," I said. My voice came out steadier than I expected. "I roughed her up a little. But I did not slit her throat."

I paused. Let the words settle.

"My insane sister over here did that herself."

"Language, please."

The reprimand was firm. The audacity the man has caused me to bite down on the inside of my cheek hard enough to taste copper.

The lead elder shifted in his seat. His eyes moved from me to Fia.

"Luna Fia, would you like to talk?"

Luna Fia.

The title made my stomach turn. She wasn't a Luna. She was nothing. A reject. A failure. A fucking lowborn who deserved to have no place in this world.

Fia nodded. She stood slowly. Her movements were deliberate. Pathetically careful. Did she think she was some sort of egg?

She lifted one hand to her neck. Her fingers pressed against the smooth, unmarked skin there. The audacity. She didn't even have a scar. Not even a faint line. Nothing to show that I had ever touched her.

Omegas didn't help that quickly. So her Alpha must have put in some good work to helping her get stitched up.

For the first time, I hated myself for letting Fia take my place at the altar.

The message Fia was sending was however clear as day. She wanted to be a victim.

When she spoke, her voice shook. "I'm sorry. It's so hard to relive this. I thought I was going to die."

I felt bile rise in my throat. The faux pick-me energy radiating off her worked so well that it nauseated me.

She sniffled. Like actually sniffled like some kind of wounded animal begging for scraps of sympathy and it seemed to be working.

"Hazel has already been proven to be dishonest," Fia continued. Her voice was soft. Fragile. "Considering she lied about not plotting that I be the one to marry Cian Donlon."

She paused and let her poison seep in.

"If it didn't work out in the end, I would most likely be dead already."

She gave a long sigh. This one was even more theatrical.

But everyone seemed to be buying it.

"I have only the goddess to thank."

I wanted to scream. Wanted to tear that false innocence right off her face and show everyone what she really was. A liar. A manipulator. Someone who had orchestrated this entire nightmare just to watch me burn.

But I stayed silent and clenched my jaw so hard my teeth ached.

"And it's so funny," Fia said, her voice taking on a slightly sharper edge, "how she can claim this when I was the one who was brutalized all over my body and with a slit throat while she got away unscathed if she is indeed the victim."

"That Alpha of yours broke my hand!"

The words burst out of me before I could stop them. Anger flooded my system. Hot and reckless.

"That is enough, Beta Hazel."

Beta Hazel?

Not Luna...

Beta.

The correction hit me like a physical blow. My chest constricted. The dull ache flared back to life for just a second. A reminder of what I had lost. What had been taken from me.

I couldn't breathe.

"Please continue, Luna Fia."

Luna Fia...

Luna... Fia.

Luna Fia.

The title echoed in my head. Over and over. A cruel taunt that wouldn't stop.

My eyes went wide. The reality of my situation crashed over me like a wave. If Fia won this round, I would be demoted again. One more rank lower. From Beta to Gamma.

Gamma.

The word alone made me want to vomit.

And then there was Milo's case. That one couldn't be proven, right? I had made sure of it. My tracks were usually covered. But there was no way there was anything against me. There could not be evidence. His family wasn't even here. Either, mother's assassins had either found them or they had disappeared from the face of the earth. Any was good by me.

But if this bitch who had made all of this happen was playing the victim well enough to convince these elders, what was to say she didn't have something on that too?

What if Milo had spoken to her before I had to take him out?

What if he had told her something that implicated me?

My gaze snapped to Fia. She was looking directly at me. And then she smiled.

That smile nearly sent me over the edge. It was small. Subtle. But I saw it. The satisfaction lurking behind that false mask of innocence.

She was enjoying this.

I felt something crack inside me. Something dangerous and desperate. My hands trembled. My vision blurred at the edges. I was losing. I was actually losing.

Then I looked back at my grandmother.

Her eyes were on me now. Not on Fia. On me. Her expression was calm. Controlled. And in that gaze, I saw a message.

Calm yourself.

The command was silent but clear. I sucked in a breath.

I forced my hands to still. Forced my face to smooth out. She was right. I couldn't afford to fall apart. Not here. Not now.

The House of Strati was on my side. My grandmother wouldn't let me fall. Aldric wouldn't let me fall. I just had to hold on a little longer.

"That will be all," Fia said softly. "I hope justice is served."

The elders turned to me. One of them produced that stupid recording device. My stomach dropped again.

They played the tape.

I heard myself. My voice sharp and venomous. The sound of Fia's body hitting the mirror. The crash of glass. My own laughter cutting through the chaos.

"You bitch," I heard myself say. "Die."

The word hung in the air. Damning. Undeniable. Even if I hadn't been the one to slit her throat.

"The evidence is outstanding," the lead elder said. His tone was grave. Final. "You did attempt to kill Fia."

No. No, no, no.

"For that, you will be demoted a rank lower."

Tears filled my eyes without warning. I didn't mean for them to come. I didn't want to show any weakness in front of these people. But I couldn't stop them.

I looked at Fia. Then at Baruch who stood flanked behind her.

Do something, I wanted to scream at him. Slit that bitch's throat. I wouldn't even mind paying for it. As long as Fia didn't breathe anymore.

But he didn't look my way. He stared ahead with an expression I couldn't read. Pain, maybe. Like seeing me like this hurt him.

That thought brought a small smile to my face despite everything. He couldn't bear to see me suffer. That had to mean something.

I had faith in Aldric. In my grandmother. They would get me out of this. They had to.

The spiritual elder stood.

I braced myself as she did her stupid prayer again.

The pain hit me like lightning. Worse than before. So much worse. I fell to my knees and spit forced its way out of my mouth. My eyes widened as hot white agony blasted through every nerve in my body.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!"

My nails scraped against the floor. I squeezed my hands into fists so tight I felt something pop. The goddess was answering their prayer again. Damning me. Stripping away another piece of who I was.

From Luna to Beta to Gamma.

This wasn't a life. This was a slow death.

When the pain finally slowed, that grating voice returned.

"Now to the matter of murder. The murder of the sentinel Milo Ashford. Do you still plead not guilty?"

My body shook. I couldn't stop it. Every muscle trembled like I was coming apart at the seams.

Should I just confess? End this nightmare?

But that was death. Certain death. Any option was death on this round.

I looked up at my grandmother. Silently begging her to play the card. Whatever she had planned, now was the time. Please.

Milo's family was still nowhere in sight. That should have been a relief. But it wasn't. I was still afraid.

Afraid of Fia.

I glanced at her and she had that sick smile on her face again. Like she was savoring every second of my suffering.

Despite the shaking, despite the fear crawling up my spine, I forced the words out.

"Not guilty."

"We did reach out to the Ashfords but we couldn't find them," the lead elder said. His voice carried a note of something I couldn't quite place. "The evidence we have gathered also seems to prove that Milo Ashford did attempt to rape you."

A small smile found my face before I could stop it. Relief flooded through me so fast it made me dizzy. I looked down at the ground in attempt to hide the expression. I tried to school my features into something more appropriate so I wouldn't look more guilty.

This was it. This was the way out.

But then Fia's voice cut through the room.

"I do not think so."