

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 201: Hold that hammer -

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FIA

I stood slowly, the words leaving my mouth before I could second-guess them.

"I do not think so."

The room shifted. Every head turned toward me. The elders. Father and stepmother. The strange woman and man. Even the sentinels by the door straightened, their attention pulled in my direction.

My father's voice cut through the sudden quiet. "Fia."

It was a sharp warning. But the man didn't have that kind of power over me anymore.

I didn't look at him. My eyes stayed locked on the lead elder's face. On the furrow between his brows. On the way his mouth had pressed into a thin line.

"Milo's family would be here today," I said. My voice carried farther than I expected. Steadier. "But they feared for their lives."

The whispers started immediately. Low murmurs that rippled through the room like wind through grass.

My father stood. I felt the movement more than saw it. The scrape of his chair. The rustle of fabric.

"Fia," he said again.

I kept my gaze forward.

"They believed somebody wanted to assassinate them." I let the words hang there. I let them settle into the minds of everyone listening. "I'm not pointing fingers when I say somebody."

My eyes drifted then. Just for a moment. Just long enough to find her.

Isobel.

She sat rigid in her seat. Her face had gone gaunt. Pale. The color had drained from her skin so completely she looked like a ghost. Her lips parted slightly but no sound came out.

I turned back to the elders.

"But they sought asylum with me," I said. "And I got evidence. Milo's words himself."

The lead elder leaned forward. His fingers steepled beneath his chin. The other elders exchanged glances. Quick. Uncertain.

"If you have evidence," the lead elder said slowly, "then play it."

My hand moved to my pocket. My fingers closed around my phone. The weight of it felt heavier than it should have. I pulled it up. Unlocked the screen. Opened the audio app.

The file was right there. Waiting.

I pressed play.

Static crackled first. Then breathing. Heavy and uneven. Like someone trying to steady themselves before speaking.

Then Milo's voice filled the room.

"Man, I don't even know where to start with this."

The words were thick. Tired. Like he'd been carrying something too heavy for too long.

"I was used. I know that now. I was used by a girl I thought loved me. A girl who said she cared for me at the time. And because of that love, because I believed it, I betrayed my mate. I put her in a position where she was seen as the traitor of the pack."

He paused. The silence stretched. I watched the elders lean in closer.

"But she doesn't love me," Milo continued. His voice cracked slightly. "She just used me. To hurt her sister. To sell her story even more. And I'm scared, man. I'm scared all that betrayal was for nothing. I don't know how to make this shit right."

There was another pause on the voicemail. It was longer this time.

"But I'm going to," he said. His voice firmed up. "Because it's what a man should do. It's what I should have done from the start."

He exhaled. Long and shaky.

"I love you, Barry. I know you hate that nickname. But just... just... Take care of grandmother. Because I might not see her for a while."

The recording ended.

Silence crashed down like a wave. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke.

Then the whispers started again. Louder this time. More urgent.

I looked at the elders. "That's Milo saying he betrayed me because he thought my sister loved him. And when he realized he'd been used, he wanted to make things right. Confess. But he couldn't."

I let my gaze drift to Hazel. She stared at me with wide eyes. Her face had gone pale too but in a different way than Isobel's. Hers was the pallor of someone cornered. Trapped.

"Because all of a sudden," I said, "he was accused of rape. And put to death."

I paused. Let the implication sink in.

"Makes you wonder."

The laugh started small. A hollow sound that didn't quite reach Hazel's eyes. Then it grew. Louder. Sharper. Until it turned into something manic. Something unhinged.

"You psychotic evil bitch!" The words tore out of her. "Wow. I didn't think you had it in you. But you want me dead."

She pushed herself up. Her movements were jerky. Uncontrolled.

"If I just die," she screamed, "I'll take you with me!"

She lunged forward. Her body twisted as she tried to jump toward the semicircle of tables where the elders sat. Where I stood.

The front doors burst open. Sentinels poured through. Four of them. They grabbed Hazel before she made it two steps. Their hands locked around her arms. Her waist. She thrashed against them. Screaming. Clawing.

"Let me go! Let me go!"

I stood perfectly still. My expression didn't change.

"If that isn't a confession," I said quietly, "I don't know what is."

The lead elder's face had gone hard. His jaw set. He looked at Hazel struggling in the sentinels' grip. Then back to me.

"We all listened to the evidence," he said. His voice carried the weight of judgment. "It makes sense why the Ashfords disappeared from the face of the earth when we looked for them."

Movement caught my eye. A woman stood. It was the strange lady from before who had called me Athena.

"This gathering feels biased," she said.

The lead elder's head snapped toward her. "What?"

"I said it feels biased." Her voice was cool. Clinical and detached in a way that made you feel sick to the stomach. "That recording could have been doctored for all we know."

My fingers tightened around my phone.

"Why does she even have to speak?" the woman continued. "This matter concerns the Ashfords."

I met her gaze directly. "I was his ex-mate. I have as much standing here as anyone. The reason he was killed was because of me."

My voice didn't waver. Neither did it shake.

"Who are you," I asked, "to even have a say at this table?"

She smiled. It didn't reach her eyes.

"I am Isobel's mother," she said. "Pauline Strati."

The name hit the room like a stone dropped in still water. Ripples spread outward. There were more whispers. More sidelong glances.

I looked at the elders. "The recording can be scanned. There's time." I gestured toward where Hazel still struggled against the sentinels. "Even if Hazel's outburst is more than enough, there's time. And I have nothing to hide."

Pauline's smile didn't falter. But something flickered behind her eyes. Something cold and calculating.

The lead elder looked between us. Between me and Pauline. Between the phone in my hand and Hazel being restrained by four grown men.

"We will have the recording examined," he said finally. "But the accused's reaction speaks volumes on its own."

Hazel's screaming had turned to sobs. The broken and desperate type. She sagged in the sentinels' grip. Isobel on the other hand, still looked like death itself had touched her shoulder.

I slipped my phone back into my pocket. My heart hammered against my ribs but I kept my breathing even. And I kept my face calm.

Baruch stood behind me still. I felt his presence like a steady weight at my back. Grounding me.

The lead elder stood. The other elders followed suit.

"This council will reconvene after the evidence has been properly examined," he said. "Until then, Hazel Hughes will remain in custody."

Hazel's head snapped up. "No. No, you can't do this!"

The sentinels dragged Hazel toward the side door. Her protests echoed off the walls until the door slammed shut behind them.

Then silence fell again.

I turned slowly. My eyes found my father. He looked at me with an expression I could read as clear as day.

Pure unadulterated disgust.

Then I looked back at the other woman. Pauline Strati.

It was odd to see a Strati here because everyone knew that stepmother's parents practically disowned her the second she took my father's hand.

Was this also the doing of Gabriel?

Chapter 202: The top drawer

CIAN

I left Madeline's room with my thoughts churning like a storm I couldn't quiet.

My feet carried me through the hallways without conscious direction. I needed to move. Needed to burn off whatever this restless energy was that had taken root in my chest.

The training grounds sprawled out behind the main estate. Open space ringed with forest on three sides. I spotted Ronan immediately. He was alone, working through a series of strikes against one of the practice dummies. His movements were fluid and controlled.

"Ronan," I called out.

He turned, wiping sweat from his brow. "Cian."

"Spar with me."

He raised an eyebrow but didn't question it. He just nodded and moved to the center of the ring. I joined him there, rolling my shoulders to loosen them.

We circled each other. It was a familiar dance before we engaged.

"I was right," I said. "About Madeline."

Ronan's stance shifted slightly. Prepared but listening. "Right about what?"

"C'mon. That she wants to be here. For a reason."

He made the first move. A quick jab that I blocked easily. "You're talking too fast and I am so lost. Begin from the beginning."

I deflected his next strike and countered with one of my own. He dodged. "Madeline just told me she practically got disowned. By her family and her coven."

That made him pause. Just for a fraction of a second. "Goddess. That's horrible."

"Yeah." I landed a hit to his shoulder. It wasn't hard enough to hurt. This was just a spar after all. "But she wants to stay here."

"Not without your permission though." Ronan swept low, trying to take my legs out. I jumped back. "So does it even matter?"

The words stuck in my throat for a moment. I threw a combination. Left, right, left. He blocked all three.

"I let her."

Ronan stopped moving. Fully stopped. "What?"

I mirrored his stillness. "What?"

"With the way you are actively demonizing her," he said, and his voice had an edge to it now, "why would you let her stay?"

I felt my jaw tighten. "To figure out her game."

"This is on you, Cian."

The disappointment in his tone made something hot flare in my chest. I came at him harder. My fist connected with his ribs. He grunted but didn't back down.

"I only did it to watch her," I said. "To see what she's playing at."

Ronan blocked my next strike and shoved me back. There was something in his expression. Something that looked almost sad. "Right. And it has nothing to do with the fact that there is some strong dissonance going on here."

"Why are you defending her?" The question came out sharper than I intended.

We were moving faster now. Trading blows with more force behind them.

"Does it sound like I am doing that?" Ronan caught my wrist and twisted. I broke free and drove my elbow toward his face. He ducked.

"Yeah. You have been defending her since I brought this topic to you. If I didn't know better. I'd think you are in cohorts with her or something."

"You only feel that way because I am making you uncomfortable."

I threw a punch. He sidestepped. "Well yes. You keep implying I am still in love with her or something and I am not."

Ronan came at me then. Really came at me. His fist caught my jaw and my head snapped to the side. I tasted copper.

"You didn't have to make her stay," he said, breathing hard now. "You had full control over that if you felt she was suspicious. But you did. Why?"

"I just told you." I wiped blood from my lip and launched myself at him. We grappled, both trying to gain the upper hand. "To watch her. To see what her game is about."

"That is if she indeed killed Ophelia." Ronan's voice was strained with effort as we struggled. "That is if she is indeed working for Gabriel. But we don't know that. You don't know that."

I shoved him back hard. He stumbled but kept his footing.

"And she did you a solid one with your mother and your mate," he continued. "She doesn't deserve for you to wrap your unresolved feelings in suspicions just because you won't have a real and mature discussion and close that Chapter."

Something in me snapped. Blood rushed behind my ears and my entire body grew hot.

I hated that he wouldn't let it go. He wouldn't let it die.

I laughed though. The sound was harsh and wrong even to my own ears. To pretend that his assumption wasn't doing numbers on my mind.

"I am not in love with her." I maintained.

My next strike was too hard. Too fast. Too violent.

Ronan tried to block but I was past the point of measured sparring. I was fighting like I needed to prove something. To him. To myself. To the world.

Each hit landed with more force than the last. Ronan gave as good as he got but I could see him starting to struggle. Could see the concern creeping into his eyes.

"Do you still have that picture of her in your drawer?" He followed and that was what broke the camel's back.

The words hit me like a physical blow and I saw red.

My fist flew forward with everything I had behind it. It connected with Ronan's face with a sickening crack. His head whipped back and his body followed. He flew backward and hit the ground hard.

The sound of his body landing snapped me out of whatever haze had taken over.

"Fuck." I was already running toward him. "Ronan. Ronan, I'm sorry."

He was on his back, one hand pressed to his face. Blood poured from his nose. Bright red against his skin.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." I dropped to my knees beside him. My hands hovered uselessly. Not sure what to do or how to help.

Ronan lowered his hand slowly. His nose was definitely broken. The blood kept coming.

"I must be right then," he said. His voice was thick and nasal from the injury. "Only hit dogs holler. Or break noses."

The shame that crashed over me was overwhelming. I had hit him. My best friend. My beta. The person who had stood by me through everything.

"Man, you have to face it." Ronan sat up slowly, still holding his nose. "You have to confront whatever is still left. For your sake. Madeline's sake. And for the sake of Fia."

I couldn't look at him. I couldn't meet his eyes.

"I have come to like her," he continued. "So don't you hurt her. Or Madeline. I still fancy her brother."

That surprised a wet laugh out of me. Despite everything. Despite the blood and the shame and the guilt eating away at my insides.

"Right... But first let's get you fixed up."

"It will heal." Ronan waved me off but accepted my hand when I offered to help him up.

We stood there in the middle of the training ring. Blood on the ground between us. The sun was starting to get hotter.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I admitted quietly.

Ronan tilted his head back to slow the bleeding. "I know."

"I don't know why I did that," I admitted. "I was so sure I was over her. I thought I moved on."

"Maybe you did. Maybe you didn't. But either way, you need to be honest with yourself." He looked at me then. His eyes were already starting to bruise. "Because right now? You're lying to everyone. Including yourself."

The words settled heavy in my chest.

I had let Madeline stay. Had insisted on it even when she tried to decline. Had told myself it was about watching her. About keeping her close to figure out her motives.

But was that really why?

I wasn't even sure anymore.

Ronan did hit something hard. I still had Madeline's picture in my drawer.

"I love Fia," I said. And I meant it.

"I believe you." Ronan's voice was gentle now. "But that doesn't mean there isn't something unfinished with Madeline."

We started walking back toward the main house. Ronan kept his head tilted back and I stayed close in case he needed support.

My knuckles ached. I looked down at them and saw they were already starting to swell.

"Thank you," I said after a while.

"For what? Getting my nose broken?"

"For being honest with me. Even when I didn't want to hear it."

Ronan snorted, then winced at the pain it caused. "That's what betas are for. To tell their alphas when they're being idiots."

"I'm an idiot."

"Yeah. But you're my idiot."

"Come on," I said as we got inside, guiding Ronan toward the infirmary. "Let's get you properly looked at."

"It's already healing."

"Humor me."

He sighed but didn't argue.

What he said however still lingered deeply inside my mind. Did I still have unfinished business with Madeline and was all this suspicion, even the thing with the smell of her magic all just my mind going through crazy dissonance?

Chapter 203: Dead to me

FIA

And just like that the trauma was put on pause again and I was outside of the elder circle building.

I stood still for a minute. Drinking it all in. I had been so close. So fucking close.

When I looked back at the circle building again, I saw a sentinel approach me. He held out his hand without a word. It was as professional and as detached as he could manage.

I pulled the phone from my pocket again. The screen was still warm from my grip. I unlocked it and navigated back to the audio file. My thumb hovered over the share button for a second before I tapped it.

"I'll send it to the council's secure server," the sentinel said.

I nodded as I watched the file transfer. The loading bar crept across the screen with agonizing slowness. When it finished, the sentinel pocketed his own device and turned without another word. His footsteps echoed as he walked back toward the elders' chambers.

The weight lifted from my hand but settled somewhere deeper. In my chest. In the space between my ribs where my heart had been hammering since I stood up and said those first defiant words.

I turned toward the lounge. The same one they'd put me in before the trial started.

That was when father stepped into my path.

I stopped. My body went rigid. Every muscle tensed like I was preparing for a blow.

He didn't say anything at first.

He simply looked at me with those eyes that used to make me shrink. I still remembered how they made me apologize for existing.

I pushed past him. My shoulder brushed his. The contact sent a jolt through me but I kept walking.

"This is interference with due process," I said. My voice came out level. I attempted to make it controlled but it was so damn hard. "Whatever you're about to say or do will be seen that way."

"Is your goal to kill your sister?"

The question stopped me. Not because it shocked me. Not because it hurt. But because of the audacity. The sheer nerve it took to ask me that after everything.

I turned slowly and faced him head on.

"What if it is?"

His face twisted. I saw disgust mixed with something that might have been disappointment if I cared enough to parse it.

"It would make you a monster," he said. "A person with no scruples."

The laugh that came out of me was bitter. Sharp edged and ugly.

"You didn't fight this hard for me." The words tasted like ash. "When I was accused by Hazel of stealing her place at the altar. When she painted me as the villain who destroyed her happiness."

He opened his mouth but I kept going.

"You were silent mostly. You stood there and let it happen. Let them tear me apart." I stepped closer. Close enough to see the lines around his eyes. The new greys in his hair. "But you seem to be here fighting tooth and nail for Hazel. Why is that? Ask yourself that."

"I thought you did it."

The admission came out quiet. Like he thought saying it softly would make it hurt less.

"What about me screamed I did it?"

He didn't answer.

"Despite everything," I continued. My voice rose. Not shouting but firm. Unyielding. "Despite the little I was raised on in this pack, I was more than content. Yes, I was unimportant. But at the time I was deluded enough to believe I had love even if my mother wasn't present."

The memories crashed over me. Sitting at dinner tables where conversation flowed around me but never to me. Watching Hazel open gifts on her birthday while I got a card. Being told to be quiet. To not draw attention. To remember my place.

"I had a mate," I said. "Everything was rosy."

My father's jaw tightened.

"But I see it all now." I gestured vaguely at the space between us. At the building behind him. At everything this place represented. "So maybe this hell you now face is me being vindictive. But nothing that has happened has been buttons pushed by me. These are actual crimes that your legitimate daughter committed."

I spat the word legitimate like it was poison.

"Crimes that you are still somehow willing to let her get away with."

A scoff escaped me. The sound was harsh in the quiet hallway.

"All I allegedly did was knock Hazel out and steal her place as a bride." I held up one finger. Then another. "But Hazel actually killed someone. She even tried to kill me. And she was the one who actually put this pack in danger."

I paused. Let the words sink in. Let him hear them. Really hear them. Not that it would matter. I had clocked out of this head save for a while now. It was hard but it had to be done.

"Somehow though she still has your support." My voice dropped. Went cold. "How is that even possible? Does that not make you see the sort of man that you are?"

"Fia."

He raised his hand. The movement was quick. Instinctive. Like all those times before when I'd spoken out of turn or said something that displeased him.

The sound of metal against leather cut through the air.

It was unmistakable.

Garrett had drawn his gun. The barrel pointed directly at my father's chest. His stance was solid. But his eyes blazed with barely contained fury.

"Take your hand away from my Luna."

My father froze. His hand still raised. His face had gone pale. The color draining from his cheeks as he stared down the barrel of Garrett's weapon.

I looked into his eyes. Saw the horror there. The fear. The realization that things had changed in ways he couldn't comprehend.

"But I am no longer that small and insignificant girl," I said quietly.

He lowered his hand slowly. Like any sudden movement might trigger something irreversible.

"I am no longer just your omega daughter you can push to the sidelines and silence either." My voice stayed steady and calm. "That time is dead."

I held his gaze for another moment. Let him see what he'd created. What his negligence and favoritism had turned me into.

"At this point too, you might be dead to me as well."

Chapter 204: She's got a way

FIA

I turned and walked away. Garrett fell into step beside me. Baruch materialized on my other side. Their presence was a shield. A reminder that I wasn't alone anymore. Wasn't powerless.

The tears pressed behind my eyes. Hot and insistent. I blinked them back. Goddess, it was hard. But I kept my chin up and kept walking.

We reached the lounge. The door stood open. The room beyond looked exactly as I'd left it.

I however stopped at the threshold.

"I cannot be here," I said.

Baruch looked at me. His expression was neutral but his eyes were understanding.

"I have to see my mother."

They didn't question it. They didn't ask if I was sure or suggest we wait. They just nodded and followed as I changed direction and walked through the building and out the back entrance. Away from the formal gardens and manicured lawns.

The grave was far from the main estate. Tucked away where visitors wouldn't stumble across it. Where it wouldn't remind anyone of uncomfortable truths.

Weeds had grown over the nameplate. Green shoots and tangled vines that obscured the letters carved into stone.

I knelt. My fingers worked at the growth. I made sure to pull it away strand by strand until the name became visible.

Muna Sterling Hughes.

"How are you, mom?" The words came out soft. Barely above a whisper. "Are you resting well?"

The stone didn't answer. The wind rustled through the trees overhead. Somewhere in the distance a bird called out.

"The dead do not speak to the living." A voice said.

I spun around. My heart jumped into my throat. The figure stood several paces away. Backlit by the hot afternoon sun. The silhouette was familiar. The cut of the suit. The way she held herself.

I stood slowly. Brushed the dirt from my knees.

"You."

Garrett and Baruch moved forward. Their bodies shifted to put themselves between me and the newcomer. Ready to act and to protect.

I raised my hand. A simple gesture that made them pause and instead hold their positions without stepping back.

"What do you want?"

Pauline Strati stepped closer. Her features became clearer. Sharp cheekbones. Eyes that calculated everything. A smile that held no warmth.

"Why the hostility?" she asked. "I am not your enemy."

"Neither are you my friend."

Her smile widened slightly. Like I'd said something amusing.

"Well, I am older," she said. "So I am not looking to make friends with the young."

Her gaze drifted to the gravestone. To the name I'd just uncovered.

"Sterling." She said the name slowly. Deliberately. Then looked back at me. "So you are the daughter of the side piece that Joseph married."

The words should have stung. Should have made me angry. But I'd heard worse. We'd been called worse behind our backs and even in our faces.

"Your mother and yourself really hurt my daughter."

I crossed my arms. "Perhaps you should be having this conversation with my father."

"Joseph is beyond useless."

The admission surprised me. Not the sentiment but the openness of it.

"I overheard your conversation," she continued. "And I must say I sympathize. It must have been tough not having the love of your father."

She paused. Her head tilted slightly.

"Is that why you are so fixated on killing your sister? You know, the one who did have the love of your father?"

The question hung in the air between us. Sharp and pointed. She meant to cut with her words. But they didn't have that effect on me. Not one bit.

"Can you really take this high road considering you abandoned your own daughter for choosing her heart?" I kept my voice even. Matter of fact. "It is a very well known truth around here. Even I know."

Something flickered across her face. Brief and almost imperceptible.

"You sure have a sharp tongue."

"You made the first cut."

"Well, I suppose that is true." She clasped her hands in front of her. The picture of composure. "But I am not here to trade words with a child who thinks because she married some affluent alpha that all her problems are now solved."

I waited and let her continue. I wanted to know why she was here.

"What will it take for you to drop this obsessive takedown of your sister?"

"It will surprise you to learn I actually want Hazel beheaded." The words came out flat. Final. "That is the only way this ends."

"I don't think so."

"If that were true you wouldn't be here trying to make a deal with me."

Pauline's smile turned sharp. Predatory.

"I am only here because I don't want Hazel demoted to the lowest scum of the whole pyramid." She paused, letting the implication sink in. "You know. What you are."

The insult rolled off me. I'd been called worse by better people.

"The punishment for murder is death." I said.

"You will be surprised."

She turned then and started to walk away. But stopped after a few steps.

"In another life and another time you would have fascinated me," she said without looking back. "I hate taking down strong willed women who remind me of myself."

The certainty in her voice made my teeth grate. Made something cold settle in my stomach. But I kept my expression neutral.

"Really," I said. "Because I could have sworn I reminded you of Athena."

Pauline froze. Her entire body went rigid. The composure cracked. Just for a second. Just long enough for me to see.

I walked past her, my footsteps carrying me several paces before I turned back.

"From that reaction I am guessing I am not wrong." I studied her face. The way color had drained from it. The way her hands had tightened into fists. "It does make me curious who this Athena was or what she did. You look as white as a ghost."

I didn't wait for a response. I had gotten my pound of flesh so I turned and headed back toward the estate.

Garrett and Baruch fell into step beside me.

"That was odd," Baruch said once we were out of earshot. "She seems sure that Hazel will not die."

"I know right. Something is going on." I replayed the conversation in my head. The way Pauline had spoken. The confidence. The certainty. "It was like the attack she made at me during the trial was to buy time."

"Marriage." Baruch suddenly said.

The word stopped me cold. I turned to look at Baruch.

"What?"

"When your sister framed you for stealing her happiness by taking her place as Alpha Cian's bride, you would have faced the Elder's court if Cian decided he was done with the union." He met my eyes. "But that didn't happen."

The pieces started falling into place. Slowly at first. Then faster.

"Because I was now connected to Skollrend," I said. "A much stronger pack."

Baruch nodded.

"Then it clicked." My voice went quiet. Urgent. "Hazel will most likely not die if she suddenly gets connected to a strong pack herself."

I thought about my father. About the Hughes pack. About the limited influence they had even with my union to Cian.

"Father wouldn't have that kind of connection. The Hughes do not have that strong of a connection." I paced. My mind racing. "And even if he could pull a few strings, no one with a brain would want to piss Cian off over a small pack."

I stopped. Looked at Baruch. Then at Garrett.

"But with a Strati."

The words hung there. Heavy with implication. With the realization of what Pauline was planning. What she'd come here to set in motion.

Goddess... They were going to marry Hazel off. Connect her to power that would make her untouchable. Make her crimes irrelevant in the grand scheme of things.

Fucking hell.

Chapter 205: Devil's Advocate

ALDRIC

I stood in the doorway and watched Morrigan direct the maids. Her voice carried across the room, crisp and clear, none of that rasping weakness that had marked her voice for over two years.

This renewed strength of hers made me sick to the stomach. I had been so close to taking her out without suspicion. Now I had to deal with her stupid saccharin ass again.

She gestured to the curtains, then to the bedside table, pointing out what needed to be moved, what needed to be cleaned, what needed to be thrown out entirely.

She looked good. Better than good. She looked like herself again. Oh. I hated it.

The maids scurried around her, nodding and murmuring agreements, their arms full of linens and bottles and the detritus of sickness. One of them carried a tray stacked with jars of herbs, the kind the healers had been forcing down Morrigan's throat for weeks. The smell of them still clung to the air, bitter and medicinal.

I needed to move quickly now. Fia would come to Morrigan soon. Probably today. Maybe even this evening once she was back from the secret game we were playing at Silver Creek. And when she did, she'd talk. She'd spill every suspicion she had about me, every theory, every dark thought that had been building in that pretty head of hers since the moment she arrived.

Morrigan wouldn't believe it. Not immediately. Cian hadn't turned on me yet, despite everything. But women were different. Women were quicker to doubt, quicker to see shadows where men saw only light. And Morrigan... Stupid as she was, could be sharp

when occasion demanded it. Always had been really. If Fia planted the seed, it would grow.

It was why she was the one I wanted to take out first in the first place.

So I had to poison the soil first.

Morrigan turned and saw me. Her eyes widened slightly. "Aldric? What are you doing here?"

I smiled. The warm one. The one I'd perfected over decades of practice. "It's nice to see you as yourself again."

I stepped into the room. The maids froze, uncertain whether to continue or flee. I waved a hand at them. "Don't let me interrupt."

They went back to work.

Morrigan watched me, and I tried to see through her. I was good at it. But sometimes with this woman, it could be hard. It was like she placed a mirror in front of her face and all that stared back was yourself.

She'd sometimes been hard to read, even when my brother was alive. It was one of the things he'd loved about her.

"It's also nice to see this room not stink of herbs," I said.

The corner of her mouth twitched into almost a smile. "I can agree on that."

I moved further into the room, my eyes scanning the space. The curtains were open now, letting in real light for the first time in years. The bed was stripped, the blankets folded and piled on a chair. The nightstand was clear except for a single framed photograph.

My brother's face stared out at me from the frame. Younger. Happier. Standing next to Morrigan in what looked like a garden somewhere. Her hand was on his chest. His arm was around her waist.

I picked up the frame. The glass was cool under my fingers. "How I miss him."

The words came out soft. Genuine. Because they were genuine. I practiced this feeling. It was anything but false.

Morrigan crossed the room and wrapped her arms around me. The embrace was brief but it was still repulsive. "We all do."

I held the frame for another moment, then set it back down on the nightstand.

"Have you had breakfast?" I asked.

"No," she answered honestly.

"You should eat," I said.

Morrigan stepped back. She shook her head. "I don't feel hungry."

"You need your strength."

"I have things to do." She gestured at the room, at the maids, at the chaos of cleaning and organizing. "A lot of things."

I looked at her. Really looked at her. The stubborn set of her jaw. The determination in her eyes. She was going to work herself into the ground trying to make up for lost time.

At least I could pull that off her.

"You know none of it is running away, right?" I said. "You're back. You're fine."

"Well." She crossed her arms. "I wouldn't be fine if it wasn't for Fia."

There it was. The opening I needed.

"That girl saved my life," Morrigan continued. Her voice was firm.

I nodded slowly. "I heard all about it."

I let a pause settle between us. Let the weight of what I was about to say build in the silence.

"But she doesn't like me."

Morrigan's eyebrows shot up. "What? That's utter nonsense."

"Except it's not." I kept my voice level. Reasonable. Like I was simply stating a simple fact.

I moved to the window and looked out at the grounds. The gardens were green and lush, the trees heavy with summer leaves.

"In my bid to save you," I said, "and with all the witches sort of turning their back on us, I had to reach out to the Blossoms."

I turned to face her. Let her see the regret in my eyes. The guilt.

And damn was I good at it.

"I know I looked hella suspicious all through. Because of how guilty I felt going through that route. But I couldn't see you die, Morrigan." My voice dropped. "After my brother... I couldn't lose you. Cian couldn't lose you."

Morrigan's expression softened. I saw it happen. I saw the exact moment the hook set.

"But the moment Madeline showed up," I continued, "it was like Fia made me enemy number one. And I understand." I spread my hands. "This was Cian's ex. We all know how much he loved Madeline. How deep and poignant that relationship was. I know she feels threatened."

I walked back toward Morrigan. My bait was set and she had definitely taken it.

"But I also know Cian has moved on. And you're alive. So I'm fine with being her enemy. Time will heal that wound for her."

Morrigan shook her head. Emphatic. "I swear she isn't like that. You two must have just gotten on the wrong foot."

"You think so?"

"It'll get better." She reached out and touched my arm. "I'll make sure of it."

"You mean it?"

"Yeah." Her grip tightened slightly. "She's my daughter-in-law. And I'm making sure Madeline gets the hell out of here before she can cause chaos."

Perfect. She was exactly where I needed her.

But I couldn't seem too eager. I couldn't push too hard.

"Oh." I let doubt creep into my voice. "I don't know. Madeline did save you. I don't think she's an enemy."

"Of course not," Morrigan said quickly. "I owe her. But she's also here for nefarious reasons."

I raised an eyebrow. But I let her continue as if this wasn't all my design.

"She clearly wants Cian back. Can you believe that?"

I made my expression thoughtful as if I was considering it. "They did have a past. A past that never did end right. Perhaps meeting again will end the Chapter."

Morrigan's eyes narrowed. "I'm just not giving them the chance. Anything can blossom."

"You do like Fia a lot."

"I do."

The words were fierce. Protective. Possessive. Exactly what I had been counting on.

I sighed, the sound heavy with concern rather than challenge. "That is why I worry. Hatred that deep rarely comes from nowhere. It usually comes from fear. Or from feeling like something precious is being threatened."

Morrigan's jaw tightened. "I do not hate the girl."

"I have watched," I continued gently, "even during your illness. Even while you slept. I have watched Fia and Cian grow closer. Quietly. Naturally. Not because anyone pushed them, but because time does that to people."

Her fingers curled into her skirts.

"But meddling," I added, almost casually, "has a way of breaking fragile things. And when someone insists hard enough on an outcome, it has a habit of snapping in the opposite direction."

She looked at me sharply now. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying," I replied, lowering my voice, "do not antagonize the witch."

Her eyes flashed. "She is the one antagonizing me."

"Is she?" I tilted my head. "I hear she has already been excommunicated from her coven for helping us. Imagine that sacrifice. Cast out by her own kind, branded disloyal, and still she is met with suspicion and disdain at the place she chose to stand. That is not a pleasant place to stand."

Morrigan hesitated.

"What would you have me do?" she demanded. "She said she wants Cian back."

"A relationship is not a one way street," I said calmly. "Love cannot be forced."

Her lips pressed together. "And what if he still loves her?"

I shrugged lightly. "What about it?"

She scoffed. "You men."

"He is married," she snapped. "He is Fia's."

"Perhaps," I said, my voice almost regretful, "this is why Fia was right to hate me. Because I am selfish at the end of the day. I want Cian's happiness first. And if he still loves Madeline, I do not see the issue."

Her head snapped up. "No."

"An Alpha can have multiple wives," I added smoothly.

"No," Morrigan said again, fiercer now. "Not my Cian."

I smiled faintly. "Your fear makes sense. You know he married because of you. Because of pressure. Because of duty."

She said nothing.

"If he still loves Madeline," I went on, "you believe everything will fracture. Am I wrong?"

She stared at me, realization dawning slowly, painfully.

"I hate you so much," Morrigan said at last.

I chuckled, unable to help myself.

"Because," I said lightly, "you know that I am right."

I let the moment stretch, just long enough for the sting to linger, then softened my expression.

"Morrigan," I said quietly, "I am only playing devil's advocate. Someone has to say the uncomfortable things so they lose their power."

Her gaze stayed sharp and guarded.

"I truly believe Cian has moved on," I continued. "What he shared with Madeline belonged to another version of him. A younger one. Grief changes people. Responsibility changes them even more. He is not a man who lives in the past, no matter how loudly it tries to call to him."

She studied my face, searching for mockery and finding none.

"And Fia?" she asked.

"She is his present," I said simply. "And whether anyone likes it or not, that matters."

Only then did I smile, light, deliberate, as if easing us out of deep water.

"Well," I said, "let us talk about old things while we eat. Brunch would not kill us."

"There's a lot to fix here." Morrigan gestured at the room again. At the maids who were pretending not to listen to every word we said.

"Leave the omegas to do it." I kept my voice gentle. Persuasive. "I'm sure they don't want you breathing in their ears. They've done this for a long time before you got sick. Just let them be."

Morrigan looked around the room. At the half-cleaned surfaces. At the maids with their arms full of linens. At the work that still needed to be done.

I could see her weighing it. The desire to be useful against the exhaustion that still lingered in her bones. The need to be in control against the very reasonable suggestion that she rest.

Finally, she sighed. The sound was long and tired.

"Okay then."

Victory tasted sweet on my tongue.

I offered her my arm. She took it. We walked toward the door together, leaving the maids to their work.

And just like that, I gave her something else to focus on, while the seed I planted settled quietly into the soil.

Chapter 206: Us

MADELINE

I stayed there for a long time after the door closed behind Cian.

When I gathered myself, I went over to the dresser and that was when my phone buzzed.

I went over, picked it up and saw Aldric's name flash across the screen.

Cian is suspicious of you. Watch your back. Delete everything. Texts. Call logs. All of it.

I stared at the message for a long moment, My thumb hovering over the screen.

Suspicious?

I replayed the conversation we just had. The way he looked at me. The careful distance he maintained. The slight hesitation before he offered me a place to stay.

But he hadn't acted strange. Not really. He seemed concerned about my situation with the coven. About my father's decision. About me.

Unless that was the point.

Unless concern was the mask and suspicion was what lay underneath.

But I still hadn't done anything to warrant the suspicion.

Nonetheless, I deleted the text and watched the words disappear from the screen. Then I went through my call history and wiped those too. Every trace of communication between Aldric and me vanished with a few taps.

My phone buzzed again.

I'm at the gate, it said and this time it was from Wilhelm.

I walked back to the drawer and pulled it open. The small glass bottle filled with dark red liquid sat nestled in the corner. Fia's blood.

I picked it up and held it up to the light. The color was even richer now.

What if Cian questioned this?

What if he asked Wilhelm what it was for and my brother fumbled the answer?

Wilhelm was many things but a good liar under pressure was not one of them.

I turned my phone back on and typed quickly.

If Cian or anyone asks why you have blood, tell them it's to bind me from entering coven property. Say it's part of the excommunication ritual.

The reply came fast.

It was a like emoji.

I stared at the emoji for a second. That was Wilhelm for you. Casual even when things were serious.

I slipped the bottle into a small cloth pouch and pulled the drawstring tight. Then I changed into jeans and a loose sweater and headed outside.

The parking area was empty when I arrived. The afternoon sun felt warm against my skin. I stood near the edge of the driveway and waited.

Footsteps approached from behind.

I turned and saw Cian walking toward me. His expression was unreadable.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I want to see how your brother can be okay with you being ostracized from your home." His voice was calm. But now I was starting to read into what Aldric said.

"Please. Do not start." I shifted the pouch from one hand to the other. "I just want to give him this and get my mind over it."

"What is it?"

I hesitated. Was this genuine curiosity or was he scoping me out? Testing me?

Then I noticed the blood on his knuckles. It was fresh blood.

"Are you alright?" I asked. My eyes stayed on his hand.

"Yeah." He flexed his fingers slightly. "I punched Ronan in the face."

"What the fuck. Why?"

He looked away and I watched his jaw tighten. He was intentionally avoiding that question and the fact that he did so simply made me even more curious than I was.

"Cian. Why did you—"

"Oh look." He cut me off smoothly. "Your brother is here."

I followed his gaze and saw the car approaching.

It was a 1967 Chevrolet Impala. Cherry red with chrome bumpers that caught the sunlight and threw it back in sharp glints. The convertible top was down and I could see Wilhelm's blond hair whipping in the wind as he drove up the long driveway.

The car rumbled low. The engine had that deep throaty sound that Wilhelm loved. It was why he got it in the first place.

That and the fact that it was a showgirl of a vehicle.

I tightened my hand over the pouch. My palm was sweating slightly.

Cian was here and thanks to Aldric's warnings, I was sort of prepared. Not entirely though.

Wilhelm was an integral piece here as well. So I prayed to Hekate; Please let him handle this right.

The Impala pulled up in front of us and Wilhelm killed the engine. He draped one arm over the steering wheel and grinned widely.

"What's up, lovebirds?"

"Please do not call us that," Cian said immediately. He has a curt smile on his face but he was very uncomfortable.

"It seems you are here to cause chaos again," I said in response , immediately mirroring Cian. "Just take it and go."

I stepped forward and held out the pouch.

Cian's hand shot out faster than mine. He intercepted it and took it from me.

My stomach dropped when he did that.

"What even is this?" He asked as he pulled the drawstring open and peered inside.

"Her blood," Wilhelm said casually.

Cian lifted the hand sanitizer bottle out and held it up to the light. The liquid inside shifted slightly.

"Oh." He placed it back in the pouch carefully. "And what is it for?"

Wilhelm glanced at me. Then back at Cian. "Well, you should ask her. All of this is because she chose you instead of her people after all."

He opened the car door and stepped out. His boots hit the gravel with a soft crunch. He walked over and plucked the pouch from Cian's hand.

Wilhelm rolled the bottle between his fingers. "The coven doesn't want her on any of our property. It's what you would call a true excommunication."

Cian's expression hardened. "Your father can be allowed to hide his tail since he holds a sensitive position. But as the son of the house, would you not fight for your sister?"

Wilhelm laughed. Short and bitter. "Well nobody in that house takes me fucking seriously. Why should I break my back over something she knew would happen?" He looked at me. His eyes were sharp despite the casual tone. "This is the bed my good sister made because she still loves you. What good is it if she will not lie in it?"

He then walked past both of us. His shoulder brushed against Cian's.

"I do think it's nice to spend today with her," Wilhelm continued. He didn't look back. "A final goodbye. After all, the coven is clamoring for fifteen years. That will be rough for my sister. She has always been family oriented too."

"What? Fifteen years?" Cian's voice rose slightly.

"It is just the law," I said quietly.

"The law is stupid."

"Well she didn't make it, neither did I." Wilhelm stopped and turned around. He scanned the area. His gaze swept over the estate grounds. "Where is that Beta of yours?"

"He is injured. Also leave him be. We still have a lot to—"

But Wilhelm was already moving. He jogged toward the main entrance and disappeared inside before Cian could finish his sentence.

Cian turned to me. "He should know there are a lot of things he cannot get away with anymore, considering we aren't together."

"Forgive him for today." I wrapped my arms around myself. "He is pretending this doesn't hurt him but I know Wilhelm. He hates not having power and being unable to help me. He masks it by being the way he is."

Cian was quiet. His eyes were distant. Like he was working through something in his mind.

"I should go chaperone him," I said. "Before he makes Ronan's life a living hell."

"Do not bother. Ronan quite likes him around."

"Oh... I know."

Silence settled between us again. The kind that followed us relentlessly now. It felt heavy and weighted with things unsaid.

Cian took a deep breath. His shoulders rose and fell. "We need to talk, Madeline."

I reached up and fixed my hair. I tucked a strand behind my ear then I looked at him straight in the eye.

"About what?"

"*Us.*"

Chapter 207: Sticky situation

MADELINE

The word hung there. Simple and direct.

My heart kicked against my ribs.

I kept my expression neutral. Kept my voice steady. "What about us?"

He stepped closer. Not too close but enough that I had to tilt my head slightly to maintain eye contact.

"I need to know something," he said. "And I need you to be honest with me."

"I am always honest with you, Cian."

"Are you?"

The question landed like a stone dropping into still water. The ripples spread out between us.

I felt something cold settle in my chest. "What are you asking me, Cian?"

"I am asking if there is anything you are not telling me." His eyes searched mine. "Anything I should know about why you are really here."

My throat tightened. "I am here because I helped your mother. Because I had nowhere else to go. You know this."

"I know what you have told me."

"And you think I am lying?"

"I think—" He stopped and he ran a hand through his hair. "I think there are things that do not add up."

"Like what?"

"Like how convenient it is that you got excommunicated right when staying here became complicated." His voice was still calm but there was an edge to it now. Sharp. Cutting. "Like how your father, who holds immense power, just let this happen without a fight."

My pulse hammered in my ears. "You think I orchestrated my own exile?"

"Did you?"

"No." The word came out firm. Clear. "I did not."

He watched me. His gaze was intense. Searching for cracks. For tells.

I held it. Did not look away. Did not blink.

"Cian." I kept my voice soft. "I understand your mother and Fia probably feel uncomfortable with me being here. I understand that this situation is complicated. But I did not plan for any of this to happen the way it did."

"Then help me understand." He took another step closer. "Help me understand why your coven would go this far. Why your father would allow it. Why any of this makes sense."

"Because magic has rules." I spread my hands slightly. "Because covens have laws that even the father supreme cannot break. Because I interfered in your pack business when I was told not to." My voice rose just a fraction. "Because I chose to help you and your family over my own people. That is why."

He was quiet.

The afternoon breeze picked up. It rustled through the trees nearby. Carried the scent of pine and earth.

"I want to believe you," he said finally.

"But you do not."

"I did not say that."

"You did not have to."

His jaw worked. Like he was chewing on words he was not ready to say yet.

I took a breath. Let it out slowly. "If you want me to leave, I will leave. You do not have to give me a place to stay. I will figure something out."

"That is not what I want."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want the truth."

"I gave you the truth."

"Did you?"

We were going in circles now. The same questions. The same answers. Neither of us backing down.

I felt tired suddenly. Bone deep tired.

"I cannot make you trust me, Cian." My voice came out quieter than I intended. "If you have already decided I am playing some kind of game then nothing I say will change your mind. I feel so disgusting right now even. What would even make you think this way of me? No wonder your mom had that sick thought of me. I am not that in love with you... You arrogant prick!"

I turned away from him.

Enough to signal that I was done standing there and letting his doubt sit on my skin like grime. My foot barely cleared the stone when his hand closed around my wrist.

I sucked in a sharp breath. "Let me go."

He did not.

"Madeline."

"I said let me go." I twisted, anger flaring hot and sudden, a spike through the exhaustion. "You do not get to hold me in place while you tear me apart."

His grip tightened. Like he was afraid that if he loosened it even a little I would disappear into the dark of the drive and never look back.

"I am sorry," he said, and his voice was low now, stripped of its edge. "If it sounds that way. I am not asking these questions because I still believe you are in love with me."

I laughed. "That is generous of you."

"That is not what I meant." He stepped closer, forcing me to face him, the foyer lights catching the planes of his face. "There is this belief. From everyone. That you still have something for me. That I still have something for you. And apparently, it makes me treat

you like an enemy in my head. Like I need to stay clear of you to protect myself and protect my mate."

My chest ached when he said that. I hated the way I had been reduced.

I looked up at him, and I knew my eyes were glassy because the world had started to blur at the edges. "Maybe they are right."

The words tasted wrong the moment they left my mouth. Bitter even.

His hand fell away from my wrist as if I had burned him.

"No," he said immediately. Too fast. "They are not."

I folded my arms around myself, suddenly cold despite the summer night. "You seem very confident for someone who has spent the last ten minutes interrogating me."

He did not rise to it. His gaze had gone distant, unfocused, like he was listening to something I could not hear.

"I know you," he said quietly. "I knew you. And I know what your magic smells like."

The words landed wrong.

My breath hitched. "What are you even talking about?"

His jaw tightened. His eyes flicked over my face, my hands, my throat, as if he was searching for something that refused to show itself.

Then he stepped back and fully let me go.

The space between us yawned open, heavy and charged.

"Maybe it is madness," he said, more to himself than to me. "Maybe Ronan was right. Maybe this is just cognitive dissonance."

My heart began to pound. "What are you talking about, Cian?"

"I was going to watch you," he admitted. His mouth curved in something like self-disgust. "Just watch you act. Let you exist here until you slipped. Until I could tell myself I was right to be wary."

My stomach twisted.

"But I cannot," he went on, lifting his gaze back to mine. There was something raw in it now. Something stripped bare. "Not on my honor. Or yours. You do not deserve this kind of suspicion."

Suspicion....

The word echoed in my skull.

My voice came out thin. "Suspicion?"

He hesitated.

For half a heartbeat, I thought he might lie. That he might soften it, reshape it into something easier to swallow.

He did not.

"You think I did something," I said slowly.

His silence was an answer all its own.

"You think I did something," I repeated, louder now, disbelief cracking through the exhaustion. "You dragged me here, questioned me, looked at me like I was something dirty under your boot, because you think I am capable of what, exactly?"

His eyes met mine.

"I thought you killed that witch."

The world tilted and cold spread through my veins, starting at my chest and radiating outward, like ice water poured directly into my blood. My fingers went numb. My mouth felt dry.

"What... are you taking about?"

"Mads, did you kill Ophelia?"

Chapter 208: Sanctum

FIA

I needed to find the lead elder. Now.

My feet carried me back through the estate grounds. Through corridors I'd walked a thousand times. Past windows that framed the manicured gardens.

Garrett and Baruch stayed close. Their footsteps echoed mine. A steady rhythm that matched my racing pulse.

The elder circle building stood not too far off. The prominent looking heavy oak doors. Wee what first caught my attention. The Brass handles worn smooth by centuries of hands. I didn't knock. I didn't even pause to think it over when I pushed through.

The room fell silent.

Five elders sat around the curved table. Papers spread before them. The lead elder looked up from whatever document he'd been reviewing. His expression shifted from concentration to surprise to something colder.

"Mrs Donlon." His voice carried warning. "You are not supposed to be here."

The other elders turned. Their faces arranged themselves into various degrees of disapproval. One woman with silver hair pursed her lips. A man with sharp features leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms.

"I need to speak with the lead elder." I kept my voice steady and firm. "Alone."

The silver-haired woman actually scoffed. "Absolutely not."

"You were not invited to this space." Another elder spoke up. A —compared to them— much younger man with calculating eyes. "You have no right to interrupt our proceedings."

"This is highly irregular," the lead elder said. He set down his pen with deliberate care. "You are not even supposed to be speaking with anyone involved in this investigation. Alone is completely out of the question."

"Luna Fia." The silver-haired woman stood. Her chair scraped against the floor. "Please step out. The investigation is still ongoing and your presence here compromises the integrity of our process."

I planted my feet. "No."

The word hung in the air. But my words were final.

"Excuse me?" The lead elder's eyebrows rose.

"I said no." I looked at each of them in turn. "I will not just sit my ass around while the powers that be are plotting to ensure Hazel somehow doesn't pay the brunt of what she did."

The lead elder sighed. A long, tired sound. Like I was a child throwing a tantrum.

"Technical is checking the audio recording as we speak." His tone was measured and reasonable. The voice of someone explaining simple facts to someone too emotional to understand them. But that wasn't who I was. "If anything in it proves true, due process will follow. Your sister will be punished accordingly."

The calm delivery made my teeth grind. Everything about it screamed procedure.

Protocol.

A system designed to move slowly while the world burned around it.

"That's not what will happen." My hands curled into fists at my sides.

"And what exactly do you think will happen?" The calculating elder leaned forward. "That we'll simply ignore evidence? That we're corrupt?"

"Time is being bought right now."

The lead elder's expression didn't change. "Bought for what purpose? For your sister to be broken out of here? Luna Fia, this estate is secure. No one is staging a prison break. That would break great tenets of supernatural law."

"No." I stepped closer to the table. "What happens if all of a sudden Hazel is bound to another powerful pack?"

The question landed like a stone in still water. Ripples of unease spread across their faces.

"Will that not compromise jurisdiction?" I pressed.

They exchanged glances. Quick and furtive ones. The silver-haired woman leaned toward the lead elder and whispered something. Another elder shuffled papers unnecessarily.

Finally, the lead elder spoke. "Last we checked, Hazel is not betrothed. Her marriage union to Alpha Cian was nullified the moment you took her place."

"I don't know much myself." The words came faster now. The pieces falling together even as I spoke them. "But Pauline Strati is here."

The name dropped like a bomb. Every elder at that table went still. Utterly still.

"Surely that makes the gears of everyone here grind." I watched their faces. "The presiding Luna of Silver Creek was disowned because she didn't marry into the house her parents wanted her to marry into. But the Strati house is here again? After all these years? All is forgiven now?"

No one answered. No one moved.

"No." I shook my head. "I don't think so and neither should you. That betrothal will probably be passed to Hazel in this dire time. It's perfectly legal and a great loophole. They just have to be here and who conveniently bought time during the trial?"

The silver-haired woman opened her mouth and closed it again. I know she hated my guts but even she had to see what I was talking about.

"I'm here because I can see what's going on." My voice carried across the room. Clear and certain. "And I hope this good court can as well. Because once political or potential marriage ties are established, punishment becomes symbolic at best. Pauline's timing is not a coincidence."

The lead elder didn't deny it. None of them did. That silence spoke louder than any words could have.

Instead, the calculated elder stood. "This is pure speculation."

"Is it?" I challenged.

"You are interfering with an active inquiry." The silver-haired woman's voice turned sharp. "From the look of things even, it seems like you are acting from personal grievance rather than civic duty."

"Does it even matter?" The words burst out in a hot and angry fashion. "Even if we both know that's not true."

The lie tasted bitter on my tongue. But I needed them to move. To act. To do something before it was too late.

They sat there. Stone-faced and silent. The lead elder picked up a small bell from the table and rang it once. The clear tone cut through the tension.

"Sentinels." His voice was cold now. Formal. "Please escort Mrs Donlon from this room."

"Wait." I took a step forward. "You can't just ignore this."

The doors opened behind me. Heavy boots on marble floors.

"You're making a mistake." My voice rose. "They're going to get away with everything. Hazel murdered Milo. There is no doubt about it. And if you do not listen to me and find a way to curb this immediately, you're going to let her walk away scott-free."

Hands gripped my arms firmly as the sentinels flanked me.

"This is procedure, Luna Fia." The lead elder wouldn't meet my eyes. "We follow the law here."

"The law?" I laughed. The sound came out harsh and broken. "You're hiding behind procedure while they rewrite the rules right under our noses now."

They pulled me backward. My feet slid against the polished floor.

"You cowards." The words ripped out of me. "You spineless, corrupted cowards. You know I'm right. Now you know what they're doing and if you do not make a move now, you're letting it happen."

The silver-haired woman looked away. The calculating elder studied his papers. The lead elder simply sat there with his hands folded on the table.

"This is an outrage." My voice echoed off the walls. "You call this justice? You call this due process? It's theater. It's a fucking performance and you're all actors."

The sentinels dragged me through the doorway. Into the corridor beyond.

"History will remember this." I twisted against their grip but they held firm. "Everyone will know you chose politics over truth. Chose to bend the fucking knee to power over what's right."

The doors swung shut. The solid thud cut off my words. Cut off any chance I had of reaching them.

The sentinels released me then stepped back but remained watchful. Ready to intervene again if needed.

I stood there with my chest heaving and my heart hammering. The rage coursed through my veins like fire.

Garrett who has been waiting for me outside alongside Baruch moved to my side. His hand hovered near my shoulder but didn't quite touch.

"Luna Fia." His voice was gentle. Careful.

"They know now." The words came out tight. "They know exactly what is going to happen and those old heads are just going to let it happen anyway."

I looked at Baruch and I could see how distraught he was hearing me.

"What now?" Garrett asked.

What now indeed. I'd played my hand and made my accusation. And they'd thrown me out like garbage.

I pressed my palms against my eyes and took a breath, then another.

The anger wanted to consume me. It wanted to make me scream, rage and break things. But that wouldn't help. That wouldn't change anything.

I lowered my hands and looked at Garrett and then at Baruch.

"Now we figure out something else I guess but if I am being honest, I am out of options."

The hopelessness crept in even as I said it. But what could I really do now in this short time?

That was when movement caught my eye. I saw something in the distance.

Vehicles.

A whole fleet of them coming up the main drive toward the estate.

Black and expensive looking cars, moving in perfect formation.

My stomach dropped.

"No." The word came out as barely a whisper.

Garrett followed my gaze. "What is that?"

I watched the cars approach, watched them glide past the fountains and manicured hedges and watched as they pulled up to the main entrance with practiced precision.

"The pack that will be Hazel's salvation." My voice sounded hollow. "They're here."