

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 212: The thrall of the dark - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 212: The thrall of the dark

Chapter 212: The thrall of the dark

FIA

Every pair of eyes shifted from me to the boy from the meadows. His expression remained neutral, but something in his stillness felt deliberate and calculated.

It was like he was a predator deciding whether its prey was worth the chase.

I waited for him to speak. To respond to my challenge with the same smooth rhetoric he'd been wielding all day. The silence stretched longer than it should have.

And my father took that as a sign to move first.

He took quick and purposeful footsteps that echoed across the polished floor. I turned to face him and saw his hand already raised. My body tensed on instinct, bracing for the impact I'd learned to expect from that particular angle and that particular expression on his face.

His palm however stopped inches from my cheek.

The momentum died. His fingers trembled in the air between us before slowly lowering to his side. Something flickered across his features. Realization, maybe. Or just the memory he has with Garrett and his gun earlier that reminded him that he couldn't do that anymore. Not as freely as he once had.

"Honored elders," His voice came out wound tight. "And members of Lily of the Valley. I apologize profusely for my daughter's behavior. Her disrespect. Her complete lack of understanding regarding matters far beyond her comprehension."

He turned toward the doors. "Sentinels. Inside. Now."

The doors opened and four sentinels filed in, their expressions carefully blank. They knew better than to show surprise at finding me here when I wasn't supposed to be.

I stepped forward before they could reach me. "I'm offering Skollrend's forces to you." My words cut through my father's apology. "Take it and this would be no trouble. We can stand together against this threat."

My father's hand shot out. His fingers wrapped around my upper arm hard enough to bruise. He jerked me close. His breath hit my ear in a harsh whisper that none of the others would hear.

"You think I want the one decent daughter I have to die huh?"

The words should have meant something. I knew they were meant to harden the anger burning in my chest. But they didn't.

I pulled away from his grip and faced the lead elder directly. "It seems my father is in on this. He doesn't want Skollrend's help with the threat that Lily of the Valley poses."

The lead elder studied me for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice carried disappointment rather than anger. "No Alpha and no pack wants to be subjugated by another pack or Alpha in any way. Good or bad. There is a reason there is not one big convergence even if we have an Alpha King. Last I remember, you are not a member of this pack anymore."

The words landed like stones in my stomach.

"I suggest you let the voices that this pack has and needs do the work." He gestured to the council members seated behind him. "The experts."

Something cracked inside my chest. A small fracture that I tried to ignore.

The sentinels moved in then once the damage against me has been done. Their hands reached for my arms but these were somehow not as rough as I remembered them to be and I knew well enough because they'd done this before with troublemakers who interrupted council meetings.

"Wait."

The single word came from the boy with green eyes. His hand lifted in a gesture that somehow commanded absolute authority despite its casualness.

The sentinels froze.

"I haven't talked yet."

He walked toward me. His steps were measured and unhurried. The representative from Lily of the Valley watched with an expression of pride. They were so sure he was going to put me in my place.

I held my ground as he approached. I met those green eyes directly and refused to look away even though every instinct told me this man was now dangerous in ways I didn't fully understand.

"Seems like I win." His voice was soft. Almost gentle.

"No." I kept my chin up. "Not yet."

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Real amusement flickered in his gaze. "So you were a daughter of this pack."

There was something in how he said it. Some undercurrent I couldn't quite identify. Not mockery exactly. I would not call it curiosity either. It was something else.

"Well, not anymore it seems." He straightened slightly. "Donlon..."

The way he said my new last name felt deliberate. Like he was testing the weight of it.

"You are now a woman of Skollrend."

I frowned. "What does that have to do with anything?"

He leaned in. The movement was smooth. I wanted to step back but the sentinels stood like a wall behind me. His presence filled the space between us. His breath ghosted past my ear when he spoke.

"Do you remember me?"

The question caught me off guard. My mind raced through our brief encounter in the meadow. The way he'd helped me and spoken to me through the pain. It was the same patient quality he was using now.

"I'm sure I would remember a lawless man who thinks everything needs to accommodate him if I met him before."

His chuckle was low. He pulled back enough to meet my eyes again. "Really?"

Then he turned away. Just like that. As if the conversation had reached its natural conclusion and I wasn't worth any more of his time.

"Get her out." One of the elders spoke for the first time.

Hands gripped my arms. They dragged me backward toward the doors. My boots scraped against the floor as I tried to maintain some dignity in the removal.

"This isn't over." I threw the words over my shoulder but no one seemed to be listening anymore.

The chill air that came from a closing afternoon hit my face as they hauled me through the doors. They didn't slow down and they didn't give me a chance to find my footing

either. Once they dragged me far enough from the entrance and were certain that no one inside would hear, they dropped me.

I hit the ground hard. My palms scraped against gravel. Pain shot through my wrists as I caught myself.

The door slammed shut behind them.

I pushed myself up slowly and brushed the dirt from my hands. "You should be careful with me next time."

The sentinels were already walking away but I kept talking anyway.

"You should be able to see what happens to sentinels who bite more than they can chew and how this pack treats them when they finally bite more than necessary. Milo was your brother too. In many ways than one."

They didn't respond. They didn't even slow down.

I stood there for a while. My breath coming in short bursts that had nothing to do with physical exertion and everything to do with the rage coiling in my chest.

Garrett and Baruch were still in the secret passages. They didn't know the way out like I did. But they were trained sentinels. They'd figure it out eventually. They had to.

My thoughts kept circling back to Hazel. To the smug satisfaction that would be on her face when she learned that the Lily of the Valley delegation had delivered their ultimatum. To the way she'd stand now at trial, knowing she was going to get away with murder.

Because that's what would happen now. Once the trial was called again, they'd slap her with something minimal. A token punishment that meant nothing. Justice would be abandoned for politics and Milo would still be dead and Hazel would walk free.

I couldn't let that happen.

The thought burned through my mind with crystalline clarity. I'd promised to speak for Milo. To make sure his death meant something. To ensure that justice was served even when everyone else wanted to look away.

But how?

I paced in small circles outside the hall. The calm air cooled the heat in my face but did nothing for the fire in my chest. Every option I considered led to dead ends. The circle wouldn't listen to me. The elders had made that painfully clear. My father certainly

wouldn't help. He was all about this. And Skollrend's support meant nothing if Silver Creek refused it out of pride.

My boots crunched against gravel as I walked. The sound seemed too loud in the quiet.

A thought slithered into my mind then. Dark and as unwelcome as it could be. The kind of thought that came from desperate places.

Why don't you poison her?

I stopped walking.

The idea sat there in my consciousness like a serpent coiled in tall grass. Waiting and patient.

Hazel deserved to die after all. The evidence proved her guilt. The audio recording confirmed premeditation. She'd murdered Milo in cold blood and now she was going to escape punishment because her betrothed came from a powerful pack.

That wasn't justice.

But poison was murder. It would be a cold and calculated thing to do. Exactly what I'd been condemning Hazel for.

I started pacing again. Faster this time. My thoughts raced ahead of my feet.

It wouldn't even be hard. I knew plants. I knew which ones were deadly and which were merely painful. I knew how to prepare them so they'd work quickly or slowly depending on what I wanted. I knew how to make death look like natural causes if I was careful enough.

I mean... what else could I do? Stand back and watch Hazel walk free? Accept that power and politics mattered more than truth? Let Milo's death become nothing more than an unfortunate incident that people would whisper about but never truly address?

Let whatever Cian's uncle wanted from her come to fruition by letting her live?

Chapter 213: Have your cake

FIA

I forced the thought down the moment it surfaced.

It did not vanish. It never really did. It simply sank, heavy and ugly, lodged somewhere deep where I could pretend it was not there. I hated that Hazel could still pull that kind of

darkness out of me without even being in the room. I hated that my mind could wander there at all.

Poison...

I closed my eyes for half a second and breathed through it.

No.

I would not let her turn me into something else. I would not let her rot me from the inside the way she rotted everything she touched. Whatever justice looked like now, twisted and compromised as it was, I would not cross that line.

But I had to see her.

That need felt different from anger. Quieter. Sharper. Like a hook under my ribs pulling me forward whether I liked it or not.

The entrance to the lower levels sat tucked behind a narrow service corridor most people never noticed. The moment I passed through it, the estate changed its skin. Marble gave way to stone. Polished light faded into torch-glow. The air thickened, damp and sour, clinging to the back of my throat.

Each step down felt deliberate, like I was choosing this with my whole body.

The corridors narrowed as I descended. The ceiling lowered. The walls pressed closer, rough beneath my fingers when I brushed them. The smell grew worse the farther I went, layered and old, piss and mold and something underneath that made my stomach tighten. I could not tell if it was blood or decay, and I decided I did not want to know.

A sentinel stepped into view ahead of me.

He was standing half in shadow, half in torchlight, shoulders stiff, posture too rigid. His hand moved to his gun the moment he saw me, fingers curling around it like it was the only solid thing he trusted down here.

"I was warned to keep you out," he said.

His voice cracked on the last word.

I stopped a few paces away and looked at him properly. He was young. Younger than he should have been for a post like this. His jaw was clenched tight, eyes darting just enough to give him away.

"Drop it," I said.

He did not. The gun lifted instead, not quite steady.

"You're not supposed to be here," he said again, louder this time, as if volume could turn an order into truth.

"I am here to see my sister."

The word sister felt wrong in my mouth. Heavy. Sour.

"I was told to keep you out," he repeated. "No exceptions."

I tilted my head. "And what will you do then?"

His grip tightened.

"Shoot me?" I asked. "Shoot the ruling Luna of Skollrend?"

The title landed between us like a blade.

His breathing hitched and the gun wavered.

I took a step closer.

"Please," I said quietly. "We both know you are bluffing."

The barrel hovered inches from my chest. I could see his finger on the trigger now, pale and tense.

"You are welcome to watch me," I went on. "I have no nefarious purpose."

For a long moment, neither of us moved. Torchlight flickered across his face, catching the sweat at his temple, the fear he was trying so hard to swallow.

Then his shoulders sagged.

The gun lowered.

He looked away from me, shame flashing across his features before he could hide it.

I walked past him without another word.

The cells stretched ahead, iron bars lining the stone corridor like ribs. Some were empty. Others were not. Shapes shifted in the shadows. Low sounds followed me, breaths and murmurs and the scrape of movement against stone.

Hazel's cell was at the end.

She was standing when I reached it.

She looked bad. Worse than she wanted anyone to see. Sweat slicked her skin, darkening the collar of her dress. Her hair clung to her face in limp strands, no longer perfectly arranged. Her eyes were bright in a way that had nothing to do with confidence and everything to do with strain.

She straightened when she saw me, pride snapping into place like armor.

"If you are here," she said, blowing her hair out of her face, "then I have to assume I am no longer in dire danger."

Her lips curved into a smile. "My grandmother must have done her thing."

She laughed softly. "Oh, the look on your face right now."

Her gaze dragged over me, savoring.

"I win again, little sister."

I stepped closer to the bars and met her eyes. I let myself really look at her. At the cracks she was pretending did not exist.

"You are no Luna anymore," I said.

Her smile faltered.

"That used to be your pride," I continued. "Now you are... what? A Gamma?"

Her jaw tightened. "Nothing an upper-ranking marriage cannot fix."

She lifted her chin. "Look at you. From Omega to honorary Luna of a powerful pack. I will have the same."

Her eyes sharpened. "But tell me, Fi. What are you without Cian Donlon and Skollrend?"

She leaned closer to the bars. "I can stand as Gamma at least. I am still the beloved daughter of my parents. I have both of them. And a man magnet."

Her gaze flicked over me, cruel and precise. "All you have going for you is that pitiful look."

I smiled.

It was slow. Controlled. It startled her.

"But I still threatened you all your life," I said. "I was still a thorn in your side. My happiness made you grate. You thought I was so pathetic I would never fight back."

I leaned in until the cold iron pressed against my forearms.

"That is why you are in this cell."

Her lips parted. No sound came out.

"I will tell you the difference between us," I said. "I do not need to use a man. I do not need to rely on one for my salvation."

Her laugh burst out sharp and sudden. "When you slit your own throat to get your mad husband on my case, what was that?"

I tilted my head. "What are you talking about?"

Her eyes glittered. "You slit your throat. Remember?"

I watched her hand curl into a fist. Was she trying to corner me to saying the truth somehow?

"You slit my throat," I said calmly. "Remember?"

Her breath caught.

"I am not done yet," I added.

Her confidence wavered, just for a moment.

"Even if you survive this," I said, "I will ensure you are bitter until the end of your life."

I straightened slowly.

"But sister to sister," I went on, "be careful whose hands you hold. Sometimes the enemy of your enemy is not your friend."

Her eyes widened.

"Gabriel Donlon is no friend of yours."

Fear cracked through her composure. Real fear.

"Yes," I said. "I figured he had something to do with this."

I smiled. "My husband is looking for him. To hang him or behead him."

Her fingers dug into the bars.

"I imagine he would not be so kind if he heard you were fraternizing with his enemies," I continued. "A broken hand would be the least of your worries."

She swallowed hard.

"But I can keep a secret," I said lightly. "And I assure you, whatever help he rendered, you should be afraid of it."

Her breathing grew shallow.

"Because his help is probably a noose," I went on. "Why do you think he got Stratis here? What did he have on them?"

I tilted my head. "And what will he have on you soon enough?"

She shook her head once, sharp and angry. "You are terrified that I won."

I turned toward the corridor.

"Like I said," I replied, "I am not done yet."

I paused and looked back at her one last time.

"I will make sure you become so reliant on a man that you have no choice but to kneel," I said. "Saving yourself will become your only priority."

I smiled again. "You will never have the time to look in my corner and ruin me. Because if there is one thing proud and self serving Alphas hate, it is a runt with no prospects."

Her scream followed me down the corridor.

"What does that mean?" she shouted. "What does that mean?"

I did not answer.

I walked away as the sound of her rage echoed behind me.

This time, the darkness did not feel like it owned me anymore. And I had the brightest idea now.

Chapter 214: You're gonna die in this house 1

HAZEL

I stood there long after she left.

The corridor felt smaller without her in it, like the walls had edged closer the moment her footsteps faded. My hands were still wrapped around the bars, fingers aching from how hard I had been gripping them. I did not remember when I started. I only knew my palms were slick with sweat and the iron was starting to get cold enough to sting.

What does that mean...

The words kept repeating in my head, ugly and sharp.

What does that mean...

I turned toward the sentinel who had been stationed just beyond my cell. He had been pretending not to listen, pretending not to see, but there was no hiding the way his eyes had followed her as she walked away.

"Call my mother," I said.

My voice sounded thinner than I wanted it to.

He did not move.

I straightened, forcing my spine into the posture that had always served me. "Did you not fucking hear me? Call my mother."

He looked at me then. Really looked. There was no urgency in his gaze, no rush to obey. If anything, there was only disdain. It was barely masked, but there.

He turned and started walking away.

"You stupid fuck," I snapped. "Did you not hear me?"

He stopped but did not turn around.

"I was told to keep watch over you," he said. "Not be your personal servant."

The words hit harder than they should have.

"How dare you speak to me like that," I said, heat flooding my face. "I am the daughter and a Luna of this pack."

The sentence died halfway out of my mouth.

Luna...

The word echoed hollowly in my head.

I was no Luna.

The realization landed slow and heavy, like something settling where it could not be dislodged. That title had been my shield. My leverage. The thing that made people lower their eyes and swallow their words. And it was gone now.

The sentinel turned back to me then, eyebrows raised slightly, waiting.

Waiting for me to finish.

Waiting for me to say something else.

But there was nothing else.

My throat closed around the words that refused to come.

He scoffed softly and then walked away.

The sound of his boots faded down the corridor, each step a reminder of what I no longer had. I stood there frozen, staring at the empty space he left behind, my mind scrambling for something solid to hold onto.

Fia was right.

The thought crept in uninvited and stayed.

My pride was gone. The way people looked at me had already changed. No one rushed to my side. No one whispered reassurance through the bars. No one cared enough to pretend.

They had never loved me.

They had loved the title.

And now that it was stripped away, so was everything else.

I did not know how long I stood there before footsteps returned. I flinched when the sentinel reappeared with keys jingling in his hand.

"The trial is on again," he said.

He opened the cell and grabbed my arm. His grip was not gentle but it was certainly just as cruel. It did not matter. My body felt numb as he dragged me out.

The corridor blurred as we moved. Torchlight flickered past. Faces turned toward me, some curious, some indifferent. I could not read any of them. I could barely feel my feet hitting the stone beneath me.

The doors to the council chamber opened.

The sound rushed in all at once. Voices. Shuffling. The low hum of expectation. My heart started pounding again, sharp and frantic, as if it had been waiting for this moment to remind me it was still there.

They shoved me forward.

I lifted my head as I was forced to stand before the elders one last time. The circle loomed above me, familiar and terrifying in equal measure. I searched the faces I knew best first.

My mother sat tall and composed. Her expression was calm in a way that made my chest loosen just a little. My grandmother beside her looked almost bored, her fingers folded neatly in her lap. My father's shoulders were relaxed, his jaw unclenched.

Relief washed through me.

Why was I so terrified? I would survive this.

I knew it the moment I saw them. The smiles were subtle, but they were there. The elders, on the other hand, looked strained. Tight and cornered.

Which was good for me.

The lead elder cleared his throat.

"We reconvene regarding the last accusation," he said. "This concerns the case of Luna— Apologies. This concerns the case of now Gamma Hazel Hughes in regards to the murder of Sentinel Milo Ashford."

The words rang through the chamber. I kept my face neutral and my breathing steady. I had practiced this. I knew how to stand. How to look repentant without conceding anything.

I let my gaze drift then, just once, and it landed on her.

Fia stood among them. She was not seated, but she managed to be as present as a thorn. In that way she has that drew my attention against my will. She was smiling.

It was sickening to look at that wide, unapologetic grin.

My stomach twisted. Because... Why was she smiling?

What did she think was so funny?

I looked away quickly when my pulse started to spike.

I told myself she was a wack. That smile did not belong here. And she was just pretending to have some ace. But what could she even have?

Everything was finally settling back into place.

Then I noticed someone else.

A man stood near the Lily of the Valley delegation. I did not recognize him. He was tall and composed. The most telling part was how his presence despite being quiet was undeniable. His eyes were the first thing that caught me.

They were emerald green.

They were fixed on me at first, sharp and assessing, and for a fleeting moment I wondered if this was it. I wondered if this was him. My salvation. The heir of the Lily of the valley pack perhaps. The one meant to smooth this over and make it disappear.

Then his gaze shifted.

It moved past me and landed on Fia.

It was haunting how his eyes stayed there.

The way he looked at her made my skin crawl. It was not hunger exactly. It was something deeper. Something intent. Like he was studying her, memorizing her and drinking her in.

The lead elder's voice pulled me back.

"We have evidence," he said.

My fingers curled at my sides.

"Damning evidence," he continued. "That you, Hazel Hughes, did connive to kill Milo Ashford because he threatened to expose your wrongdoings."

The room seemed to tilt.

My chest tightened and my breath started coming shallow.

"Because of that," he said, "you are guilty as charged and must be appropriately punished."

I waited for the reprieve. The pause and the pivot.

My heart kept thudding as I watched the elder swallow.

"But given the recent circumstances, a beheading would be barbaric."

There it was.

Relief surged through me, sharp and dizzying.

"However," he went on, "you will be punished. You will be excommu—"

"Forgive me." Fia's voice cut through the chamber.

Every head turned.

She stepped forward, her expression suddenly serious, measured in a way that made my skin prickle.

"An excommunication from this pack is beyond cruel," she said. "Not for Hazel alone. But for our parents."

The lead elder turned toward her, irritation flickering across his face. I could see the words forming on his tongue, sharp and dismissive.

Then the green-eyed man spoke.

"I agree."

The word echoed louder than it should have.

It is cruel the power he carried because two words from him let the whole hall fall into complete silence.

I stared at him, my heart thudding so hard I could feel it in my throat.

When I looked at my grandmother, she looked tense. So that told me that this was not in the script.

The sickening feeling in my gut grew heavier.

The lead elder straightened, schooling his expression. "What would you suggest is fair?"

Fia did not hesitate.

"Something that allows her to remember the sanctity of life," she said. "Something that still gives her a community at the end of the day."

She turned slowly, letting her gaze sweep the room before it landed at me.

"And something that shows the sentinels and the Omegas of this pack that Silver Creek, although cornered, can still be fair."

The elder nodded, thoughtful.

The green-eyed man spoke again. "The Lily of the Valley concurs."

My breath caught.

"...It is all we want really. Justice that is not barbaric."

The words rang in my ears.

This man.

This was supposed to be my way out.

The realization hit hard and fast. Why did it feel like; he had not come for me... why did it feel like he had not come to save me... Why the hell was he watching Fia like she was the axis everything turned on?

I felt suddenly cold.

The elder drew a breath, preparing to speak again, and for the first time since I had been dragged from my cell, fear wrapped fully around my spine.

What had she done?

What had she planned?

And why was everyone suddenly listening to her?

Was it because of him?

Chapter 215: You're gonna die in this house 2

FIA

I had not expected him to agree with me.

The shock of it hit somewhere beneath my ribs, sharp and sudden. I kept my face smooth anyway and I tried hard to keep my expression measured like I had planned this all along. Like his voice cutting through the chamber with those two simple words had been part of some grand design I had orchestrated from the start.

It had not been.

This was a gamble. A wild, reckless throw of dice that I thought would clatter uselessly across the floor. I thought the elders would dismiss me. I thought the Lily of the Valley delegation would stay silent or worse, object. I thought Hazel's family—because I couldn't call them mine at this point—would talk circles around my suggestion until it dissolved into nothing.

But he had spoken.

The boy from the meadows. The one with emerald eyes that kept watching me with an intensity I still felt crawling across my skin.

And now the entire room hung on that agreement like it was law.

I swallowed and let my gaze drift over the faces staring back at me. The lead elder looked contemplative, fingers drumming against the armrest of his chair. The other elders shifted in their seats, glancing at one another with expressions I could not quite read. Hazel's grandmother sat rigid, her mouth pressed into a thin line. She was proper pissed. But she wasn't going to crash out here. Her priority seemed to be keeping Hazel alive and regardless of how south this went, she had been successful. Hazel's mother, Isobel, on the other hand, looked tense in a way that told me this had veered off script.

Good.

I had no script. I was making this up as I went, stitching together words and hoping they held long enough to mean something.

The lead elder drew in a breath. He straightened in his seat and let his gaze sweep across the chamber before settling on Hazel. She stood there, pale and trembling, her hands curled into fists at her sides.

"You make a fair point, Luna Fia Donlon," he said slowly. "Excommunication would be cruel. Not just to Hazel Hughes, but to her family. To this pack."

He paused, and the silence that followed felt heavy enough to crush.

"We must remember that justice is not simply about punishment. It is about balance. About showing that even when we are tested, even when we are cornered, we can still uphold what is right."

His voice grew firmer.

"Hazel Hughes, you have been found guilty of conspiring to murder Sentinel Milo Ashford. A brother of this territory. A wolf who served this pack faithfully. You took his life because he threatened to expose your wrongdoings. You acted out of selfishness and cruelty."

Hazel flinched. Her breathing was shallow now, her chest rising and falling too fast.

"For crimes against a brother of your territory," the elder continued, "you will be demoted to the lowest of ranks until the day you die."

The words landed like stones dropped into still water.

"You will be demoted to Omega."

A smile crept across my face before I could stop it. It crawled up slow and unbidden, tugging at the corners of my mouth. I did not care if anyone saw.

Hazel's face went white.

"What?" Her voice cracked, high and desperate. "Am I not supposed to go a rank lower? Just one rank?"

The lead elder's expression hardened. "Your reaction now shows that this is the necessary punishment."

He turned toward the spiritual elder, the older woman with silver in her hair braided down her back. Her eyes were closed already, her hands folded in her lap.

"Pray to the goddess," he said. "See if she will deliver this punishment or have mercy."

"No!"

Hazel's scream tore through the chamber.

"That bored goddess hates me! She won't have mercy! You know she won't!"

Isobel shot to her feet.

"Hazel, shut up!"

But Hazel was not listening. She was shaking now, her whole body trembling as tears streamed down her face.

"Mother, please help me." Her voice broke. "I don't want to be a runt. I don't want to be a fucking Omega. Please."

The spiritual elder began to pray.

Her voice was soft at first, barely audible over Hazel's sobs. Then it grew louder, filling the chamber with words I did not fully understand. Ancient words. Sacred ones.

Hazel made a move to run.

She turned, her legs tensing, but then something stopped her. It was not a person. It looked like something invisible and unyielding had held her in place with iron chains.

Her knees buckled and she fell to the grounds shaking violently. I watched her hands uselessly claw at the stone floor.

"No," she gasped. "It hurts! It hurts!"

Her screams were raw and animal-like. They scraped against the walls and echoed back at us.

"Someone please help!"

Then she started to convulse.

Her body jerked and twisted, limbs flailing as if something inside her was trying to tear its way out.

"My wolf!" she choked out between gasps. "I can't feel my wolf anymore. Please! No!!!! Noooooo!!"

Blood spilled from her mouth, dark and thick and it splattered across the stone.

Then she went still.

Isobel let out a wail that made my chest tighten despite everything. She fell to her knees and crawled across the floor and down the semi circle toward her daughter.

"Hazel! Hazel!"

She grabbed Hazel's shoulders and shook her, her voice climbing higher with each word.

"Somebody help her! Someone get the healers!"

I turned away from the scene. My stomach felt tight, but I did not regret this. I could not afford to.

Baruch stood a few feet away, his face drawn and tired. I stepped closer and leaned in so only he could hear.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "But this is all I can offer you."

He looked at me for a long moment, then nodded.

"It is more than enough," he said quietly. "It might even be a fate worse than death for her."

I believed him.

"What do you plan to do now?" I asked.

"I will silently leave the pack," he said. "Be with my grandmother."

"They might figure you out eventually. It will not be safe. I know Hazel will definitely come looking. She can be vengeful as you know."

He shrugged, resignation settling across his features.

"You can come with me," I offered. "Come with me to Skollrend."

"No." He shook his head. "But thank you for offering."

I smiled faintly and let it drop.

The lead elder's voice rang out again, cutting through the chaos.

"Praise the goddess. This trial is over."

Relief washed through me. I then turned toward Garrett, who stood near the edge of the room watching everything unfold with quiet intensity.

"Looks like I'm done here," I said. "We should go back."

I had barely finished the sentence when quick and purposeful footsteps approached from behind.

I turned.

The boy from the meadows stalked toward me, his emerald eyes locked on mine with that same unnerving focus. He stopped just close enough that I could see the flecks of gold buried in the green.

"Fia Donlon, is it?" His voice was smooth as silk. "We should talk."

My heart thudded hard against my ribs.

I held his gaze and forced myself to stay steady.

"About what exactly?"

Chapter 216: The Kids are fine

CAMILLE'S POV

There it was again. That Cheshire cat smile. I ran a hand through my hair and fixed my masks.

I watched Dimitri's eyes squint with scrutiny. "The mask is a part of you, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I managed to respond, making my way to where Sophia was sitting. Sophia looked at me puzzled. Collins also did the same and I didn't need to be a telepath to know why.

The mask was new for them. I only hid my identity when I was using my gifts and now was one of those times. If the situation were different, I would have considered it. But I sat with three people who knew me from my past.

My eyes danced across the table. Eva was present, sipping a glass of orange juice as she dissected her food like it was the worst thing she had laid her eyes on.

Neal was at the other end of the table. He was busy with his phone and his food was barely touched.

Dimitri on the other hand was playing the role of dutiful father. It made me uncomfortable to see it happen in real time because it made me feel like a villain. Was I doing the right thing keeping it a secret? How was I even supposed to go through with it? Collins and Sophia were a result of a drunk one-night stand that he probably didn't remember. Probably was mild. He had laid eyes on me once. He didn't remember it. So, there was no point shackling him with the burden of responsibility. Keeping the kids had been my choice.

One of the servants approached with an empty plate and a glass. The glass was filled first with orange juice. Without much thought, I reached for the glass to drink, momentarily forgetting about the mask covering my mouth. As the glass brushed

against the protective clothing, I instinctively put it down in embarrassment. That's when a voice whispered in the back of my head, "But our mate would make a wonderful father, wouldn't he?"

A cold shiver ran down my spine, and to my surprise, the glass I was about to drop on the table slipped from my hand. It tipped over, spilling orange juice across the pristine white tablecloth. Eva, seated opposite me, bore the brunt of the spill.

"Fuck!" She swore, shooting me a death glare. "Are you clumsy or just retarded?!"

The whole room fell into silence as everyone stared down at me and then Eva.

"Eva, that is rude." The woman from yesterday broke the silence. "She is a guest of the kingdom just as you are. Courtesy demands that you treat her with respect."

"Oh, Milana, spare me that. Can't you see what she did?"

"I apologize," I cut in, my eyes fixated on Sophia who was appalled by what Eva had said.

"What?" Eva snickered. "your apology isn't going to miraculously fix—"

"I am not done talking," I cut her off.

Eva's eyes shot wide like she couldn't believe I would dare clap back.

"It was an accident," I continued. "But it is fine by me if you don't want to believe that. All I ask is that you watch your language when you are around my kids."

My statement hung in the air, and the room was wrapped in tense silence. Eva's pride seemed wounded so of course she wouldn't back down without receiving her pound of flesh.

"Aren't you a single mother? Language is the least you should be worried about when it comes to your kids. You should have seen how they acted like god-damned ani—"

"Eva, that is enough." Dimitri cut in, slamming the spoon in his hand on his plate. "I will not accept you disrespecting my guests."

I acknowledged Dimitri's defence with an awkward smile.

Eva glared at me, clearly displeased with being silenced. But she did keep her mouth shut. Almost like she respected Dimitri.

I seized the opportunity to maintain my composure and redirect the focus to something else.

My wolf rarely spoke. The first time I heard it speak was when I was on the brink of death. The accident vividly flashed at the back of my hand as I attempted to black it out. But it was doing it again.

"Are you there?" I sent back, hoping the mental link would be sustained.

I had so many questions. But it seems just like it was before, my wolf did as it pleased. There was no response to my call. Just silence.

The maid who had served the juice I poured in Eva's direction stalked back to me after she was done cleaning my mess with the orange-stained towel in her hands.

"Miss, would you like more juice?" She asked.

Knowing there was no way I would be able to enjoy it. I refused her. She nodded in understanding and attempted to serve me a plate instead.

"There is no need," I told her. "I am not hungry."

It was an obvious lie. My stomach was growling but I was much too embarrassed to do anything about it. I would have settled for breakfast in bed like it was afforded to us yesterday. But my children wouldn't just sit still. So here I was, starving and frustrated.

Dimitri must have noticed the discontent in my soul because he peered up at me and spoke. "You should eat something."

"I am not hungry," I chuckled like the nervous wreck that I was. "Really."

He didn't buy it but he let me be. I kept my eyes on Collins. Dimitri had somehow managed to feed him his entire plate in mere minutes which was surprising. Collins did like food but he was a restless child. He burned out his food as he ate.

Sophia on the other hand was focused on the finer things of life. Last night, she had been all about finding me the perfect boyfriend/husband but today, she was fixated on the beautiful woman seated next to us. I could almost laugh as she imitated the way the woman ate and her demeanour. Most would find it insulting but Milana seemed to have no problem with it.

Just then, two men rushed in. They were burly and in armor pieces telling me that they were sentinels. The one with a hardened face looked worried so it told the whole room that something was wrong.

"Your Majesty," the fierce one spoke. "Forgive my intrusion. But the prisoner that was healed yesterday is..." The man then paused, his eyes darted around and it looked as if he was physically in pain.

"Is what?" Dimitri's tone turned serious.

The man bowed. "Hector Menard is having another outbreak of the disease."

Those words left like a sucker punch in the guts. Dimitri's word from the pool told me he had a lot of faith in my gift and I knew first-hand how hard he was trying to rid himself of the disease, he had scouted me five years ago when I lived as Camille, the newly discovered daughter of Bo De'crescent and the granddaughter of the greatest healer to ever live.

I felt somehow guilty.

"But how?!" Dimitri's voice was cracking. The new world he had probably built for himself was crashing down on him before he even got a chance to enjoy it. "He was fine yesterday."

"He was fine this morning too. It started some minutes ago." The sentinel responded. "He just started screaming and when we went to check him out. His entire flesh had turned black. It's even worse than before."

"No." Dimitri shook his head. "I have to see this myself."

, too, couldn't shake the feeling of responsibility, knowing that Hector's condition might have worsened because of my gift.

"I'm going with you," I asserted, my voice firm, although a pang of guilt lingered within me.

Everyone on the table stood up. Neal instructed one of the guards to stay with the children and keep watch while we all followed the other to where Hector was imprisoned.

I could barely keep up with the pace of everyone. I kept wondering what I had done wrong. Did I not finish the job? Was the strange disease stronger than my abilities could take?

"Thinking?" A voice interrupted my thoughts, and I looked up to find Neal beside me, his expression a blend of concern and curiosity.

"I..." I hesitated, not sure how to express my frustration. "I thought I had cured Hector completely. I don't understand why the disease is back and worse than before."

Neal placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. "You've done everything you can, Cameryn. Sometimes, things are beyond our control."

He was right. But why did it hurt so much? I didn't even want to be here in the first place. I was forced back into this world against my will. But here I was pressed that Dimitri's hopes were shattered.

It was a sentiment I didn't want to admit that I understood.

Chapter 217: No claim left

FIA

I frowned. "About what exactly?"

He tilted his head, studying my face like the answer mattered more than it should have. "You really don't remember me?"

I blinked. The question landed wrong, not heavy exactly, just misplaced, like something meant for another version of me. My eyes drifted past him before I could stop myself, to where my father stood with the elders as they gathered their things and spoke in low, tired voices. He was watching us.

His expression sat somewhere between confusion and surprise, like he hadn't expected to look up and find me talking to anyone at all, least of all someone like this.

Pauline Strati stood a short distance away. The moment I saw her face, my stomach tightened. There was a sharpness in her eyes that made my skin prickle. The kind that came before bloodshedding.

I looked back at the boy in front of me.

"Am I supposed to?"

His mouth curved, barely. The smile was small and quick, but it changed him. Softened something sharp around the edges. He stepped closer and held out his hand, palm open like this was a meeting between equals.

"The name's Lysander Asker," he said. "Alpha heir of Lily of the Valley."

I didn't take his hand. I didn't even pretend to consider it. My gaze slid back to Pauline, who now looked like she was holding herself together by force alone. Her jaw was tight, her shoulders rigid, every line of her body pulled inward like a coiled wire.

I returned my attention to him.

"I don't think you should be talking to me," I said. "I already have enough enemies."

He followed my line of sight easily, like he'd expected it. When he looked at Pauline, his smile widened instead of fading.

"We're just talking," he said lightly. "No need to shoot daggers into her soul or think about assassination."

Pauline's expression darkened, something ugly flickering there before she masked it.

"She looks terrified of you," he added, still watching her.

Then he turned back to me as if that was the end of the discussion, as if he had just smoothed over a minor inconvenience. "There. That settles it."

I stared at him, stunned by the audacity of it. Pauline muttered a curse under her breath and turned away, stalking down the steps to where Isobel knelt beside Hazel. Hazel was still unconscious and she was being lifted onto a stretcher, her face ashen, her hair tangled and damp with sweat.

When I looked back, Lysander was still there, watching me like none of that mattered.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"I want you to remember me," he said, almost cheerfully. "I never forgot you. It stings a little, knowing I didn't make enough of an impression to be memorable."

I let out a slow breath, trying to steady myself, trying not to feel like the floor had shifted under my feet.

"And if I say I remember you," I said, "does this end?"

He shrugged. "Maybe."

"Fine," I said. "I remember you. The boy from the meadows."

His smile spread, real this time, like I'd just confirmed something he already knew.

"So you lied."

"I don't owe you honesty," I replied.

He shook his head slowly. "I don't think that's true." His voice lowered, not threatening, but deliberate. "I helped you deal with your sister. I stood behind you when you had her stripped of rank. Demoted to Omega." He paused, letting the words settle where they would coil most. "You know you couldn't have done that without my backing."

The air felt heavier after that, like the room itself had decided to listen.

I scoffed. The audacity of him standing here acting like he had done me some grand favor.

"Without your backing, she would be dead. If anything, you hindered me."

I pushed past him and headed toward the door. Garrett straightened from where he had been waiting and fell into step beside me.

"Garrett, let us go."

"I had no idea you were Silvercreek." Lysander's voice stopped me. I turned back.

He stood where I had left him, hands loose at his sides. His expression had shifted. There was something quieter there now. Something more serious.

"After you vanished while I went to get better help, I looked for you. I looked for you like crazy. I even asked a witch for help. But your blood couldn't be tracked for whatever reason. It was like the goddess didn't want us to meet ever again."

The words hung in the air between us. I felt something shift in my chest.

"Thank you for your help then," I said. "But it was so long ago."

"Not to me."

The way he said it. The way he had been looking at me this entire time. I suddenly understood what was happening here and I needed to shut it down immediately.

"You do know I am mated to someone."

He looked confused for a second. Then he laughed. It was genuine and startled.

"Did it feel like I was flirting? I get that a lot. But of course I know you are married. Perhaps if I had acclimated myself more to werewolf society gatherings, I would have known you were his bride much faster."

I studied his face. He seemed sincere. But who knew? There was something about the way he looked at me that still made my skin prickle.

"Well goodbye to you."

He smiled again. That same small smile.

"Goodbye, Fia."

The way his tongue settled on my name sent a strange shiver across my skin. I ignored it and kept walking.

What the hell was even that? I thought.

Garrett and I made it outside before I heard my father's voice.

"Fia."

I stopped and turned.

He stood in the doorway, his face shadowed by the overhang. His expression was hard and closed off.

"Before you ask, I don't really know him," I said. "And he chose to help me because he wanted to. Not because I am some manipulative monster who found a way—"

"I do not care about that." His voice cut in in a sharp and final manner.

I waited.

He took a breath. When he spoke again, his words were measured. Deliberate.

"After this, I never want to see you again. Don't come to Silvercreek. Stay out of our lives and we will stay out of yours."

The words should have hurt. Once upon a time, they would have shattered me. They would have carved something hollow and aching in my chest that I would have carried for years.

I laughed instead.

The sound surprised even me. I had no resentment at all. His words held no weight anymore.

"Once upon a time that would have hurt me like crazy." I met his eyes. "But not anymore."

He said nothing.

"I will not miss here," I continued. "But my mother's grave is on these grounds. So I'll visit. And I promise you..." I stepped closer. "You cannot stop me."

His jaw tightened.

"We'll uproot that grave and give the sand, stone, and body to you if that is what it takes for you to stay the fuck away from this family!"

The anger came quick and hot. It surged up through my chest and I felt it burning behind my eyes. But I smiled instead of screaming or trying to tear at his throat.

"No. You won't."

"Watch me."

"Not unless you want your head on a silver platter." My voice was quiet now. I meant every word. "Because that is what you will get if you disturb her rest after everything you did."

He stared at me and I stared right back.

"Dare me and see."

The silence stretched between us. He did not move. Neither did he speak.

Only then, did I turn and keep walking.

Garrett followed without a word.

"You alright, Luna?" Garrett asked.

"I'm fine."

He did not press. That was one of the things I appreciated about him. He knew when to let silence sit.

We walked in quiet for a while. My mind kept replaying the trial. Hazel's screams. The blood on the stone floor. The way Isobel had wailed when her daughter collapsed.

I should have felt something. Mostly satisfaction. But instead, I just felt tired.

"Do you think they'll actually try to move her grave?" Garrett asked after a while.

"No."

"You sound sure."

"I am." I glanced at him. "My father is a coward. He won't risk the fallout. Not when it would make him look bad in front of the other packs."

Garrett nodded slowly. "And if he does?"

"Then I'll make good on my threat."

He did not ask if I meant it. He already knew the answer.

Chapter 218: The Crutch

CIAN

I was an idiot.

The thought looped in my head as I stood in the hallway that led toward my room. My hand was still raised, fingers curled into a loose fist like I'd been about to knock on something. But there was nothing to knock on. Just regret

Ronan had told me to be careful. To think before I spoke. To consider that maybe the intensity of my suspicions came from somewhere else entirely. Somewhere I didn't want to look.

And what had I done?

I'd walked up to Madeline and still thrown the accusation at her like a grenade.

The look on her face when I'd said it. The way her body had gone rigid. The crack of her palm against my cheek still burned.

I deserved it.

I deserved worse than that.

She'd taken offense. Real, raw offense. The kind that couldn't be faked. And why wouldn't she? I'd accused her of murder. Of working for my uncle. Of being some kind of sleeper agent sent to destroy everything I cared about.

Things couldn't go back to normal after that. Whatever fragile thing we'd been rebuilding, I'd just put a boot through it.

I'd sent Wilhelm to check on her. I couldn't do it myself. Not when my presence would only make things worse. Not when she'd told me she hated me with tears streaming down her face.

A part of me wondered if the difficulty I had letting go of the suspicion was because there was truth to what Ronan had guessed. That nagging voice kept whispering maybe, maybe, maybe.

But that was the problem, wasn't it?

I couldn't trust my own instincts anymore. Not when they were this tangled up in everything else.

I needed to get rid of that picture. The one I'd kept hidden in my room. The one I should have thrown away years ago. Maybe if I did that, if I finally let go of that last piece of her, the thoughts would stop circling.

Ronan's hypothesis wouldn't have to matter. It would just die.

I turned toward my room and took three steps before I stopped.

My mother's door was open and I could see movement inside.

I changed direction immediately.

My mother was sitting in the chair by the window. I took a good look at her and noticed her hair was brushed. She looked more like herself than she had since we'd brought her back from her poison induced coma.

She saw me and smiled. "There you are. Where have you been?"

"I could ask you the same thing." I stepped into the room and leaned against the doorframe. "You've been scarce. Your room looks nice."

She moved her legs in an exaggerated way, pointing her toes and flexing her feet. "Well, I have been bedridden for a while now. I'm going to make do with what I have. Also thank you. Being in a coma did sort of let me see that things don't have to be the same. I left the room the way it was for a long time because of your father. But I think he'd want me to have this."

I tried to smile. I really did. But it felt wrong on my face and I was certain all I have was a heavy and crooked look.

Her expression shifted. The warmth dimmed just slightly. "Is something wrong?"

"No."

"I know you, Cian." She tilted her head. "I'm your mother."

I exhaled through my nose and looked away. Out the window. At the wall. Anywhere but at her face. "I don't want to talk about it with you. You're already terrified at the thought."

She went still.

The silence stretched between us and I knew she understood. I didn't have to say the name.

"Madeline," she said quietly.

I didn't answer. But she took that as enough.

"I have my reservations and my fears." Her voice was careful now. Measured even. "You know I'm grateful to her. She's the reason I have this new life. But just because I'm grateful doesn't mean I'll turn the other eye."

I glanced at her. She was watching me with that expression mothers got when they knew their child was about to say something they didn't want to hear.

"And I know I seem over the top," she continued. "I know I've been on your throat about this matter. But you can still talk to me. Even if it's about her. I promise I won't judge you."

Something in my chest loosened. Just a fraction.

"I was certain you were wrong yesterday," I said. The words came out rough. "But I'm not so sure anymore."

My mother swallowed. "You believe you still have feelings for her?"

"I wish I knew what it was." I pushed off the doorframe and paced to the other side of the room. "I don't want to hurt Fia. She's the last person I want to hurt."

"If you cannot be sure right now," my mother said, "then you're not being honest with yourself."

I walked to the window and stared out at the grounds.

At the trees swaying in the breeze.

At the normal, peaceful world that felt completely at odds with the chaos in my head.

"How can I?" My voice came out harder than I meant it to. "If it does turn out that there is still something, I'm going to blow up people's lives."

Behind me, I heard her shift in her chair.

"Cian." Her voice was softer now, gentler. "Listen to me."

I turned.

She was leaning forward, her hands clasped in her lap. Her eyes were clear and focused as she spoke.

"You cannot make decisions about your future based on fear of the fallout," she said. "I know that sounds harsh. I know it sounds like I'm telling you to be reckless with people's hearts. But that's not what I mean."

I waited.

"What I mean is this." She took a breath. "You need to figure out what's true first. Not what's convenient. Not what's easiest. Not what hurts the fewest people. What's true. Because if you build your life on anything else, it will collapse eventually. And when it does, the damage will be so much worse than if you'd just faced it now."

The words settled over me.

"Fia deserves a husband who is certain of his feelings," my mother continued. "She deserves someone who chooses her every day without question. Without doubt. And you deserve to be that person. But you can't be that person if you're lying to yourself about where your heart actually is."

"I know where my heart is," I said. "I would like to believe that I know where my heart is."

The admission... The thought that I couldn't beat my chest and be sure about it tasted like failure.

"Then you need to find out." She leaned back in her chair. "And yes, that might mean difficult conversations. It might mean hurting people temporarily. But it's better than the alternative. It's better than waking up five years from now and realizing you've been living a lie or torturing someone for the choice you made."

I rubbed a hand over my face. "I was going to confront it. Even Ronan hinted that the strong feelings I had... the suspicions... that it was because my mind could tell there's still something with Mads I don't want to acknowledge. And I thought I could talk to her. But when we finally got the chance to, I just froze and I said the wrong things."

My mother frowned. "Wait... Suspicions? What suspicions?"

"It's ridiculous."

"Well, let me hear it."

I hesitated. "Promise you won't internalize this in some weird way like I did. I just can't believe I said those stuff."

"I'm still not hearing anything."

I took a breath and let it out slowly. "I suspected that Madeline could be somehow working for Uncle Gabriel."

My mother's eyes widened.

"I know," I said quickly. "It's crazy."

"I wouldn't say crazy." She was watching me carefully now. Too carefully. "But why? Aldric was the one who brought her. He told me all about it."

"I know." I started pacing again. Three steps one way. Three steps back. "But you were unconscious. And every corner seemed to be against me. Witches didn't even want to help. Then Madeline was ready to blow up her life to revive and bring you back."

I stopped and looked at her.

"I guess I didn't want to take that as... I guess it told me that Madeline was still the same old Mads," I said. "That there was no sacrifice she wouldn't make for me. That her love was still as fervent as ever even if she lied that it was over. And maybe the thought just compounded again and again and again. And I needed to hate her badly to have normalcy again."

The confession hung in the air between us.

My mother was quiet for a long moment. Then she stood. Slower than she used to, but steady. She crossed the room until she was standing right in front of me.

"Squash it out," she said. Her voice was firm. "Talk to her. Get your priorities and boundaries clear. I know you can do that. You hold your father's seat and you're doing a damn great job at it. In the matters of the heart, I know you'll be just as terrific too."

I stared at her. "I half expected you to discourage me. What if this opens a bad door?"

"I'm trying so hard to be objective." She reached up and put her hand on my cheek. The same one Madeline had slapped. "But I know who I raised. And he better not disappoint himself or me."

Something in my throat tightened.

"You want honesty?" my mother continued. "I'm team Fia. I think she's wonderful and I think you two could be very happy together. But I'm also team you. And if you're not honest about what you're feeling, you'll poison that relationship from the inside out. So figure it out. Be brave enough to look at the truth, even if it's uncomfortable."

"Thank you," I said quietly.

She pulled me into a hug. I wrapped my arms around her and for a moment I was a kid again. Small, uncertain and grateful that someone else knew how to fix things.

But I wasn't a kid anymore.

And this was something I had to fix myself.

Chapter 219: Teeth 1

HAZEL

The darkness had teeth.

I was running through Silvercreek's halls, barefoot, my nightgown catching on invisible thorns. The stone floors were cold. So cold they burned. Behind me, footsteps echoed.

They were heavy and they kept multiplying with each turn I took. I didn't look back. I knew what was chasing me.

The whispers started soft, then grew louder.

Omega. Omega. Omega.

The word wrapped around my throat like fingers. I tried to scream, but my voice came out wrong. Thin. Weak. The sound a prey animal makes when it knows the hunt is over.

I rounded a corner and stopped.

The grand hall stretched before me, filled with wolves from every pack. They stood in rows, silent and still, their eyes tracking my movement. At the front, my mother and father waited on a raised platform. Behind them, a banner hung—the Silvercreek crest, except the silver wolf had been crossed out in blood.

"Please," I whispered. My voice cracked. "Please, I didn't mean—"

My mother's face was stone. "You thought you could challenge her and walk away unchanged?"

"I was protecting myself. She was a weak Omega bitch. What could she have really done? I was nearly mad at what she said to father... I thought I was protecting the family—"

"You were protecting your pride, and stroking your ego" Father said. His voice cut through the hall like a blade. "And now look at you."

I glanced down.

My hands were wrong. The fingers too long, the nails cracked and dirty. When I touched my face, I felt hollows where there shouldn't be. My cheekbones jutted out sharp enough to cut. My hair fell in clumps when I ran my fingers through it.

"What's happening to me?"

No one answered.

The crowd began to move. They circled me slowly, closing in. Their faces blurred together, but I caught fragments. Expressions of disgust... I saw pity. Even satisfaction.

Someone laughed and plenty others joined them.

I spun, searching for an exit, but the walls had moved closer. The ceiling pressed down. The air thickened until breathing felt like swallowing mud.

"Stop," I gasped. "Stop, please—"

A hand grabbed my shoulder. I jerked away and found myself face to face with Fia.

Except it wasn't Fia. Not exactly. Her eyes were too bright, almost glowing. Her smile was wrong. It was too wide and far too sharp. Blood dripped from her hands and her throats and the crimson pooled at her feet.

"Did you really think you'd win?" she asked.

"I—I didn't—"

"You tried to humiliate me in front of everyone. You called me a liar. A fraud." She stepped closer. The blood spread across the floor, reaching for my bare feet. "So I took everything from you instead."

"No. No, that's not—"

"Your rank. Your wolf. Your future." Her smile widened. "All of it. Gone."

The crowd began to chant. Low at first, then building.

Omega. Omega. Omega.

I pressed my hands over my ears, but the sound burrowed deeper. It vibrated in my bones, rattled in my skull. I opened my mouth to scream, to tell them they were wrong, that this was temporary, that I was still Luna-born, still important—

But nothing came out.

Even when I reached for my wolf. That warm, powerful presence that had always been there, coiled in my chest like a second heartbeat. The strength I'd felt since birth. The proof of my worth.

It was empty too.

The space where she should have been was hollow and scraped clean till nothing at all was left.

My wolf was gone.

"No!" The word finally tore free. "No, no, no—"

Fia leaned in close, her breath cold against my ear. "You did this to yourself."

The floor gave way beneath me. I fell through darkness, through nothing, through a void that swallowed sound and light and hope. I clawed at the air, at the walls that weren't there, at anything that might stop the descent.

But it was a waste of a struggle. I kept falling.

And falling.

Then I woke up screaming.

My throat was raw. The sound kept coming, kept ripping out of me in ragged bursts until hands pressed against my shoulders and a familiar voice cut through the panic.

"Hazel! Hazel, you're alright. You're safe. You're here with me."

Mother's face swam into focus above me. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her hair pulled back in a messy bun. Behind her, the infirmary walls were stark white. Clinically empty but real.

I sucked in air, but it didn't feel like enough. My chest heaved. Sweat plastered my nightgown to my skin.

"It's alright," Mother said again, softer now. She smoothed my hair back from my forehead. "You're alright now."

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to close my eyes and sink back into the pillows and pretend the nightmare was the only thing wrong.

But it wasn't.

"Nothing is alright." My voice came out hoarse, broken. I stared at the ceiling, at the cracks in the plaster that looked like spider webs. "My wolf is gone."

Mother's hand stilled.

"It was taken from me." The words felt heavy and final. Like saying them out loud made it real in a way the trial hadn't. "She's just—she's not there anymore."

Silence filled the room. Not the comfortable kind. The terrible kind that confirmed everything I didn't want to know.

"Oh, shut up."

I flinched and turned my head.

Grandmother Pauline stood by the window, arms crossed, her expression carved from ice. She didn't look at me when she spoke. She just stared out at the grounds beyond the glass.

"The most important thing right now is that you are alive," she continued. Her voice was clipped, matter-of-fact. "Wolf or not, it wouldn't have mattered if you were beheaded."

The pragmatism of it hit like a slap. I opened my mouth, then closed it. What could I possibly say? That I'd rather be dead than be Omega? That losing my wolf felt like losing a limb, except worse, because at least phantom limbs could be mourned?

My stomach churned. Bile rose in my throat.

I said nothing.

Mother squeezed my hand. I barely felt it.

Movement in my peripheral vision made me look up. My breath caught.

A boy stood in the doorway. Green eyes and with sharp sun kissed features. I looked back at his deeply unsettling green eyes and then at his mouth.

"You." The word came out strangled.

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him with a soft click.

"You helped her," I said. The accusation hung between us.

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Chapter 220: Teeth 2

HAZEL

"I'm the reason you're still alive." His voice was light, almost cheerful, but there was steel underneath. He moved further into the room, hands in his pockets. "So I suggest you fix your tone and stop looking at me like that. Be grateful instead."

Grateful? Did this fool just imply I be thankful?

The word twisted something in my chest. I sat up straighter, ignoring the way my body protested. "How the fuck am I supposed to be grateful when I'm powerless?"

He tilted his head, studying me like I was a puzzle he'd already solved. "Powerless is better than dead."

"Is it?" I shot back. "Is it really?"

"Ask your mother or your grandmother. See what they say."

I didn't need to ask. I could see the answer in the way Mother's shoulders tensed, in the way she wouldn't meet my eyes.

"Why would you even help her?" The question scraped out of me. "Everything already worked out. I got what I wanted. The betrothal. The alliance. I would have gotten out of that with being a Gamma. Why side with her at all?"

He smiled then. It was small, strange and completely genuine. "Your grandmother's request to my father was that he use me to save you. That was all. Whether you kept your rank or not was unimportant."

The casual cruelty of it stole my breath.

"But," he continued, walking closer to my bed, "considering we'll be sharing a last name and a roof soon, it's best we get to know each other."

He stopped at the foot of the bed and extended his hand.

"I'm Lysander. Lysander Asker."

I stared at his hand. At his face. At the easy confidence that radiated off him like heat.

Instead of taking his hand, I looked at Mother then at Grandmother.

"Can we be left alone?"

Nobody moved.

"I'm sure you both heard me."

Pauline's jaw tightened. "I was certain my silence spoke enough. I do not trust you not to say something foolish. The Askers are not forgiving." She glanced at Lysander. "And Lysander can be just as ruthless as his father."

Lysander chuckled. The sound was warm, inviting and wrong. "Please. Do not put me in the same basket as that man." He met Grandmother's gaze without flinching. "I won't take any offense with anything she might say. She is my betrothed after all."

"I think it's best I stay here," Grandmother said.

Lysander's smile didn't waver. But something in his eyes shifted and hardened.

"I'm sure I made myself clear, Luna Pauline." His voice was still pleasant. Still light. But the threat underneath was unmistakable. "She wants to talk alone. I'll allow it."

Mother moved toward Grandmother, hand outstretched.

Grandmother shrugged her off. "Whatever."

They then left and the door clicked shut.

Silence pressed in. I watched Lysander, and he watched me back. There was something manic in the brightness of his eyes. Something that made my skin prickle with warning.

"I'm sure you can get it off your chest now," he said.

I didn't waste time. "If you accepted the betrothal, you must want something. What do you want?"

"What do you or Silvercreek have to give me?" He spread his hands. "You don't have to answer. Because we both know the answer to that. Nothing."

My fingers curled into the sheets. "So I'm supposed to believe you just accepted out of the goodness of your heart?"

"I'm not the only son of my father." He pulled over a chair, sat down like he belonged there. "But I am the only heir. If I had refused, my father would have put any of my brothers to it. Even my sisters, if none of the boys decided they were up for the challenge." He leaned back. "But I accepted. Because I have no prospect. Marriage hasn't always been at the forefront of my mind. The one girl I was so sure I wanted..." He paused. His smile turned wistful. "I never saw her for the longest time. Until today."

Dread pooled in my stomach like ice water.

"Until today?" My voice came out too small.

"Yes." His expression softened in a way that made me want to scream. "Your sister. Fia."

The room tilted.

"I don't understand." I gripped the sheets tighter. "You love Fia? What does that even mean? When would you even have met?"

"It was a long, long time ago." His voice took on a dreamy quality. Distant. "We met in a neutral territory meadow. I was a stubborn teenager who loved to go swimming, and she seemed to be a tree climber who attempted something far beyond her pay grade."

I saw it in his eyes. The way they lit up. The way his whole face changed when he talked about her.

Love.

Real, genuine, consuming love.

My stomach twisted.

"You know that evil monster is married, right?" The words came out harsh and desperate. "To a pack even stronger than yours by eight ranks."

"I know that."

"Then what—"

"I was just being honest with you because we will be united as one at the end of the day, and I appreciate honesty." He straightened. "An added bonus, and the strongest reason my father managed to convince me completely to take your hand, was also the fact that your grandparents promised us a powerful healer."

I blinked. "What does that mean? What is so special about healers?"

"I'm not entirely sure myself. But if my father wants it badly, then I'm sure it's worth it."

He stood in a smooth and casual manner. Like he hadn't just upended my entire world for the second time in as many days.

"Would that be all?"

"Are you still in love with Fia?" I asked without preamble.

He paused and then turned back to me. "Why do you care? It's not like this is a union of love."

"I am certain you must see the relationship I have with my sister." My voice shook. "So I ask again. Are you in love with her?"

"Would the answer bring you peace?"

"Yes."

He smiled. That same small, unsettling smile. "Yes. I do."

The confirmation shouldn't have hurt. I knew it already. But hearing it out loud made it real.

"So is that why you helped her when she suggested I be demoted?"

"Yes."

My hands clenched into fists.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"Yes. That is all. For now."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. It was a deep dark green with gold lettering thing that caught the light. He placed it on the bedside table.

"Call me."

Then he left.

I stared at the closed door. At the card. At the white walls that felt like they were closing in.

Fia.

Fia.

Fia.

Her name pounded in my head like a heartbeat. Like a curse. Like the only word that mattered anymore.

What the fuck was this life?

I'd lost my wolf. Lost my rank. And now I was engaged to a man who looked at my sister the way stories talked about soulmates.

I reached for the card. The edges bit into my palm.

Outside, I heard voices. Mother and Grandmother, probably discussing what to do with me now.

I lay back against the pillows and closed my eyes.

The darkness had teeth. And it seemed even in reality, I was still falling.