

To ruin an Omega #Chapter 231: Powerless 2 - Read To ruin an Omega Chapter 231: Powerless 2

Chapter 231: Powerless 2

HAZEL

The first girl's eyes went wide. She dropped to her knees like someone had cut her strings.

"No. Never." Her words tumbled over each other. "A sentinel is currently pursuing her," she then pointed at her friend. "... And we found something he did was funny."

"The truth is, I don't believe you."

The other girl finally moved. She'd been frozen but now she knelt too. The motion looked stiff. Unwilling.

"Of course not." Her voice shook. "We would never, Ome—"

Her eyes went wide before her mouth snapped shut but the damage was done.

"We would never, Luna Hazel."

Omega.

She'd been about to call me Omega.

Something hot and vicious surged through my veins. I charged at her before rational thought could intervene. My hands found her face. I squeezed. My fingers dug into her cheeks until she made a small sound of pain.

"You will spend the night in the dungeons for that unsightly tongue."

She tried to speak but my grip made the words come out mangled. "It was a slip, Luna Hazel."

A sentinel was walking down the corridor. Young. Probably new to the position based on how fresh and tidy his uniform looked.

"Hey, you. Come here."

He looked behind him. Then he pointed to himself with an expression that asked 'me?'

I looked at him with daggers in my eyes. Only then did he start walking. His steps were measured, careful and incredibly slow. He was taking his sweet ole time.

"Yes?"

"Throw this bitch in the deepest dungeons. Give her no food or water either. I want her to suffer for her insolence."

He hesitated. I saw the moment the hesitation turned into something else. Something that looked almost like pity.

Not for me. That shit could never be for me. I refused to be fucking pitied like a dog without claws or canines.

"I'll reach out to the Alpha and Luna and will immediately do so once they give permission."

The words didn't make sense at first. They bounced around in my skull like marbles, refusing to settle into meaning.

"What? What does that mean?"

"I apologize but the path I made, I swore them to the Alphas and Lunas of this pack. No one else aside from them, the Betas and the Gammas of this pack can get me to do something. If any of them do, I require permission."

Understanding came slow. Then all at once.

"Oh, is that right? Why?"

"It is the law."

My hand was already moving. Already pulling back to slap him across his smug face. Someone however caught my wrist at the last second and held it firm.

"Luna Hazel, you shouldn't be doing this."

I turned and saw Baruch. His face was calm and he was concerned. My eyes softened despite the fury still coursing through me.

"You have no idea what this monster just said to me."

Baruch's grip on my wrist didn't loosen. "We should go."

"And let them get away with the disrespect?"

"I know their names. I'll give them to you and you can report to your parents. If they deserve punishment, then they'll be punished."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The words kept coming from his mouth but they felt wrong. Backwards even. I was supposed to be able to punish them myself. I was supposed to have authority. I was born with that power. The ability to make people fear me with a single look.

But it seemed now that I didn't.

I was powerless.

I dropped my hands hearing it directly from Baruch's mouth and I just started walking.

Baruch fell into step beside me.

"I know how I sounded." His voice was gentle. "But I couldn't just let you continue to humiliate yourself there."

"Right." The word came out bitter. "Humiliate myself."

We reached my room. I stood in front of the door and felt everything I'd been holding back start to crack through the surface.

"I used to have fucking power. Now I'm just a random girl." I laughed. It sounded broken even to my own ears. "Girl? I'm not even that. I'm the bottom of the fucking food chain. I hate that bitch Fia so much! She did this to me! Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!! I can only hope she's dead already. That's the only way all of this will be alright."

"What does that mean?"

His question cut through the haze.

It made me quickly realized that I'd said too much and given away too much of what Grandmother had planned.

It was stupid of me. But that wasn't entirely why I backed away from the question. For some reason I didn't want Baruch to see me as some kind of monster and pull away. He was the only one I seemed to have in my corner right now. And I wanted to keep that. I wanted to keep him.

"I'm just in my head." I lied.

I pushed the door open and then stepped inside. The room was the same as I'd left it but it felt different now. Smaller somehow. Less mine.

"Right now, I need to destress."

My eyes locked on his lips. On the way they parted slightly when he was thinking. On how they'd feel against my skin.

"Lock the door and get rid of your shirt."

"You just went through something traumatic—"

I was already undressing. The hospital gown slipped off my shoulders and pooled at my feet. So did the other modest gown under it that was now grimy.

I then stood there in just my undergarments and met his eyes.

"I know. And I want to get my mind off it using your body." My voice came out steadier now. More certain. "Close the fucking door and lose your shirt."

Baruch looked at me for a long moment. Then he obeyed.

The lock clicked into place. His shirt hit the floor. And for the first time since I'd woken up without my wolf, I felt like I had control over something.

Even if it was just this.

Even if it was just him.

It would have to be enough.

Chapter 232: Don't worry...(M)

HAZEL

Baruch's hands went to his waistband. He unbuttoned his pants and pushed them down his hips, stepping out of them and kicking them aside. He stood there in just his briefs, the fabric doing nothing to hide the outline of him.

I crossed the distance between us in three strides. My hand went to his throat, fingers wrapping around the column of his neck. Not hard enough to hurt. Just enough to make him feel it. To make him understand who was in control here.

"You're mine tonight," I said. "All mine."

My other hand slipped into his briefs. He wasn't hard yet. In fact, he was warm and soft against my palm. I wrapped my fingers around him and stroked.

The friction was dry and probably uncomfortable but he didn't pull away.

I felt him twitch in my hand; I felt him start to harden. His breathing changed, became shallower. His pulse jumped beneath my fingers where they pressed against his throat.

"That's it," I murmured as I stroked him again, firmer this time. Watching his face. Watching the way his eyes fluttered closed and his lips parted.

He grew harder with each stroke. The dry friction made a soft sound in the quiet room. His hips shifted forward slightly, seeking more.

I squeezed his throat just a fraction tighter and his eyes opened and met mine. They were darkly glazed, yet so beautiful.

I released his throat and pulled my hand from his briefs. Then I grabbed his face and kissed him.

The kiss was hard and demanding. I didn't ask for entry. I just took it. My tongue invaded his mouth and he opened for me immediately and let me in.

He let me take what I needed.

I kissed him like I was trying to consume him. Like I could swallow down his strength and make it mine. My hands tangled in his hair, pulling his head back to give me better access.

When I finally broke the kiss, we were both breathing hard. Using my fingers, I pointed him toward the bed and he followed without resistance.

When we were close, I then shoved him hard and he fell back onto the mattress. The springs creaked under his weight. He propped himself up on his elbows, watching me.

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

Now I was completely bare.

I climbed onto the bed and crawled up his body like a predator stalking prey. My hands traced the lines of his torso, feeling the hard muscle beneath warm skin.

When I reached his briefs, I pulled them down. His cock sprang free. It was hard, flushed and ready for me.

I wrapped my hand around him and he groaned. I stroked him once, feeling him throb in my palm. Then I leaned down and took him in my mouth.

The taste of him flooded my senses. Salt, musk and something uniquely Baruch. I hollowed my cheeks and sucked, taking him deeper. My tongue swirled around the head before I slid him further in.

He made a choked sound above me. His hands went to the sheets, fisting the fabric.

I bobbed my head, finding a rhythm. Taking him deep then pulling back to swirl my tongue around the tip. My hand came up to fondle his balls, rolling them gently in my palm.

"Fuck, Hazel," he gasped.

I hummed around him and the vibration made him curse again. I could feel him getting closer. Feel him hardening even more in my mouth. I could feel the way his thighs tensed beneath my free hand.

Then I felt it. The first drop of precum hit my tongue. Salty and slightly bitter.

I pulled off him immediately.

He made a frustrated sound but I ignored it. I crawled up his body and kissed him again. I ensured he taste himself on my tongue. The kiss was slower this time. More deliberate. I explored his mouth thoroughly before finally pulling back.

I looked at him. Really looked at him. His hair was mussed, sticking up in every direction from where I'd run my fingers through it. His lips were swollen and red from my kisses. His chest heaved with each breath.

"You belong to me," I said.

He swallowed. His throat worked with the motion. Then he nodded, his lips forming the word without sound. Yeah.

I craned my neck back and smiled. The expression felt predatory on my face. "Show me."

His hands came up to cup my head. He pulled me closer, his fingers tangling in my hair. Then he kissed me.

This kiss was different. He started slow, his lips moving against mine with careful precision. But then he deepened it. His tongue pushed into my mouth and this time there was no submission. He fought for dominance, his tongue tangling with mine.

His free hand moved down my body. They found my breast first and he cupped it. His thumb brushed over my nipple and I gasped into his mouth. The sensitive bud hardened under his touch.

He rolled my nipple between his thumb and forefinger before pinching it gently. The sensation shot straight through me and I moaned against his lips.

His hand continued its journey down my body. Over my ribs, my stomach, my hip. He traced patterns on my skin that made me shiver and caused goosebumps to rise in the wake of his touch.

Then his hand slipped between my thighs. I was already wet. Already ready for him. His fingers slid through my folds, gathering my arousal.

He pushed two fingers inside me.

I broke the kiss with a gasp. My body jerked back from the sudden intrusion, the sudden pleasure that lanced through me. But his other hand held my head and kept me close.

"Baruch," I moaned.

His fingers moved inside me. In and out in a steady rhythm that had me panting. His thumb found my clit and circled it in time with his thrusts.

I leaned back further, my body arching. But his big palm held me steady and kept me from falling. His fingers never stopped moving. Never gave me a moment to catch my breath.

The pleasure built fast. Too fast. I could feel it coiling in my belly, hot and tight. His fingers curved inside me, hitting that spot that made me see stars.

"Oh goddess," I gasped. "Oh goddess, Baruch."

He pumped his fingers faster. Harder. His thumb pressed down on my clit and that was it. I came with a cry, my body convulsing around his fingers. The orgasm rolled through me in waves, leaving me trembling.

When the aftershocks finally subsided, he pulled his fingers out. They glistened with my arousal. He brought them to his mouth and sucked them clean, his eyes locked on mine.

The sight made heat pool low in my belly again.

He pulled me down and kissed me. I tasted myself on his tongue, mixed with the lingering taste of him. The combination was obscene and utterly perfect.

When he broke the kiss, his lips brushed against my ear. "You like that?"

I nodded, unable to form words. My body was still humming with pleasure and my mind was foggy.

"I need you," I finally managed to say.

I shifted, wrapping my legs around him. I positioned myself over his cock, feeling the head press against my entrance. Then slowly, so slowly, I sank down onto him.

We both moaned as I took his full length. The stretch was almost too much after the intensity of my orgasm. But I didn't stop. I didn't pause. I just kept going until he was fully seated inside me.

For a moment, I just sat there. Adjusting. Feeling him pulse inside me. Feeling so full I could barely breathe.

Then he moved.

His hands gripped my hips and he lifted me slightly before pulling me back down. The thrust was hard, as it was unforgiving. It drove the air from my lungs.

He did it again. And again. Setting a brutal pace that had me gasping. Each thrust hit deep, hitting spots inside me I didn't know existed. My whole body jolted with the force of it.

"Yeeeessss," I gasped. "Yes, just like that."

He didn't slow down. He didn't gentle his movements. He fucked me hard, his fingers digging into my hips hard enough to bruise. The bed frame creaked beneath us. The headboard slammed against the wall with each thrust.

I could feel another orgasm building already. Faster and more intense than the first. My inner walls clenched around him, trying to pull him deeper.

"Baruch," I moaned. "I'm going to—"

"Come for me," he growled. "Come on my cock."

His words pushed me over the edge. The orgasm crashed through me like a tidal wave. I felt myself gush, wetness flooding out of me and coating both of us. I was squirting now and my body was convulsing uncontrollably.

He didn't stop. He kept thrusting through my orgasm, prolonging it until I was sobbing with the intensity. His movements became erratic and less controlled.

"Hazel," he groaned. "I'm—"

"Come inside me," I gasped. "Fill me up."

That was all it took. He thrust deep one last time and held himself there. I felt him pulse inside me, felt the warmth of his release flooding me. His fingers dug into my hips so hard I knew there would be marks tomorrow.

Good. I wanted them. Wanted the evidence of this. Wanted to wake up tomorrow and see the bruises and remember that for a few hours tonight, I had power over something.

We stayed like that for a long moment. Both of us trembling. Both of us trying to catch our breath. Finally, he relaxed his grip and I slumped forward against his chest.

His arms came around me and held me close. One hand stroked my hair while the other traced lazy patterns on my back.

"You okay?" he asked quietly.

I nodded against his chest. I was more than okay. For the first time since losing my wolf, since becoming nothing more than a regular Omega, I felt like myself again.

Even if it was only temporary.

Even if tomorrow I'd wake up and remember that I was powerless in every way that mattered.

Tonight, I had this. I had him. I had control.

Chapter 233: Encore

HAZEL

My fingers traced lazy circles on Baruch's chest. His skin was still warm, still damp with sweat. The rhythm of his heartbeat thrummed beneath my palm.

"I'm going to have to marry pretty soon," I said.

His chest rose with a breath. "To that Alpha heir?"

I nodded against him. "He was a choice on my mind for the yearly shifter ball. I didn't think it would be remotely possible if I'm being honest." My finger paused mid-circle. "But the universe still paid me in kind despite what Fia tried to do. Despite what the goddess punished me with."

The words tasted bitter. I swallowed them down.

"I would much have preferred being able to keep my born title," I continued. "Lysander. That's his name, by the way. He's strange. I feel uneasy about him." My stomach twisted just thinking about it. "He seems like the kind that would make you work for

anything you want from him. And it doesn't help matters that he basically confirmed he was in love with my sister. Can you believe that? What even does Fia have that would make anyone that fixated on her? Crazy part is they met once. Perhaps there is something about that bitch I have yet to discover."

Baruch said nothing. His silence stretched between us like a held breath.

"The marriage will be a loveless one," I continued. "I know he won't touch me."

I then tilted my head to look up at Baruch's face. Really look at him. "I don't think I can live a life without pleasure."

A smile curved my lips. It felt good there. Natural.

"It's a good thing I have you though."

Baruch moved. It was not the gentle shift of a lover adjusting positions. No, he pushed me off him entirely. I stumbled to the side as he stood, the mattress dipping and rising with the sudden movement.

He reached for his clothes.

Something cold settled in my chest. Something wrong.

"Did I say something wrong?" I asked.

He pulled on his briefs. Then his pants. The fabric rustled in the quiet room. He didn't look at me.

"No," he said.

"I can feel something off now." I sat up, pulling the sheet around myself. "Don't tell me no."

"What's off?" He asked.

"Well... We had sex and you just became cold. I thought you knew what this arrangement was. You please me and that's it."

He grabbed his shirt from where it had been discarded on the floor. The muscles in his back flexed as he pulled it over his head. Then he turned and walked toward me. Each step was measured and deliberate.

He stopped at the edge of the bed.

"I am very knowledgeable about what our arrangement is. Are you?"

His eyes met mine. They were different now. Harder and devoid of the warmth they used to hold. Was I just reading too much into this?

I scoffed. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You sound like you're in love with me."

Heat flared in my cheeks. Anger and something else I didn't want to name. "Don't flatter yourself."

"What is the point of fantasizing about keeping me around when you can find another willing low born who is willing to climb up to the occasion at Lily of the Valley?" His voice was flat. Empty. "So don't fantasize about playing house with me."

My nerves started to burn. That familiar fire that came before I did something reckless. Something I might regret.

"What if I am?" The words came out sharper than I intended. "I know you like me too. I know you love me." I leaned forward. "Has that changed because I'm no longer a Luna? You like the thrill of having a woman leagues beyond you and—"

He leaned in. Close enough that I could see the flecks of the color brown in his eyes. Close enough to kiss.

"Love you?" His lips curved into something that wasn't quite a smile. "Who could ever love you?"

Pain exploded at my neck. Sharp and sudden and wrong. I gasped, my hand flying to the spot. When I turned my head, I saw it.

A syringe. In Baruch's hand. And the worst part, it was empty.

My eyes went wide. I opened my mouth to scream, to shout, to demand answers, but his hand clamped over my lips. He forced me back onto the bed, his weight pinning me down. His palm pressed hard against my mouth, cutting off any sound I might have made.

Fear crashed through me. Real fear. The kind that made my heart hammer against my ribs and my breath come in short, panicked bursts through my nose.

"I do not love you," he said. His voice was calm. Too calm. "I never have. But I am so glad I gave you such a beautiful performance."

I tried to speak through his hand. The words came out muffled, strained. "What did I do to deserve this?"

"I am Milo's brother." He watched my face as he said it. Watched the recognition dawn. "The one you killed in cold blood."

No. No, no, no. My eyes went wider. My chest heaved with breaths I couldn't quite catch.

"I infiltrated my way into this pack and your life to find a way to finish you." His hand stayed firm over my mouth. "There were many times where I just considered taking your life. But I had family to take care of and I would be damned if I let the likes of you be the reason I get beheaded."

This couldn't be happening. This wasn't real. It couldn't be real.

I had been fucking the enemy? I told him things even.

"It made me sick every time to have your hands on me. Your breath on me and your tongue inside me." His lip curled. "It was repulsive."

Dizziness swept through me. The room tilted and blurred at the edges.

"That must be the drug starting to work its magic." He said it like he was commenting on the weather. Like he hadn't just destroyed everything. "Don't worry, it's not poison. You'll just be as fucked as a vampire on fae dust when you wake."

He leaned closer. His breath ghosted across my cheek.

"I just wanted you to know I played a part in your downfall. I wanted you to know that it was me." His eyes bore into mine. "I enjoyed your pain and struggle all throughout. And I want to assure you that it will not get better."

Tears burned behind my eyes. I blinked but they came anyway, hot and shameful.

"Though it pains me you still have to breathe after what you did to my brother, I will sleep easy knowing you will never forget tonight. You will never forget my face despite tonight being the last time you will ever see it." His thumb brushed against my cheekbone, a mockery of tenderness. "When you fall ill from your now weakened immune system, when you get the phantom pain from being without your wolf, remember I played a part in it. And you were too dumb to see through me because narcissists are too busy thinking about themselves to realize that they're getting played."

He smiled. Actually smiled.

"I loved those words. Your own words."

He lifted his hand from my mouth. I tried to speak, to move, to do anything, but my body wouldn't respond. The drug had turned my limbs to lead. My tongue felt thick and clumsy.

Through blurry eyes, through tears I couldn't stop, I managed four words. "I did like you."

"No." He stood, looking down at me like I was nothing. Less than nothing. "You liked the power I gave you over me and how I made you feel. How I bent over backwards for you."

"I will hunt you down." The words came out weak. Pathetic. Even I could hear it.

"No you won't." He grabbed his sentinel jacket from the chair. "After tonight's I disappear off the face of the earth. And... What power do you have now? What power will you have in Lily of the Valley too? You will be just Luna in name alone and everyone there as well as here knows how you came to be a bride. A murderer escaping justice."

Fresh tears poured down my cheeks. They soaked into the pillow beneath my head. I couldn't even lift my hand to wipe them away.

"You monster," I whispered.

He paused at the door and looked back at me one last time.

"It takes one to know one."

Then he was gone. The door clicked shut behind him. The sound echoed in the sudden silence.

I lay there, unable to move. Unable to do anything but stare at the ceiling and feel the tears slide down into my hair. My body felt foreign, disconnected. The drug coursed through my veins like poison even though he'd said it wasn't.

Everything hurt. Not physically. Not yet. But somewhere deeper. Somewhere I hadn't realized was still vulnerable.

He'd played me. He used me. He took everything I'd given him and laughed while doing it.

And I'd let him. I'd trusted him. I'd thought...

What had I thought? That he actually cared? That what we had meant something?

When had that even happen? When did my heart soften for him?

The room spun. Darkness crept in at the edges of my vision.

I'd killed his brother. I knew that. I remembered Milo. Remembered the way his blood had looked on my hands after I took a picture of his head. I'd told myself he deserved it. The fool was going to out me

Now in the grand scheme of things, it felt like it didn't even matter.

It all came out in the end.

Though this one hurt. More than I would even like to admit.

The thought followed me down into unconsciousness. Down into the dark where I couldn't escape it.

Betrayal tasted like blood coupled with tears and the ghost of kisses that had never meant anything at all.

Chapter 234: Hairline Cracks

CIAN

The estate gates came into view, and relief crashed through me so hard my knees nearly buckled. Home. We'd made it.

Thorne stood waiting at the entrance, his weathered face lined with concern. Maren flanked him, her medical bag already in hand. Behind them, three more Omegas whose specialties lay in healing wheeled a stretcher forward.

They were born ready.

Ronan brought the car to a stop. I didn't wait for it to fully settle before I was moving, shouldering the door open with Fia still cradled in my arms.

"Alpha." Thorne's voice carried decades of calm authority. "Let us take her."

Every instinct in my body screamed to refuse. To keep holding her. To not let her go even for a second. But I forced myself to lower her onto the stretcher, my hands lingering on her shoulders until the last possible moment.

Maren immediately moved in, her fingers finding Fia's wrist to check her pulse. Her dark eyes flicked to the blood soaking through Fia's sweater, the shirt underneath was completely ruined. "Where's the wound?"

"There isn't one." The words felt surreal coming out of my mouth.

Maren's gaze snapped to mine. That look crossed her face. The one that said 'you're seeing this too, right?' I gave her a slight nod.

They wheeled Fia toward the infirmary. I followed close enough that my shadow fell across the stretcher. The hallways blurred past. Stone walls. Flickering sconces. The familiar path I'd walked a thousand times before but never with this kind of weight pressing down on my chest.

The infirmary doors swung open. Antiseptic and herbs hit my nose. They transferred Fia to one of the beds, the white sheets a stark contrast against her pale skin and blood-stained clothing. Maren worked quickly, cutting away the ruined sweater and shirt to expose Fia's torso.

There was nothing there. Not a single mark or even a slight bruise.

Thorne moved to the other side of the bed. His gnarled fingers pressed gently along Fia's ribs, her stomach, checking for breaks or internal damage. He lifted one of her eyelids, examining the pupil beneath. Then the other.

"Her vitals are stable." Maren's voice held a note of confusion. "Heart rate is good. Blood pressure is normal. Breathing is clear."

Thorne straightened, his expression thoughtful. "Her energy levels are quite low. Depleted, I would say. But otherwise..." He trailed off, glancing at Maren.

"She seems fine," Maren finished. She didn't sound convinced.

Neither was I. "Check even deeper for internal bleeding."

Thorne raised an eyebrow.

"Just do it." I couldn't keep the edge from my voice. "Please. Her healing factor isn't as strong as ours. Hidden wounds kill faster."

Maren nodded, already reaching for the equipment she'd need. Thorne moved to prepare an herbal infusion, something to help restore Fia's depleted energy.

I should have felt relief. They'd said she was fine. But my mind kept circling back to what I'd felt. That moment when the bond had gone silent. When I'd been certain she was dying.

Garrett stood near the doorway. Still covered in blood. Still looking shell-shocked. His hands trembled slightly at his sides.

I turned to face him fully. "I think we need to talk."

He straightened immediately, bowing his head. "Of course, Alpha."

We left the infirmary. Ronan fell into step behind us without being asked. I led them down the corridor to one of the private meeting rooms, pushing the door open and gesturing for them to enter.

The door clicked shut behind us. The three of us stood there in the dim light filtering through the narrow window.

Garrett wouldn't meet my eyes. His usual composure had cracked completely. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, his jaw working like he was chewing on words he couldn't quite spit out.

"You can speak." I kept my voice level. "What exactly did Fia see?"

"Like I said before." Garrett's voice came out rough. "She saw a woman I couldn't see. Standing in the middle of the road."

I waited. There had to be more.

"She mentioned smelling something strange." He finally looked up. "A strong perfume. Cloying and unnatural."

My ears twitched. Every nerve in my body went on alert. "A strong smell?"

Ronan leaned forward slightly. "That sounds like magic."

The word hung in the air between us. Magic... Which meant this hadn't been an accident at all.

"So this is the work of Silver Creek." I said it like a statement, not a question.

"I don't know." Garrett's hands clenched into fists. "Luna Fia is still their daughter and technically, they would have no reason to come after us. Hazel Hughes survived the trial."

"It doesn't matter." Heat crawled up my spine. "It's definitely something her stepmother could do."

"About that..." Garrett's voice dropped. "The Strati house was there."

I stared at him. "What?"

"Pack Nocturne. They were at the trial."

Ronan's confusion mirrored my own. "That's odd. It's public knowledge that Alpha Joseph's bride was disowned by her parents. Why would they be there?"

"To help Hazel Hughes survive." Garrett met my gaze steadily now. "Luna Fia's goal was to make sure Hazel died. They made sure that wasn't possible."

The words took a moment to process. "Hold up. Fia wanted what?"

That didn't sound like her. Fia could be fierce, protective, even ruthless when she needed to be. But actively seeking someone's death? That vindictive streak didn't fit.

"She believed it was for the greater good," Garrett said quietly.

I turned to Ronan. "Make sure delicates are gotten to the accident scene. I can't do shit without proof. So I need that proof."

Ronan's expression shifted. "The delicates are crazy expensive. And they don't always find something in materials."

"Someone just tried to kill my wife." My voice came out harder than I intended. "Expend whatever we need. I want whoever did this found."

Ronan nodded slowly. "I'll make the call."

He moved to the far corner of the room, pulling out his phone. His voice dropped to a murmur as he spoke to whoever was on the other end.

Garrett grabbed my hand suddenly. His grip was tight enough to hurt. "There are some things I will not be able to answer honestly, and I'm sorry for that, Alpha."

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"There are moths in this tapestry."

The phrase made no sense. "What does that mean?"

"It means we cannot trust everybody on these grounds." His eyes were urgent now. Desperate.

Cold settled in my gut. "Are you trying to insinuate that my Beta is—"

Garrett's grip tightened even more sharply as if to warm me to watch my tongue and then he released my hand like it had burned him, stepping back just as Ronan's footsteps approached.

"I informed my subordinates." Ronan slipped his phone back into his pocket. "I'll keep you updated."

I nodded, but my mind was spinning. Moths in this tapestry. We cannot trust everybody. Had Garrett just warned me about Ronan? My Beta? The man I'd known for years? The man I trusted with pack business, with sensitive information, with my life?

No. That couldn't be right. Garrett must have meant something else. Someone else.

But the seed of doubt had been planted.

Ronan turned to Garrett. "There was a blinding blue light when we were coming to you. What was that?"

Garrett blinked. His expression shifted to one of genuine confusion. "What blue light?"

Ronan and I exchanged a glance. The light had been impossible to miss. It had swallowed the entire road, bright enough to force Ronan to swerve off into the ditch.

"The light that nearly caused us to crash," I said. "It exploded right before I felt the bond between Fia and I come back. You didn't see it?"

Garrett shook his head slowly. "I didn't see any light. After the crash, everything was..." He gestured vaguely. "Chaotic. I was trying to help Luna Fia. I wasn't paying attention to much else."

That didn't make sense. The light had been massive. All-consuming. There was no way anyone at that scene could have missed it.

Unless they'd been unconscious.

Unless something else had been happening that had occupied his full attention.

Or unless Garrett was lying.

I studied his face, looking for tells. But his confusion seemed genuine. His body language read as honest bewilderment, not deception.

"Maybe it was some kind of aftereffect," Ronan suggested. "From whatever magic was used."

Maybe. But that felt too convenient. Too neat.

My head throbbed. Too many questions. Too many pieces that didn't fit together properly. Someone had tried to kill Fia. She'd seen something, smelled something, that

had warned her just in time. Then the crash had happened. Then she'd been dying. Then that blue light. Then she'd been fine.

And through it all, Garrett had been there. The only other survivor. Covered in blood that was mostly not his own and making cryptic warnings about moths and trust.

I needed answers. Real ones. But first, I needed to make sure Fia was truly safe.

"We're done here for now," I said. "Garrett, get yourself checked out. You look like hell."

He bowed again. "Thank you, Alpha."

I watched him leave, noting the way his shoulders hunched. The way his steps seemed heavier than usual.

When the door closed behind him, Ronan spoke. "What was that about moths?"

Fuck, he had heard that?

"I don't know." The lie tasted bitter. "His head is probably a mess from the accident. Imagine him saying he didn't see that blinding light. Let us just give him time."

I wondered though. Why did I lie?

Chapter 235: Old Blood, Older sins 1

LYSANDER

The car rolled past the gates, and I pressed my forehead against the cool window glass. The gates of the Lily of the Valley estate were wrought iron and ancient, twisted into patterns that told old tales. Beyond them, the grounds stretched out into old money perfection. Every hedge was trimmed. Every stone was placed with intention. It was beautiful in the way a mausoleum was beautiful.

I was still thinking about her hair.

It was ridiculous, the way my mind kept circling back to it. The dark strands that had fallen loose during the trial. The way she had pushed them back with an impatient hand when Hazel started screaming. There was something about the gesture that felt more real than anything else in that chamber. More real than the blood on the stones or the spiritual elder's prayers or the way Hazel's body had convulsed like something was being ripped out of her from the inside.

Fia Donlon was stubborn. That much was clear. The kind of stubborn that got people killed or crowned, depending on how the dice fell. She had stood in front of the elders and suggested a punishment for her sister without flinching.

With no hesitation or second-guessing. The certainty she had carved into every word made her interesting.

I wondered if she knew how dangerous that was. Certainty like that made enemies faster than cruelty ever could.

The car lurched to a stop.

I straightened and blinked away the thoughts that had been clouding my head. The Beta, my father's representative, turned in his seat. His face was lined and serious, and from experience, I knew this kind of serious only came when he was about to deliver news I wouldn't fancy.

"Your father requires your presence in his study," he said.

Fuck. I was exhausted to the bone. But I would brave it. I had something to tell my old man anyway.

I nodded and stepped out.

The air outside was colder than it had been at Silver Creek. It always was here. Something about the elevation or the way the wind came down from the mountains. The estate loomed ahead, plastered with white stone and high stained glass windows. It was grand. Nothing like Silver Creek. Columns lined the entrance, carved with names of former presiding Alphas. The fountain in the courtyard was silent now, the water drained for the coming winter. The gardens were skeletal. Bare branches reached upward like they were begging for something they would never receive.

I hated this place.

Not because it was ugly. It was not. It was because it was exactly what it was supposed to be. Perfect and cold to the touch.

I walked through the main entrance and the guards at the door bowed without making eye contact. Inside, the foyer stretched upward into a vaulted ceiling painted with scenes from the age of legends. Wolves running beneath a full moon. The goddess with her hands raised in blessing. Healers tending to wounded warriors. It was all propaganda dressed up as art.

My boots echoed against the marble as I made my way to the staircase. The study was at the top of the estate. My father liked it that way. He liked being able to look down at everything. To see the whole of his territory spread out beneath him like a map he could fold up and put in his pocket.

I climbed the stairs two at a time. The hallways up here were narrower, more intimate, but no warmer. You still couldn't escape the dead though too as portraits of past alphas

stared down at you from the walls. Their eyes followed as I passed. I had always hated those paintings. They made it feel like I was being judged by ghosts.

When I reached the top floor, I saw sentinels lying in wait. Two of them stood on either side of the door to the study. They were the hardest wolves we had. The kind who did not flinch when ordered to kill. They bowed when they saw me.

One of them knocked on the door in three sharp raps.

"Alpha Lysander is here," he said.

"Let him in."

The voice was baritone and smooth, like aged whiskey. It belonged to a man who had never had to raise it to be obeyed.

The door opened.

The study was exactly as I remembered it. Bookshelves lined three of the four walls, filled with texts I was not allowed to touch as a child. The fourth wall was a window that stretched floor to ceiling, offering a view of the entire estate and the forest beyond. My father's desk sat in front of that window. It was made of dark wood and looked older than the estate itself. Papers were spread across its surface, maps and documents weighted down with fine stones.

My father looked up from his work and smiled.

"How was it, son?" he asked. "Did you succeed?"

I collapsed into one of the chairs across from his desk. The leather creaked beneath me.

"When have I ever failed you, Father?"

His smile widened. Maybe it was the look of pride or perhaps it was just satisfaction. I could never tell the difference with him.

"I knew you would understand the stakes," he said.

I leaned my head back and stared at the ceiling. The wood beams up there were carved with more symbols. More propaganda.

"Except I don't," I said.

He tilted his head, waiting.

"We're affiliating ourselves with a pack ninety feet down because of what?" I straightened and met his eyes. "A pack ranked twenty-eight promised you a healer. We have a talented spiritual guide. More connected to the goddess than most of the others. And our healers with knowledge of medicine are undisputed. What more do we need healers for?"

My father set down the pen he had been holding. He folded his hands on the desk and looked at me with the patience of someone explaining basic arithmetic to a child.

"These are not just healers," he said.

I frowned.

"The healers the world has now are but pale imitations of what once was."

I swallowed. The way he said it made something cold settle in my stomach.

"Continue," I said.

He leaned back in his chair. The leather groaned softly.

"I'm sure you've heard the stories," he said. "You have even seen the portraits. Even the healers we have now cling to them because they yearn for the moments of power their bloodline carried during the age of legends."

I scoffed. "Are those stories even true?"

"Of course they are."

He said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Those healers were an integral piece for an Alpha in a pack. They had a stronger connection to the goddess than the spiritual guides we have now. They had a better sense for herbs, could even perform healings on wolves using the source and that two-way line communication they had with the moon goddess. They helped packs win wars. But even then, some were stronger than others."

He paused. His gaze drifted to the window, to the forest beyond.

"Like all good things, they slowly became abused. Alphas began to war over claiming already housed healers if they found out they were stronger. They were violated to create Alphas and Lunas with those exquisite healer genes. And soon, the goddess started to frown at the great wickedness. So she took it all away and gave us these pale imitations."

I stared at him. My mind was racing, trying to piece together what he was saying.

"If the goddess took them away," I said slowly, "how are you going to get one? Did a bloodline somehow survive a goddess-blessed extinction?"

Chapter 236: Old Blood, Older Sins 2

LYSANDER

My father smiled again. It was colder this time.

"Blood has memories," he said. "And certain good actors took it upon themselves to recreate what was lost."

My eyes widened.

"Fleshcraft."

I adjusted in my seat and leaned forward.

"Father, that's a crime. An actual punishable crime."

He waved a hand dismissively.

"I didn't demand fleshcraft be performed or that I needed that specific kind of healer. I know to use my words carefully. And I documented everything I talked about with Pauline Strati. There is nothing that Lily of the Valley stands to lose in this."

I leaned back. My mind was still trying to catch up to what he was telling me.

"Except for one little thing," I said.

"What is that?"

I met his eyes.

"Did your promise to the Stratis include that I actually marry the Silver Creek girl?"

His eyebrow arched. The silence that followed felt deliberate.

"Why do you ask?" he said.

"I don't intend to marry the girl."

The words hung in the air between us. My father's expression did not change. He did not look angry or surprised. He looked like he was calculating something.

"I see," he said finally.

"Do you?" I asked.

He picked up his pen again and tapped it against the edge of the desk.

"You met someone at Silver Creek," he said. It was not a question.

I said nothing.

"The current honorary Luna of Skollrend," he continued. "Fia Donlon. Pauline told me all about it. I thought she had to be joking because my boy has never had eyes for anyone. Not since the bleeding spirit in the woods."

I still said nothing.

He smiled. It was the kind of smile that made me feel like a child again. Like I had been caught sneaking sweets from the kitchen.

"Lysander," he said, "you are my heir. You will marry who is advantageous to this pack. If that is Pauline Strati grandchild, then so be it. In the future, we can discuss an additional bride if you crave it that much, someone with a befitting status. But even then, even if there has to be someone else, we will discuss it. But right now, you will not throw away an alliance because you met a married Omega girl at a trial. What even is that about?"

I leaned forward again.

"She's not just an Omega girl," I said.

"No," my father agreed. "She's a married woman. Which makes this conversation even more pointless."

I clenched my jaw. "What if I told you she is the girl I saw that evening? The girl everyone then claimed was a spirit in the woods. A trick on my mind. Despite the very real blood on my hands."

I watched it land.

For the first time since I walked into that office, my father froze.

The tapping stopped mid motion. The pen hovered above the desk, suspended between intention and denial. His eyes sharpened, not with anger, not with disbelief, but with something far more dangerous. Recognition fighting instinct.

"What did you say?" he asked, as controlled as he could manage.

I did not repeat myself.

His gaze dropped, just for a second, and in that second I saw it. The crack. The fracture line he never let anyone glimpse. His jaw tightened. The muscle there jumped once, twice, then stilled as he forced his expression back into place. When he finally set the pen down, he did it carefully, aligning it with the edge of the blotter as though the world would tilt if he did not.

"The girl in the woods," he said slowly. "That night."

"Yes."

The silence that followed was heavier than before. It pressed against my ears, against my ribs. I could hear my own breathing and the faint crackle of the hearth behind him.

"That is not possible," he said.

"You said that," I replied. "Everyone, including you called her a spirit. A trick of grief. A hallucination brought on by my mind."

His eyes lifted to mine. Sharp, as it was assessing.

"You were barely more than a boy," he said. "The healers theorized you probably killed a small animal to cope and blocked it out because you knew your late mother did not like senseless murder."

"I know what I saw then," I maintained. "And she still the same person I saw today. And I don't want Hazel. I want her."

Father sighed and rubbed his temples with his hands.

"Lysander, I need you to focus. This alliance with Silver Creek is about more than a healer. It's about positioning ourselves for what's coming. The old powers are stirring. I am sure even the goddess is restless. And when the dust settles, I intend for Lily of the Valley to be standing at the top. We will not be that if we do not have a powerful healer in the shadows working for this pack."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you will be a disappointment," he said simply. "And I do not raise disappointments. You are not your brothers. You are the best of them. Do not disappoint me."

I stood. The chair scraped against the floor.

"I'll think about it," I said.

"You'll do more than think," he replied. "You'll obey."

I turned and walked toward the door. My hand was on the handle when he spoke again.

"Lysander."

I stopped but did not turn around.

"You carry my blood," he said. His voice had dropped, stripped of patience, stripped of control. "That blood built this pack. It buried its enemies. It decided who lived comfortably and who begged at our gates."

It was getting to threats now.

"So understand this. If you step outside the path I set for you, I will not follow. I will not soften. And I will not protect you from the consequences of daring to stand alone."

I finally turned my head, just enough to glance back at him.

"If you force my hand," he said calmly, "I will break what you are reaching for. Not because I hate you, but because packs survive when heirs remember who they belong to."

His gaze locked onto mine, unwavering.

"Decide carefully, my son. Or you're about to be painfully reminded that disobedience is not a luxury you can afford. he said. "Disobedience will get you killed. The other will make you a king."

Then just like that, he was done.

I didn't bother trading words back. I simply opened the door and stepped out. The sentinels bowed again as I passed. This time however, I did not acknowledge them.

Chapter 237: Haunt you 1

PAULINE

The call ended with a click that felt too final.

I set the phone down on the dresser harder than I meant to. The sound cracked through the silence of my chambers. My chambers. Not ours. Never ours currently, not since we'd come to this backwater excuse for a pack territory.

Silver Creek.

Even the name tasted like rust in my mouth.

I turned to face the mirror. The woman staring back at me had my eyes, my bone structure, my mouth set in that same hard line I'd perfected over decades. But the rest... the rest was a betrayal written in skin and the cruel thing that was time.

Wrinkles creased the corners of my eyes. Fine lines branched from my lips like cracks in porcelain. My neck, which had once been smooth and elegant, now showed the faint suggestion of loosening skin. I touched my jawline and felt the barely perceptible softness there. Age was creeping in despite every cream, every treatment, every desperate attempt to hold it back.

I hated it.

I hated the mirror for showing me truth. I hated time for being the one opponent I couldn't manipulate, threaten or destroy.

My gaze dropped to the bed behind me, reflected in the glass. It was serviceable. I could say clean and as adequate as this place could manage. But it wasn't the massive four-poster I'd had back home in Nocturne territory. It wasn't draped in imported silks or piled with pillows that cost good money. What was in front of me was just a bed. A perfectly acceptable, utterly mediocre bed.

Dimitri had his own chambers three doors down.

The thought made my jaw clench. He claimed he needed his own space for pack business. For late-night consultations with sentinels and advisors. For phone calls that couldn't be disturbed. And of course that the bed would be too small for both us while ranting about how much I hated his late business dealings.

Lies.

All of it lies wrapped in convenience and tied with a bow of plausible deniability.

I knew what he was doing. I'd always known. That man had never met a skirt he didn't want to lift or a willing body he didn't want to use. In our own territory, I'd had systems in place. Spies in every corner. Eyes watching his every move. I'd known about every affair, every casual fuck, every moment of weakness.

And I'd dealt with most of them.

The ones who got too comfortable disappeared. The ones who started making demands found themselves suddenly exiled or worse. The ones who dared to think they could replace me learned very quickly that being Luna wasn't just a title. It was a position you defended with blood if necessary.

Here though, in Silver Creek, my network was smaller. My reach more limited. I had people, yes. But not enough. Not nearly enough to watch Dimitri the way he needed to be watched.

He was probably with someone right now.

The thought slithered through my mind like poison. Some young wolf with firm skin and bright eyes and none of the complications that came with a wife who knew all his secrets. Some eager thing who thought fucking an Alpha meant something more than being a warm body for the night.

I'd dealt with dozens like them. Hundreds, maybe. I couldn't remember them all anymore. They blurred together into one continuous parade of threats I'd eliminated or neutralized.

But one stood out.

One I couldn't forget no matter how hard I tried.

Athena.

Even thinking her name now made something ugly twist in my chest. It was not quite rage, nor was it fear. It was something worse. The kind of feeling that could only come from seeing what belonged to you be claimed without effort.

She'd been an Omega. A Nothing girl.

Less than nothing by pack standards if I was being honest. But Dimitri had looked at her like she was treasure.

Like she was special.

And worse than his attention had been with every other of his whore. The way wolves started whispering about her. About how the Alpha favored her. About how maybe, just maybe, she might become something more.

Luna Athena.

The words had never been spoken aloud where I could hear them, but I'd felt them hovering in the air. I'd seen the speculation in people's eyes. The calculation.

In this world, even being born Luna wasn't enough protection. I'd watched it happen to others. Wives cast aside for younger models. Lunas replaced by mistresses who'd finally gained enough power and favor. Queens dethroned by ambitious concubines.

I'd sworn it would never happen to me.

The first time Dimitri brought Athena around, I'd let it slide. It was a fling. A distraction. He'd had those before and they always burned out. I always made sure of that.

The second time, I'd made subtle moves. Had her reassigned to less favorable duties. Made sure she wasn't in places where Dimitri would see her.

The third time, when I found out he'd been sneaking off to meet her, I'd confronted him directly. We'd fought. He'd denied it mattered. Said I was overreacting.

But then the rumors became even worse.

Whispers that spread like rot through the pack. An Omega was going to be elevated. The Alpha was going to make her official. She was going to be given status, title and power.

All the things meant for me and me alone.

She was going to replace me.

I couldn't allow it. Not then. Not ever.

Murder would have been the clean option. It was simple as it was direct. But sometimes opportunities presented themselves that were too good to waste.

The head warlock of the Primrose coven had approached me through channels so discrete most people didn't know they existed. He was conducting experiments. Secret ones. The kind that required subjects who wouldn't be missed. Who wouldn't be looked for. Who wouldn't matter.

An Omega fit that description perfectly.

Chapter 238: Haunt you 2

PAULINE

He'd promised me a boon in return. Power. Influence. The kind of magical favor that could be cashed in when needed most.

So I'd handed her over.

I still remembered the night. How easy it had been to lure her away from pack grounds. How little she'd suspected until it was too late. How satisfying it had felt to watch her dragged away, screaming, when she finally realized what was happening.

Dimitri had raged when she disappeared. He'd torn through pack territory looking for her. He'd threatened to kill whoever was responsible. He'd even threatened to divorce me when he'd suspected, though he could never prove anything.

But like all wounds, time had healed that one too. The rage faded. The grief dulled. Life moved on.

Until now.

Until this Fia girl appeared with Athena's face.

The resemblance wasn't just passing. It was uncanny. The same bone structure. The same eyes. The same way of holding herself that made something primal in me want to rip her apart.

And Dimitri had seen her too.

I'd watched his face when he'd first laid eyes on the girl. I had watched the recognition dawn. I'd seen something old and painful flicker across his features before he'd locked it down and pretended nothing was wrong.

Why did this girl have to look like her? Why did the universe insist on throwing Athena's ghost back in my face?

The last words she'd said haunted me. They came back at night when I couldn't sleep. When I lay in my perfect bed in my adequate chambers and stared at the ceiling.

You can get rid of me, she'd said. But I will haunt your narrative and your family till your blood dies out. You will never forget this face. No matter how much time casts a spell on you.

I'd buried that memory as deep as I could. Covered it with years, distance and denial. But it clawed its way back up whenever I closed my eyes on some nights.

A movement caught in the mirror made me freeze.

I saw a flicker of shadow where no shadow should be.

"I told you never to do that." My voice came out sharp and cold. "You don't sneak up on me."

The shadow solidified and took shape as it became a girl stepping into the light cast by the guest room lamps.

She was young. Seventeen, maybe eighteen. Dark hair that hung straight and lifeless around a pale face. Eyes that held too much knowledge for someone her age.

"I apologize." Her voice was soft, carefully neutral. "You told me to make myself invisible to everyone on these grounds."

"There's no saving you, really."

I turned back to the dresser and picked up my brush and began working it through my hair. The grey streaks were more visible now. New ones appearing every day like little flags of surrender.

I started braiding. The familiar motion helped calm the agitation still churning from my conversation with Aldric.

"Number four, was it a success?" I asked without looking at her.

She nodded. I could see the movement in the mirror.

"Yes."

"Details."

"It looked like an accident." Her words came measured and precise. "A few might survive. Maybe one or two. But the Omega girl... I watched her die."

Good. That was good. One less thorn in my side. One less complication. Athena's ghost was dead as quicky as it came.

"I took this as a trophy."

She held something out. I finished tying off my braid and turned to look. It was a phone. The screen was shattered, spiderwebbed with cracks. Dark stains marked the case.

"This has too much serial killer vibes to it," I said flatly. "I do not appreciate it and I hate that you did not even consider that this could be tracked to us. Destroy it."

Number Four closed her hand around the phone. I watched it crumble and actually disintegrate before collapsing into powder and fragments that fell through her fingers like sand.

"I want it far away from here."

"Will do."

She started to leave but stopped. I saw her hesitate in that way that meant she had something else to say.

"What?" I demanded.

"There was something odd."

"What?"

Number Four scratched at her hand. The gesture seemed unconscious, nervous.

"She resisted my second will. Did she have witch blood by chance?"

"Fuck do I know." I waved the question away. "But she's dead. That's all that matters now."

The girl scratched at her hand again. This time I caught a glimpse of the wound there. It looked like tree bark. Rough, dark and spreading across her palm.

"It looks like you pushed yourself too much."

I opened the dresser drawer and found the pill bottle I kept hidden beneath my lovely scarves. I shook one out and held it toward her.

"Here. Swallow."

She took it, placed it on her tongue and swallowed dry. I watched the wound on her hand slowly close. The bark-like texture faded before it smoothed and then it disappeared completely until there was nothing but unmarked skin.

"Thank you, mistress."

"No need to thank me. Just do your job as my healer and you get to live a long life." I turned back to the mirror. "Now leave. I need my beauty sleep."

Number Four moved to the window and opened it without a sound. The cold night air rushed in, bringing the scent of dying leaves. Autumn was nearing.

I watched her jump.

It still took some getting used to. Seeing her leap feet down. But I heard no impact. There was no sound of landing. She simply vanished into the night like she'd never existed at all.

The window closed behind her, shutting itself with a soft click.

I sat in my chair and stared at my reflection again. At the woman I'd become in my fight to hold onto everything I'd built.

Outside, Silver Creek slept. Dimitri was probably in someone else's arms. Athena's ghost watched from wherever the dead went. And I sat alone in this inadequate

chambers with my grey-streaked hair and my aging face and my carefully maintained throne.

What a life.

Chapter 239: Blood Memories

FIA

My eyes opened to darkness.

This was not the comfortable darkness of a bedroom at night, or the gentle dimness of curtains drawn against afternoon sun. This was something else entirely.

For starters; it was cold and damp.

Stone walls pressed in from all sides, which explained the kind of cold that seeped into your bones and made a home there. Torches flickered somewhere beyond my field of vision, throwing dancing shadows across rough-hewn rock that looked ancient as it was forgotten.

I tried to sit up but my body wouldn't move.

Panic flared hot in my chest. I pulled again, harder this time, and pain exploded across my wrists. Metal bit into skin. The sharp edges of iron cuffs dug deep enough that I felt something warm trickle down toward my elbows.

Blood. That was blood.

I craned my neck, fighting against the restraint across my forehead that I hadn't even noticed until now. My hands were stretched above my head, chained to a table. A metal table. The surface was freezing against my bare back, and I realized with growing horror that my clothes were gone. What I had now just a thin red paper sheet on top of me that did nothing to protect me from the cold.

My legs were spread wide and clamped in place with more iron shackles at my ankles. The position was humiliating. Vulnerable in a way that made my stomach turn.

I jerked my right hand. The chain rattled but held firm. The cuff scraped skin, burning like fire. I tried the left. It was the same result. My breathing came faster now, shallow and quick.

"Where am I?"

My voice echoed back at me. The room had to be massive. Or maybe it was just empty. It seemed to be just me, this table, these chains and all this horrible space around us.

I yanked harder at the restraints. The metal didn't budge. It didn't even shift. Someone had bolted these into the table itself. Someone had planned this. Prepared for me to wake up. Prepared for me to struggle.

"Where am I?" I shouted it this time. "Help! Somebody help me!"

The echo came back louder. More desperate. The sound of my own fear bouncing off stone that had probably heard these screams before.

I could see streaks of rust looking crust on the table and the stone walls.

A door opened somewhere to my left. The hinges creaking was what set me off first and then I heard footsteps approach with measured calm, the sound of someone who wasn't in any rush. Someone who knew I wasn't going anywhere.

A man stepped into view. He was tall, lean and he was wearing surgical scrubs and a mask that covered everything from his nose down. His eyes were dark. They swept over me like I was a specimen on a slide.

"How are you doing, Athena?"

The name hit me like a slap. I squinted up at him, trying to make sense of his features through the dim light and my own rising terror.

Athena? I knew that name. It was what stepmother's mother had called me..

"That's not my name." My voice came out hoarse. "My name is Fia. Where am I? What is this place?"

He tilted his head slightly. The movement was almost gentle. "You're fine, Athena. It's better that you're even here than dead."

Dead. The word stuck in my throat. "What do you mean?"

He moved closer, his hands clasped behind his back like a professor giving a lecture. "Do you know a lot of werewolves have healer genes in them? After the great sin, before the Goddess eradicated the healers from the age of legends because of the abuse of power..."

I stared at him. My heart hammered so hard I could hear it in my ears.

"Alphas and Lunas and Betas and Gammas..." He continued, his voice taking on that same educational tone. "They had stronger dominant natures. So the chances that those dormant genes, especially watered down through generations of selective breeding, would ever shine? Almost impossible."

He paused and he looked down at me with something that might have been fascination.

"But Omegas. Your immune system, weak as it is, makes it possible for the long-exterminated gift to shine. It shows in small ways. Some of you are talented with herbs. Some know poison. But that's nothing like what you are about to be made by me."

He reached for something on a nearby table. The scrape of metal on metal made my teeth hurt. When he turned back, he held a syringe. The liquid inside glowed faintly blue in the torchlight.

"No." I pulled at the chains again. Harder. Hard enough that I felt skin tear. "No, please. Please."

He moved toward me with slow, deliberate steps.

"I did nothing wrong!" The words burst out of me in a rush. "I was just an Omega. Was I supposed to refuse my Alpha? Disrespect him and get killed for it?"

My vision blurred. Tears spilled hot down my temples, pooling in my ears. I shook my head as much as the restraint would allow, which wasn't much at all.

It didn't feel like me talking. But at the same time it felt like it was me. I wasn't sure how to describe it. But it was like reliving a painful memory.

"I just wanted to live. I just want to live."

The needle pierced my skin. I felt the cold rush of whatever poison he'd made spreading through my veins like ice water. He depressed the plunger slowly, carefully, like he was savoring it. Like this was something precious that couldn't be wasted.

When the syringe was empty, he walked around to stand near my head. His footsteps were steady and unhurried. He reached up and pulled the surgical mask down.

I didn't recognize his face. He was quite young with unremarkable features. The kind of man you'd pass on the street and forget immediately. Except for his eyes. Those stayed with you. They held the kind of fervor that belonged to zealots and madmen. A deep cornflower blue.

"It's alright, Athena." His voice was soft now, almost kind even. "You will live. Something that wasn't promised in the Nocturne pack. I'm a scientist. Not a murderer."

"No." I shook my head again. The movement made the world tilt. "You're one of those warlocks. Who think themselves a god. You want to use my flesh to make hellish craft. Fleshcraft is a sin, you know."

He sighed. The sound was disappointed, like I'd failed to understand something simple.

"But who will know?"

My vision started to swim. The torches blurred into streaks of orange and gold. The stone ceiling rippled like water. Whatever he'd injected was working fast, pulling me under into something dark and thick.

He reached for something else. Another tool. This one made a sound when he activated it. A high-pitched mechanical whine that built and built until it became a roar. Was that a chainsaw? Was he holding a chainsaw? The blade spun so fast it looked like a solid disk of silver death.

"No. No, no, no, no."

I thrashed against the restraints. The chains rattled. The cuffs bit deeper. Fresh blood ran warm across my skin. None of it mattered. The blade was descending. Coming closer. The sound filled everything, drowned out my screams, drowned out my thoughts. There was only that terrible mechanical howl and the glint of spinning metal and the man's calm, clinical expression as he brought it toward my exposed stomach.

The blade touched skin.

And I screamed madly in response.

I woke up screaming.

"No!"

The sound ripped from my throat raw and ragged. My hands flew up to protect myself from a blade that wasn't there. My body jerked hard enough that I nearly fell.

But there was no table. No chains. No man with dead eyes and a chainsaw.

There however was soft sheets twisted around my legs. A familiar ceiling. The faint smell of antiseptic and herbs that meant the infirmary.

I was still screaming. I couldn't seem to stop. The sound just kept coming, pouring out of me in waves until my throat felt like it was tearing.

Hands grabbed my shoulders. Gentle but firm. "Luna Fia! Luna Fia, you're safe. You're home."

Maren's face swam into focus above me. Her dark eyes were wide with concern. Behind her, Thorne appeared, his weathered features creased with worry.

"You're safe," Maren said again. "It was just a dream. You're in the infirmary. You're safe."

Just a dream?

But it had felt so real. I could still feel the cold metal against my back. The bite of the cuffs around my wrists. That terrible mechanical whine of the chainsaw growing louder and louder until—

I looked down at my wrists. There was no blood or torn skin. Just faint red marks from where I must have been gripping the sheets too hard.

My breathing came in sharp, painful gasps. I couldn't seem to get enough air. The room spun and tilted. Everything felt wrong and disconnected. Like I was still partially trapped in that dungeon, waiting for the blade to fall.

"Breathe with me." Maren's voice cut through the panic. "In through your nose. Out through your mouth. That's it. You're doing great."

I tried to follow her instructions. Tried to pull air into lungs that felt too small. Too tight. The room slowly stopped spinning. The edges of my vision cleared.

Yeah. It was just a dream. It was just a horrible, vivid dream.

But why did it still feel like I could hear that chainsaw whining in the distance?

Why did the name Athena echo in my head like something I should remember?

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Chapter 240: Drag Path 1

FIA

The door to the infirmary burst open.

I heard it before I saw him. The heavy wood slamming against the wall and footsteps rushing across the floor. Then Cian was there, filling my vision with his broad shoulders and wild eyes.

"Fia."

My name... That was all he said. But the way he said it, in this raw, broken and relieved voice, it made something crack open in my chest.

I smiled. I couldn't help it. Even with my throat still raw from screaming and my hands shaking and the phantom sensation of chains around my wrists, I smiled at him.

He crossed the distance between us in two strides and pulled me into his arms.

The impact knocked the breath straight from my lungs. His chest was solid against mine. I could feel all of his hard planes and tense muscle. One of his hands cupped the back of my head, his fingers threading through my hair. The other wrapped around my waist and held me like he was afraid I might dissolve if he let go.

I felt every inch of him pressed against me. The way his heart hammered beneath his ribs. The tremor in his hands despite how tightly he held me. And somehow, impossibly, the curve of his shoulder fit perfectly against my cheek.

His scent wrapped around me. I smelled pine and the earth, as well as a tinge of blood and smoke. It chased away the lingering smell of antiseptic and the memory of that damp stone cell.

"I'm so glad you're alright." His voice rumbled through his chest, through me. He spoke into my hair, his breath warm against the top of my head. "You have no idea."

He pulled back just enough to look at me. His hands moved to my shoulders, while his gaze swept across my face like he was cataloging every detail to make sure I was real.

"You are alright. Right?"

I nodded. "I feel fine."

"That's good." He exhaled hard, some of the tension bleeding from his shoulders. "That's good. Are you hungry? Do you need anything? Water? I can get Maren or Thorne to—"

I caught his hand in mine. His palm was calloused and warm. "I'm fine."

He looked down at our joined hands. His thumb brushed across my knuckles, the touch was so gentle that it made my throat tight.

"What happened?" He sat down on the edge of the infirmary bed, his weight making the mattress dip. "I felt you." His voice dropped lower. "I felt you suffer. I felt you hurt and you..." He stopped. Swallowed hard. "You started to disappear."

My grip on his hand tightened.

He closed his eyes. "I felt you die."

The words hung in the air between us. Heavy, as it was terrible, and borderline true.

"I'm here." I held both his hands now, threading our fingers together. "I'm alive."

"By some miracle." He opened his eyes and they were bright with unshed tears. "You came here with no scratch on you. How did that even happen? Garrett... Even Garrett was..."

My stomach dropped. "Garrett."

The memory slammed back. Garrett hovering over me in the wreckage, his face pale and drawn. Blood everywhere as he tried to stop me from bleeding without even caring about himself. The sight of my blood was still engraved in my head.

Even though he had been badly injured too, he had stayed. He had tried to help me while he was probably bleeding out himself. What if something had happened to him while I was unconscious? What if he had collapsed? What if no one had found him in time?

The thought twisted in my mind like a knife.

"Is he fine?"

Cian nodded. "He survived. He has bruises, maybe even worse. But not you." He looked at me again, really looked at me. "It's not like I'm not glad some miracle happened. But Fia, the mate bond broke. You were tethering on the other side and you came right back. How the heck is that even possible?"

I glanced past him to where Maren was organizing supplies on a metal tray. Thorne stood near the doorway, his weathered face creased with concern. They were both trying to look busy but I could feel their attention on me. I could feel the weight of the pack's worry pressing in from all sides.

The infirmary felt too small. Too close. The smell of herbs and antiseptic was cloying in my throat.

"Can we go out?" My voice came out quieter than I meant it to. "The air here is a bit too much."

"Of course." Cian stood immediately and helped me to my feet. His arm came around my waist, supporting most of my weight even though I didn't need him to.

It was endearing, the way he treated me like something fragile that might shatter. Like porcelain or spun glass. When the truth was I felt perfectly fine. Better than fine, actually. There was no pain, no weakness, or lingering ache from injuries that should have killed me.

He led me through the infirmary doors and out into the night. The cool air hit my face and I breathed it in deep, filling my lungs with the scent of pine and earth and growing things.

The moon hung at its peak. It was full, bright and impossibly large. It painted everything in shades of silver and shadows of grey.

Cian guided me toward the pool. The water reflected the moonlight like a mirror, the surface so still it almost looked solid. It was beautiful.

I sat down at the edge, ignoring how the thin infirmary gown did nothing to protect me from the cold ground. The chill seeped through the paper-thin fabric but I didn't care. I needed to be here, outside, under the open sky.

"You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you."

Cian sat next to me. He pulled off his shoes and socks, setting them aside before dipping his feet into the water. Small ripples spread across the surface, distorting the moon's reflection.

"Try me."

I looked at him. Really looked at him. The strong line of his jaw. The way the moonlight caught in his dark hair. The patience in his deep blue eyes as he waited for me to find the words.

"I remember the seat belt cutting when we had the collision." My voice sounded steadier than I felt. "I remember hitting glass and scraping my skin on the road."

My hand moved to my throat without thinking. The skin there was smooth and whole. No ragged edges. No torn flesh.

I swallowed hard. "I even had a jagged piece of fucking glass sticking out of my throat. I was covered in blood."

Tears burned at the corners of my eyes. I blinked them back but more came, blurring the moonlight into streaks.

"I didn't want to die." The words cracked in the middle. "I still had so much to live for and it seemed so unfair. I thought about you. How you would feel. How it would hurt you and I couldn't bear it."

I should have said something deeper. Something about how I never thought I could have a family like this. How I never imagined I could belong somewhere, to someone, so completely. But I didn't need to say it. The words lived between us already, in the space we shared in our mind.

"You had me and... I had you," I said instead. They were simple words and goddess were they true. "I didn't want to even imagine what hell you would have gone through if I didn't make it."

I took his hand again. Our fingers slotted together like they were made for it. I looked him in the eye and said, "I saw her."

"You told me." His voice was gentle. "Your mother."

I shook my head and laughed. The sound came out wet and broken. "I wish. No. I didn't see my mother. I saw Lady Selene."

The bewilderment that crossed his face would have been funny under different circumstances. His eyes went wide, his mouth opening slightly before he caught himself.

"See?" I said. "I told you you wouldn't believe it."

"No." He squeezed my hand. "I believe. I believe you."

"She told me if I didn't want to perish, it was my choice and my choice alone." My voice dropped to barely above a whisper. "So I chose. I dragged myself back to you."

Tears formed in Cian's eyes. They caught the moonlight as they spilled down his cheeks, tracking silver paths across his skin.

"I thought I lost you." His voice broke. "I was so afraid I lost you."

I cupped his face in both hands, my thumbs wiping away the tears. His stubble was rough against my palms. "You will never lose me. I assure you."

Then I kissed him.

His lips were warm and soft. They tasted faintly of salt from his tears. He made a sound low in his throat and his hands came up to cradle my face, angling me closer. The kiss was gentle at first, almost hesitant, like he was still afraid I might disappear.

But I was here. Solid, real and alive.

I deepened the kiss, pouring everything I couldn't say into it. All the fear... All the relief and the desperate gratitude that I got to come back to this. To him. His fingers threaded through my hair and I felt his heartbeat against my chest, strong, steady and sure.

When we finally pulled apart, he rested his forehead against mine. Our breath mingled in the small space between us.

"I love you," he whispered.

The words settled over me like a blanket.

"I love you too."

We sat there by the pool with our feet in the water and the moon overhead, holding each other like we could keep the whole world at bay. And for that moment, maybe we could.

Then he asked; "Garrett says you saw the apparition of a woman before the accident."