

To ruin an Omega

Chapter 270: Futile fruits

CIAN

The handler moved before anyone else did.

He dropped to his knees beside her so fast his kneecaps cracked against the concrete. His hands hovered over her face, shaking, not daring to touch.

He leaned in close, squinting through the last wisps of smoke that still curled from her ruined face.

"Hey. Hey, hey, hey." He snapped his fingers in front of her eyes. Nothing. He grabbed her shoulder and shook her. "Wake up. Come on. Wake up, damn it."

He leaned in closer, really close, close enough that his nose was inches from hers. He looked into her eye sockets and his whole body recoiled. He jerked back so hard he almost fell over himself, one hand flying to his mouth, the other slapping the concrete for balance. A gag ripped out of him, wet and ugly, and he turned his head to the side and heaved.

"What the fuck," he choked out between gasps.

I was already moving. "Ronan. The healers. Now. Get them here."

Ronan was gone before I finished the sentence. I heard his boots pound against the garage floor and then he was out the door, the sound of him fading fast.

I dropped down beside the delicate and looked at her.

Gods.

Her face was a wreck. The skin around both eye sockets had burned and split. It was black, blistered and peeling in ragged strips. Blood seeped out of the hollowed-out sockets in slow, steady streams, running down her cheeks in tracks so red they looked painted. The edges of the burns were an angry, raw crimson, the flesh swollen and weeping where the fire had eaten through it. The skin along her forehead and the bridge of her nose had blistered and warped, tight, as they were shiny and wrong. Where her eyelids had been, there was nothing. All that really remained was dark, ruined hollows and the wet, awful glisten of exposed tissue beneath.

The smell hit me then. It did not just have the burning smell. The smell gave cooked and chemical sweet in a way that turned my stomach over.

The handler was still on his hands and knees, dry heaving, his face gray.

"What the fuck just happened?" I asked him. He was the handler. He had to know if crazy shit like this occasionally happened.

He looked up at me then. His face was slick with sweat. He swallowed hard, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I don't fucking know! You think I would be like this if I knew? This doesn't happen," he said. His voice was thin. "This has never happened. I don't know what fucking monsters you are fighting against but this is fucking diabolical."

I stared down at the girl again. At the blood. At the ruin of her face. At the way her chest barely moved as each breath came so shallow, it was almost like she wasn't breathing at all.

What sort of monsters are we fighting indeed.

I didn't let myself sit in it. Not now.

"Time is of the essence," I said, more to myself than anyone. I looked back at the handler. "We have to meet the healers halfway. If there's any hope of saving her, we have to move. Now."

He nodded. Something clicked in him, some gear turning over. He scooped the girl up without another word. She was light. Thank the goddess for that. Her head lolled against his arm, her ruined face pointed toward the ceiling, the blood still running.

We moved fast. Out of the garage and into the open air. The sunlight hit us, brutal and indifferent, and for a second I almost couldn't see. I blinked it away and kept running. The handler was half a step behind me with the girl cradled against his chest like something fragile.

We hadn't made it far across the grounds when I saw them coming from the other direction. Ronan was moving at a dead sprint, and behind him was Maren and Thorne. Both of them kept pace with him in a way that said they'd already been on their feet when he'd found them. Behind the three of them were a pair of omegas that moved in lockstep, and between them, they carried a stretcher.

They reached us at the same time we reached them.

The handler didn't slow. He transferred the delicate onto the stretcher with a practiced efficiency that surprised me. The omegas had her strapped down and were moving again before I'd even caught my breath.

Maren looked at the girl's face.

She stopped breathing for a second. She did actually stop breathing. Then her hand came up, slow, and covered her own mouth.

Thorne looked too. He went quiet in a way I hadn't seen from him before. His jaw set hard yet he said nothing.

"What the hell happened to her?" Maren asked. Her voice was steady but her eyes weren't.

"I don't fucking know," I said. The words came out rougher than I meant them to. "She was reading a memory. Peeping through something on the car. And then her eyes just burned. Out of nowhere. Just like that."

Maren was already walking, keeping pace with the stretcher, her eyes cataloging the damage with a clinical focus that I recognized and was grateful for.

"Can you save her?" I asked.

Maren glanced down at the girl. She took her time before she answered, which told me everything.

"She'll live," she said. "I don't think we can save her sight, though."

The words landed like a blow to the chest. I swallowed it down.

Behind me, the handler let out a sharp breath. "Fuck."

I heard it in his voice. The way it landed. He did not have a single iota of grief or concern for the poor girl. I knew this colder and more calculating emotion. I watched his face for a second and I saw it clearly enough: the numbers rearranging themselves behind his eyes. She was the best they had. He said it himself. She was probably the asset that brought in the most cash. And what had just happened to her face was bad for business.

Though, I thought, the man would figure out eventually that her sensitivity hadn't changed. Her ability to read and channel and feel, that was still there. Once his thick head caught up to that, he wouldn't lose as much sleep over it. Except to figure out how to siphon more money off us for the trouble that has now befallen the delicate.

But that was his problem. Not mine.

Mine was the girl on the stretcher.

This was my fault. I'd pushed her. She'd told me she couldn't break through, that it was cutting her, and I'd told her to try harder. I'd told her to push. And she had, because that was what she was built to do. To obey.

Fia couldn't find out about this. If she did, the guilt would eat her alive. And my mother... Goddess. My mother would never let me hear the end of it.

"Just do whatever you can to save her," I said to Maren. "Try to save her sight too. Whatever it takes."

Maren nodded once.

They disappeared through the doors of the main estate, the stretcher rolling fast and smooth, until we reached the infirmary and they went inside. Then the doors swung shut behind them.

I stopped walking. So did Ronan. So did the handler.

The three of us stood there in the corridor outside the infirmary, and the silence was the kind that sat heavy on your chest. The kind that filled up the space where words should be but nobody knew which ones to use.

The handler broke it first.

He started talking to himself. Low, almost under his breath, the kind of muttering a man did when he was trying to hold himself together and not quite managing it.

"She was the best we had," he said. "The goddamn best. This is fucked. This is completely fucked."

He ran his hands through his hair and paced two steps one way before he turned back.

Then he looked at me.

"Forget the five hundred thousand," he said. His voice had gone flat and hard. "That's done. Whatever we had agreed on, it's gone. I'll be charging extra for this. For her injury."

Ronan moved before the man finished speaking.

"Rubbish," he said. He stepped forward, not aggressive, but firm enough that it was a statement. "You knew the risks when you took the job."

The handler turned on him. "This has never happened. Not once. Not in the history of ever. Whatever witch is coming after you or your wife, they are powerful. I don't even think I want a hand in this anymore." He pointed at me, then at Ronan. "I want an extra five hundred thousand. And then we leave as soon as she is treated."

"The five hundred thousand promised payment was already pushing it," Ronan said, his voice level, "considering we know literally nothing of what we actually needed to know."

"Fuck that," the handler said. "And fuck you."

The air between them got tight. I could feel it building, the kind of tension that tipped over into something ugly if nobody did anything about it.

I stepped between them.

"We'll pay it," I said.

Both of them looked at me.

"What happened was a tragedy," I said, and I meant it. I looked the handler in the eye and held it. "She was one of your strongest. I saw her work today. I saw what she could do. And it is a shame that something went wrong, and she's now in there paying for it. So yes. We'll pay it."

I paused.

"That will be all, then?"

Something shifted in the handler's face. The tension in his jaw loosened. He looked away, and for a second I thought he might push for more. I could see it, the instinct of a man who made his living from people like her, who traded in their abilities like stock and always, always looked for the better deal. The look on his face said he wished he'd asked for more.

But he didn't. He just nodded. Because even he knew that would be pushing it.

"That will be all."

The shaky peace had barely settled, the silence still thin and fragile between the three of us, when Maren appeared at the infirmary doors.

She looked at me. Not at Ronan. Not at the handler. At me.

"Alpha Cian," she said. "The girl wants to speak to you."

I didn't hesitate. I pushed off the wall and started walking.

Ronan fell into step beside me.

Maren held up a hand, flat, right in front of his chest. It was firm and it was unmovable.

"Alone," she said.

