

To ruin an Omega

Chapter 273: To Ashes

MADELINE

The trash bundle sat in my closet like a bomb waiting to go off. Blood-soaked rags. Burnt book fragments. Evidence that could get me hurt badly.

I stared at it for a long moment after Wilhelm left, my mind cycling through options. I couldn't just walk downstairs carrying a suspicious bag. Not with Aldric already onto me. Not when he probably still had eyes everywhere.

They didn't even have to be purely loyal to him to do his dirty work.

My magic stirred under my skin, ready.

I closed my eyes and let it flow through me. The familiar tingle spread from my core outward, wrapping around the bundle. The trash shimmered and then condensed into something smaller and neater. A simple leather handbag that looked like it could belong to anyone. Like it held nothing more dangerous than coins and a comb.

It was perfect. Mostly perfect.

I grabbed the bag and headed for the door. My heartbeat picked up as I stepped into the hallway. The morning light streaming through the windows felt too bright. Too exposing. Every shadow seemed like it could be hiding someone watching me.

Paranoia whispered in my ear. Aldric knows. He's watching. You're already caught.

I pushed myself to walk normally. I couldn't be too fast. I couldn't be too slow either. I just had to give a woman heading downstairs with her bag.

But I could not shake the feeling that everything about me gave suspicious.

The corridor stretched ahead of me. It was empty and it was just as quiet. Except for the distant sounds of servants working below.

I didn't like quiet though. A quiet space made you very noticeable.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. That prickling sensation of being observed crawled across my skin like insects. I wanted to look over my shoulder. I badly wanted to scan the hallway for whoever was watching me.

Instead I kept walking. My fingers gripped the bag tighter.

Voices drifted up from around the next corner. Female voices. Laughing about something.

Relief flooded through me when I turned the bend and saw them. Four Omegas in their standard uniforms, clustered together near a window. They were young. Probably newer than most to the estate.

One of them spotted me and her eyes went wide. She elbowed her friend and they all turned.

I smiled and waved in a friendly, casual 'Nothing to see here' manner.

They waved back, whispering to each other as I passed.

The moment I was out of their line of sight, I turned sharply at the next corner. Another Omega stood there at the far end of the hallway, her back to me as she adjusted a painting on the wall.

My magic flared. Hot and quick.

The shift happened in a heartbeat. My face rearranged itself. My hair shortened and darkened. My clothes melted into the same uniform the other Omegas wore. Even my height changed, shrinking me down a few inches.

The bag in my hands transformed too. No longer leather. Now it was a plain trash sack, lumpy and unremarkable.

I walked forward, my steps lighter now. Smaller. I kept my head down as I approached the Omega fixing the painting.

Footsteps echoed from the corridor I'd just left. It was male and heavy. I sensed it coming closer.

My pulse spiked but I didn't look back. I just kept walking, passing the Omega who barely glanced my way.

The footsteps grew louder and closer.

I turned right at the next corner just as a man appeared behind me. I caught a glimpse of him in my peripheral vision. He was tall and broad-shouldered. A sentinel, by the look of his bearing and his uniform.

He looked confused. His head swiveled back and forth, scanning the empty hallway where I'd been moments before.

I kept walking, past another corridor, down a narrow service staircase that the Omegas used. My heart hammered against my ribs but I challenged myself to breathe slowly and evenly.

No one stopped me. No one questioned why I was there.

I shifted my appearance twice more before I made it outside. Different faces. Different builds. Always keeping the Omega uniform. Always carrying that trash bag like it was my job.

The waste disposal area sat at the far edge of the estate grounds. A cluster of large bins surrounded by a high wooden fence to keep the smell from reaching the main buildings.

I checked over my shoulder. No one had followed me.

I lifted the lid on the furthest bin and tossed the bag deep inside, letting it sink beneath layers of actual garbage. Food scraps and soiled linens and broken pottery. Things that would be burned or buried by the end of the day before being sent to the landfill.

The evidence disappeared beneath the rot.

I closed the lid and wiped my hands on my uniform. Done.

Now I just had to get back inside without being seen.

The return trip went faster. I took a different route. Circled around to the servant's entrance on the east side of the estate.

When I stepped back inside, I let my magic fall away. The shift reversed itself and I stood in the hallway wearing my own face again. My own clothes. My hands were however now empty.

The sentinel from before stood at the end of the corridor.

Our eyes met then and I watched his expression shift through several emotions in quick succession.

Surprise. Confusion.

His gaze dropped to my hands. To my sides. Searching for the bag he'd probably been told to watch for.

But there was nothing to find.

I smile, giving the most sweet and innocent act I could manage. "I'm sorry, do you want something?"

He straightened quickly, like he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't. "Luna Elara asked me to ask if you will be having breakfast with her. Breakfast is ready."

His eyes were still scanning me. Looking for any sign of what I'd been carrying earlier.

I had to give him credit. He was good. Though Elara has never once used a sentinel for a matter like this. One thing her father has unintentionally ingrained in her was that everyone has their roles in life.

"I apologize for staring," he added, breaking my train of thoughts.

"No problem." I kept my voice light and friendly. "I'll be down shortly. I'd like to brush my teeth first."

He nodded and walked away. His shoulders were tense with what I could only assume was still confusion.

He did try his best. But I was better. I had to be at this point.

I waited until he disappeared around the corner before I let out the breath I'd been holding.

Aldric didn't tolerate failure. I knew that. Which meant this sentinel wouldn't mention a mysterious vanishing bag to the Alpha that sent him spying. Not when the proof had vanished from his sight. Not when he couldn't explain how I'd simply disappeared and reappeared in a hallway where he'd been watching moments before.

Still, it meant Aldric was already suspicious enough to have me followed.

Which meant he'd probably be at breakfast.

Fuck.

I headed back to my room and went straight to the bathroom. My reflection stared back at me from the mirror. I looked tired. I had dark circles under my eyes. My skin was also too pale.

I grabbed my toothbrush and started scrubbing, working through what I was going to say. How I was going to play this.

Deny everything. That was the obvious choice. Act confused if he brought up the book. Maybe even offended that he'd accuse me of such a thing.

I practiced my expression. Wounded innocence. Righteous indignation.

The toothpaste foam in my mouth tasted like mint and a lot of lies.

I spat and rinsed. Then I stared at myself again, committing the expression to memory. I could do this. I'd played plenty of roles before. This was just one more performance.

I washed my hands and dried them on a towel. My magic hummed under my skin. Still ready. Still waiting.

The walk to the dining room felt like walking to an execution.

My gut had been right. Only Aldric and Elara sat at the long table when I entered. The morning sun streamed through the tall windows, casting long shadows across the polished wood.

Aldric sat at the head of the table. His posture was relaxed but his eyes tracked me the moment I stepped through the door. Sharp and calculating as usual.

I coerced my heartbeat to slow. I forced my expression to stay neutral and pleasant.

Elara smiled at me as I took a seat across from her. "How are you?"

"I'm good." I stretched, letting some genuine exhaustion show. It wasn't hard. I was indeed exhausted. "I didn't have a good sleep though. I was worried about Cian. His mate too."

The lie came easily because it was partly true. Half-truths always did the job.

Elara waved a hand dismissively. "They're fine. Fia must have overreacted or something." She leaned forward like she was sharing a secret. "Did you see the way Cian turned blue? I was so scared. That girl is just trouble. Not to mention how disturbed Auntie was about the whole thing. I legitimately started to replay how cruel I had been to her when I thought she was in mortal danger. But she is fine. I heard she wasn't even injured badly. I guess Omega's systems are just that fragile. It even affects the bond at the slightest hint of danger."

Her tone dripped with condescension. Like Fia was some inconvenient pet that kept making messes.

I kept my expression neutral. "Oh. Why aren't they here then?"

Aldric finally spoke. His voice cut through the space between us like a blade. "Well, my nephew wants to find who tried to kill his Luna. So he hired a delicate."

He paused, letting that sink in.

Then he continued. "And you should know my sister-in-law very well. After all, you have walked Fia's shoes once."

The emphasis on that last part made my stomach clench. A reminder, as it was a subtle jab.

"You should know how protective she can be of the women that Cian loves," Aldric finished.

The words hung in the air. Heavy with implication.

I met his gaze and didn't look away. I didn't flinch. I just held his stare and pretended like I had nothing to hide.

"Of course," I said. "I remember."