

To ruin an Omega

Chapter 296: Dawn and Devastation

HAZEL

I released them and flexed my fingers, trying to get blood flowing back into them.

"You need to stop antagonizing me."

"Maybe I'm just saying it as I'm seeing it." He tilted his head and studied me like I was some interesting specimen. "Don't tell me you expect love in this arrangement."

"No." The word came out sharp and hard. "I get what I want. I get back what I lost. I get my Luna title back and I get to marry into a prominent family. Love is the least of my worries."

"I guess this conversation is done then."

He turned to walk away. Really walk away. Like I was nothing. Like this conversation meant nothing.

"Did you get it?"

He stopped. His back went rigid.

"What?"

"My grandmother's present to this pack. The reason Lily of the Valley agreed to this arrangement in the first place."

I still had a mission. Aldric's demands.

His head turned. He looked at me then he looked at the sentinel.

The sentinel immediately bowed and walked away fast. Like he couldn't get out of there quickly enough.

Then Lysander moved. He closed the space between us in three strides and suddenly he was right there. Too close. Close enough that I could smell his cologne.

It was cloying. But not so much that it was sickening.

"There are some things you shouldn't fucking say out loud."

I blinked. The venom in his voice caught me off guard.

"It's a healer. What's the big secret?"

He stared at me. And something in his expression shifted. Like he was seeing something he hadn't expected.

"Oh," he said softly. "You don't know."

"What? Know what?"

He took a step back. The distance felt deliberate and calculated.

"Enjoy your tour."

Then he walked away. Just like that. He left me standing there in the drive with questions piling up in my throat.

"Fuck." The word slipped out before I could stop it.

What didn't I know? What was I missing? What had Grandmother done that was so secret it couldn't be spoken about in the open?

"Miss?"

I jumped. The Sentinel had returned. He stood a respectful distance away, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Are you ready for the tour?"

I took a breath, smoothed down my clothes and forced my face into something resembling calm.

"Yeah. Sure."

He smiled. "Wonderful. The estate has quite a history. I think you'll find it fascinating."

I nodded and followed him towards the entrance.

But my mind wasn't on the tour. It wasn't on the estate or its history or any of the pretty artwork this sentinel was probably going to show me.

It was on Lysander's face. On that look. That realization that I didn't know something crucial.

I was already at a disadvantage here. Already powerless in ways I hadn't fully grasped. And now there was something else. Some secret tied to my grandmother's deal that everyone seemed to know—even Aldric in a way—except me.

The doors closed behind us. The entrance hall opened up before me. I saw marble floors, high ceilings, a chandelier that was made of gold.

The Sentinel started talking. Something about the architecture. About the founding of the estate. His voice was pleasant and informative.

I made the appropriate sounds. I nodded in the right places. Smiled when it seemed expected.

But inside I was screaming.

I'd lost my pack. Lost my title. Lost my father's respect and my mother's easy affection. I'd been shipped off to a territory where my future husband couldn't even pretend to tolerate me. Where my own grandmother had made some kind of deal that everyone knew about except the person it affected most.

Me.

I was supposed to be Luna Hazel. I was supposed to be powerful, respected and feared.

Instead I was just Hazel. The unwanted bride. The political pawn. The girl who didn't even know the full terms of her own arrangement.

The sentinel led me through a doorway into what looked like a gallery. Paintings lined the walls. Beautiful expensive things that probably had stories attached.

He started talking about one. Some ancestor who did something important.

I looked at the painting. At the proud face staring back at me from the canvas.

I wondered if they'd ever felt this powerless. If they'd ever stood in a place they didn't belong and smiled while everything inside them crumbled.

Probably not.

People like that didn't end up in paintings unless they'd won. Unless they'd conquered and claimed and taken what they wanted.

I wasn't winning. I was barely surviving.

And the worst part was that I still had to smile. Had to nod. Had to pretend like this was all fine. Like I was happy to be here. Like Lysander's coldness didn't cut. Like my grandmother's secrets and Aldric's thinly veiled words didn't terrify me.

Because that's what I was supposed to do. Smile, Endure and fucking survive.

Even when survival felt like the slowest death imaginable.

The sentinel moved to the next painting. I followed.

One foot in front of the other.

That's all I could do now.

Keep moving. Keep smiling. Keep pretending.

Until I figured out what the hell I'd walked into.

And how the hell I was going to survive it.

But when my gaze settled on the painting, the noise in my head went quiet. Every stray thought drifted aside until there was nothing left but the image in front of me. A woman floated in a sky that did not look real, pale clouds curling around her like smoke. In one hand she held a glowing blue orb, in the other a burning red one, the colors clashing and blending at the same time.

I found myself leaning closer before I even realized it. "What is this about?"

The sentinel followed my line of sight. "The Alpha favors pieces that honor the old world," he said. "This one is also about the healers from the age of legends. This one is called Dawn and Devastation."

Chapter 297: Destiny's teeth

FIA

I pulled back slightly, still wrapped in the warmth of his arms and the cooling water. My body felt languid, sated in a way that made me want to sink into him forever.

"So was someone really watching us?" I asked.

His jaw tightened slightly. "It felt that way. But not anymore."

I glanced around the pool area. Everything looked peaceful and quiet. The sun had dipped lower now, casting long shadows across the deck.

"There seems to be nothing quite boring as us fucking like rabbits," I said.

A laugh rumbled through his chest. The sound vibrated against my ear where it pressed to him.

"Do you think it has something to do with Ronan?" I asked. "Or maybe Aldric?"

"Possibly."

"I think I'm holding up quite well." I tilted my head to look up at him. "You must be acting suspicious then."

He shook his head. "I don't think that's it."

His fingers traced lazy patterns on my lower back under the water. Each touch sent little aftershocks of pleasure through my oversensitized skin.

"I noticed it's almost like Garrett disappeared," he said. The lightness in his voice had vanished. "He's avoiding me completely. Have you seen him today?"

I thought back through the morning. Through the breakfast I had with Morrigan and everything that came after.

"No. Not really."

Then my heart started to panic. They wouldn't... Right?

"Do you think something happened to him?"

Cian shook his head immediately. "They wouldn't be that stupid."

I thought so too. But with Aldric, you could never really know. The man was insane.

"Then what?"

"I think he's avoiding us because he realizes the second he speaks to us, then Ronan will talk to me about the card after assuming the chance of him keeping the card's presence under wraps has now become impossible." His arms tightened around me. "I'm going on a limb here but I believe that's why we're being watched."

The pieces clicked together in my mind. It did make sense.

"You think we have new traitors," I said.

"Somehow, yes. Most likely new recruits after the deaths of the ones who retook the oaths and failed."

A chill ran through me despite the warmth of his body. The water suddenly felt colder.

"Another oath taking could be done," I suggested. "This time everybody could be made to participate."

"That will indeed work." He paused. I could practically hear the gears turning in his head. "But what if there are people that we haven't realized aren't our allies and aren't present at the time?"

"Who else could have power and influence in the pack aside from your mother?"

"A few elders."

I nodded against his chest. Of course.

"We should get dry," Cian said.

He released me and I immediately missed his warmth. He dove under the water with practiced ease. I watched his form glide down to where our clothes had settled at the bottom. He gathered them in his arms and surfaced, water streaming from his hair.

He tossed the soaked bundle onto the deck. They landed with a series of wet slaps.

I swam to the edge and pulled myself out. My muscles protested slightly. A pleasant ache that reminded me exactly what we'd just done. I padded toward the pool house, leaving wet footprints on the concrete.

The pool house was small but well stocked. Towels lined shelves along one wall. I grabbed four fluffy white ones and headed back outside.

The late afternoon air kissed my wet skin. I wrapped one towel around my body and twisted another into my hair. The fabric was soft and warm. It smelled like lavender and the lingering heat that came from baking in the sun all day.

Cian was pulling himself out of the pool. Water cascaded down his back, following the valleys of muscle along his spine. His body moved with that easy grace that always made my breath catch.

He stood there in his naked glory. Water droplets clung to his skin. The sun caught them and turned them into tiny diamonds. His body was a work of art. All hard lines and sculpted muscle.

I held out one of the remaining towels.

He took it and wrapped it around his waist. The white terry cloth sat low on his hips. His v-line was still prominent. That sharp cut of muscle that disappeared beneath the towel made my mouth go dry all over again.

I stared. I couldn't help it.

"Keep looking at me like that and we might do it again," he said.

I dragged my gaze back up to his face and laughed. Heat bloomed in my cheeks.

"Come here," I said.

He stepped closer. I took the second towel and reached up to dry his hair. My fingers worked through the wet strands. They were darker when wet. Almost vanta black instead of their usual black.

The moment my skin touched his, everything changed.

An electric shock consumed me. It wasn't painful exactly. More like every nerve in my body fired at once. The world went white. Completely, blindingly white.

Then I saw it.

A scene unfolded before my eyes like a movie playing in fast forward. The place was blurred around the edges. Out of focus. But there were two people in the middle and the only one whose face I could recognize was Cian.

He was coughing blood. It poured from his mouth in thick rivulets. His nose was bleeding too. And his eyes. Oh goddess, even his eyes were bleeding.

Someone held him in a headlock. He struggled to get free. His hands clawed at the arm around his throat. His legs kicked out but found no purchase.

The person holding him had their face blurred. Completely obscured like someone had smudged it out of the picture. But I recognized the voice when it spoke.

"Long live the King."

The words were cold and just as final.

Then the blurred figure twisted. I heard the crack. I saw the way Cian's body went limp. I watched in horror as the figure ripped his head clean off his body.

The vision went white again. That same blinding nothingness.

Then I was back.

Back in my body. Back at the pool area with the towel still in my hands and Cian standing in front of me.

My hands were frozen in mid-air. The towel hung limply from my fingers. My heart was beating so loud I could hear it in my ears. Each beat felt like a drum pounding against my ribcage.

I immediately shielded the bond between us. I threw up those walls so fast so he couldn't feel the terror coursing through me. So he couldn't sense the way my hands wanted to shake. So he couldn't hear the scream building in my throat.

"Is something wrong?" Cian asked.

His voice sounded far away. Muffled like I was hearing it through water.

I blinked once then twice. Trying to clear the image from my mind. Trying to push away the sight of his blood. His broken body. His severed head.

"Fia?"

His hand came up to touch my arm. I flinched. I couldn't help it.

Concern flooded his features. His brows drew together. His eyes searched my face.

"What happened?"

I opened my mouth but no words came out. How could I tell him? How could I explain what I'd just seen?

My hands were still frozen in the air. Still holding that damn towel. I forced them to move. Lowered them slowly.

"I..." My voice cracked. "I don't know."

That was a lie. I knew exactly what had happened. I'd had a vision. Some sort of prophetic nightmare playing out in broad daylight while I was wide awake.

"You're pale," Cian said.

He took the towel from my numb fingers and tossed it aside. Both his hands came up to cup my face. His palms were warm against my cheeks.

"Talk to me."

I couldn't meet his eyes. If I looked at him I'd see it again. I'd see the blood. See his body going limp. See his head being torn from his shoulders.

"Fia." His voice was firmer now. Demanding. "What is wrong?"

I swallowed hard and forced air into my lungs. My chest felt tight, like the world had suddenly shrunk around me.

"I just..." My voice came out thin. Fragile. "I just had a really vivid flashback of the accident."

The lie tasted bitter on my tongue. It settled heavy in my stomach.

Cian's expression softened at once. The tension left his shoulders as his thumbs brushed gently over my cheeks.

"That's long gone, Fia," he said quietly.

I shook my head before I could stop myself. "It didn't feel that way."

The images still burned behind my eyes. Blood. His blood. That voice echoing in my skull like a curse that refused to fade.

"It felt real," I whispered. "Like I was back there. Like my body remembered before my mind did. First the phantom pains and now image flashbacks... I don't think I'm over it."

His hand slid down to find mine. Warm fingers threaded through mine, grounding me before I could drift too far into the horror still clawing at my thoughts.

"It's alright," he murmured.

His grip tightened gently, reassuring, steady. He pulled me closer until my forehead rested against his chest. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat thumped beneath my ear. It was strong. He was alive and whole.

But...

I lifted my gaze slowly. My throat bobbed as I swallowed.

Because even as I stared at him, safe and breathing and real in front of me, the vision refused to leave.

I could still see the blood.

I could still hear the voice.

And it had unmistakably been *Aldric's*.

HAZEL

"What do the orbs mean?"

The sentinel turned back to the painting. His expression remained pleasant and professional. Like we were discussing the weather instead of something that felt strangely important.

"The blue signifies the natural gift the goddess blessed them with. To create. To fix the broken and restore what was damaged." He gestured toward the glowing sphere in the woman's left hand. "It was said that a healer's touch could mend wounds that would kill an ordinary wolf. They could cure sickness, ease pain, even bring someone back from the brink of death."

I looked at the red orb. The way it seemed to pulse with heat even in the static painting. The way the colors bled together where blue met red, creating something violent and beautiful at the same time.

"So I assume the red is to destroy and unfix then."

The sentinel's smile faltered. Just for a second. Then it returned, but dimmer. More uncertain.

"I really do not know." He shrugged. "It has been so long. Records from that time are fragmentary at best. But healers would have probably carried a different name if they had a nature like that. Destroyer doesn't quite have the same ring to it."

"Right."

He moved along the wall, his footsteps echoing in the gallery. I followed. The paintings blurred together for a moment until he stopped in front of another one.

"There are more. This actually tells a story even you must know very well."

I looked at the image. It wasn't a painting in the traditional sense. More like a mosaic. Thousands of tiny colored tiles forming a scene that made my stomach turn.

A woman. She was bound and her body was bent in a way that suggested pain and more importantly submission. In her bound arms, she managed to hold a child made of gold. Literal gold. The baby glowed like it had been dipped in precious metal. Its umbilical cord was still connected to its belly, then stretched back to connect to her. Above them stood a fat bellied man, his hand outstretched toward the child. Behind him, several other men. All with the same greedy expression. All reaching for her.

I knew this story. Everyone did.

"When Alphas started to covet the powers of healers and wanted that power in their direct lineage."

The sentinel nodded. "Every werewolf today probably has healer blood burning through them, although that age of power is now dead as it can be. Aside from the Goddess stripping away her given gifts, the blood has been diluted beyond recognition after generations of breeding programs that ultimately failed to produce what those Alphas wanted."

I stared at the bound woman. At the way the artist had captured her face. She did not hold resignation. Neither did she carry acceptance. The only thing you could really make out was the blank, empty exhaustion. Like she'd stopped fighting a long time ago.

"The goddess ending a class of shifters sounds cruel to me. Does it not?"

The sentinel was quiet for a moment. When he spoke, his voice carried something I couldn't quite identify. Sadness, maybe. Or just weariness.

"Her children cried to her and she listened in the best way she could."

"As someone who lost what made her unique, I don't think it was the best way." The words came out harder than I intended. I didn't care. Selene could go fuck herself. "They did nothing wrong and everything that made them special was taken away. The Alphas and Lunas who did that to them didn't even get to pay."

"They didn't win though. Everybody lost."

The voice came from behind us. Deep and authoritative. The kind of voice that expected to be listened to.

I turned.

A man stood in the gallery entrance. He had salt and pepper hair cut short and neat. He was also clean shaven, though I could see the shadow of stubble starting to show on his chin. He was fit too. Handsome in a way that suggested he'd been stunning when he was younger. He looked a bit like Lysander. The same sharp cheekbones. The same cold assessment in his eyes that were as deep as the forest but more intense somehow. Like whatever made Lysander work had been refined and perfected in this man.

This had to be his father.

The sentinel confirmed it by bowing low. "Welcome, Alpha Wenzel."

Wenzel waved at him like he was shooing away a fly. His eyes stayed on me.

"You must be Pauline's granddaughter."

I bowed. The motion felt awkward and forced. I hated this. But I did it anyway because that's what you did when you met your future father-in-law.

"It's lovely to meet you, future father-in-law."

He smiled. It didn't reach his eyes.

"That does make me feel old." He walked toward me. His movements were fluid. Predatory in a way that set my teeth on edge. "Wenzel will be fine."

He stopped next to me and looked at the mosaic painting. His expression didn't change. Looking at the depiction of a bound woman and stolen children seemed to him as casual as admiring a landscape.

"Sometimes what seems cruel is necessary."

I waited and didn't respond. Something told me he wasn't done.

"What used to make a pack, aside from number and the wits and most of the time brawn of the Alpha in charge, was its healer." He tilted his head, studying the golden child in the mosaic. "But not everyone was cut from the same cloth. Some healers were more blessed than others. No one really knew why. Perhaps it was just the goddess having her favorites or perhaps it had more to do with genetics."

He paused. The silence stretched.

"Eventually conflict would have been born from that. Healers would become commodity. They'd leave and renounce packs like new shoes the second better offers hit. So it was smart for the Alphas and Lunas of that generation to do what they did. If everyone was special, if you didn't need to rely on another whose heart you really didn't know, then you wouldn't need to uselessly fight for what belonged to you in the beginning."

I turned to him and stared at him directly.

"You make it sound like their bodies belonged to the Alphas."

Chapter 299: For every monster 2

HAZEL

Wenzel's smile widened. "I heard the things that happened to you." He said it casually. Like he was discussing the weather again. "If you were self sufficient and didn't need to rely on anyone, you would most likely not be in that predicament."

My hands clenched at my sides. I forced them to relax. Forced my breathing to stay even.

He was right. The worst part was that he was absolutely right.

If I hadn't needed Milo, I wouldn't have had to kill him. If Milo's death wasn't an equation I'd been forced to still be connected to, I wouldn't be an Omega right now. I wouldn't be standing in this gallery pretending to admire art while my future father-in-law who was probably much worse than me casually justified atrocities.

"I don't know if my pack participated, but did yours do it? You seem very fixated on healers."

Wenzel nodded. "Well, yes." There was no hesitation or shame. "I'm not proud of it, of course. But I understand them. I on the other hand do not mind being reliant. There is strength in numbers. I wouldn't have put my penis in one of them though. I would have just made sure they never left us."

The casual way he said it made my skin crawl. I didn't like how he said it. There was something about the tone. So this was where Lysander got it from. Wenzel's own was much worse though.

"Is that why you are interested in the healer my grandmother promised you?"

I watched his face and searched for any tell. Any crack in the facade that might give something away.

The Aldric situation still demanded something.

He smiled. Then he walked toward the sentinel.

His hand came up and he patted the sentinel on the shoulder.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The sentinel stood perfectly still. His expression neutral.

Wenzel still didn't answer me though.

The Alpha simply moved behind him lazily and like he had all the time in the world.

Then his arm came up and wrapped around the sentinel's throat.

The sentinel's eyes went wide. His hands came up, grabbing at Wenzel's arm.

"Don't fight." Wenzel's voice was soft and almost gentle. "Give in. You have played your part in this world and you played it well."

The sentinel struggled. His feet kicked against the marble floor. His fingers clawed at the arm cutting off his air.

I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I couldn't do anything except stand there and watch and wonder why he was doing this.

Wenzel tightened his grip.

The sound was wet and final as I heard a crack that echoed in the gallery like a gunshot.

Then the sentinel went limp.

Wenzel let him drop. The body hit the floor with a heavy thud and all that reminded present in the man was his dead eyes that stared at nothing.

I stared at the corpse. At the way his head sat at an unnatural angle. At the way his fingers were still partially curled, like they were still trying to pry away an arm that was no longer there.

Wenzel closed his eyes. His lips moved in silent prayer.

"May the goddess give him peace and forgive my grave sins."

He opened his eyes and looked at me. His expression was calm. Serene even.

Like he hadn't just murdered someone in front of me. Like the body at his feet was just another piece of art in the gallery.

My heart hammered against my ribs. My breathing had gone shallow. Every instinct screamed at me to run. To get out. To put as much distance between myself and this man as possible.

But I couldn't move.

My feet felt welded to the floor. My body refused to respond to what my brain was screaming at it.

Wenzel stepped over the body and moved closer to me.

I forced myself not to flinch.

He stopped in front of me. Close enough that I could smell his cologne. Different from Lysander's. The notes were sharper.

"Do you know what separates those who lead from those who follow?" His voice was conversational. Pleasant even. "It's not strength. Not intelligence. Not even ruthlessness, though that certainly helps."

He waited. Like he actually expected me to answer.

I couldn't. My throat had closed up. Words felt impossible.

"It's the willingness to do what needs to be done." He glanced back at the body. "That man served my family for ten years. He was loyal. Competent. Everything you could want in a sentinel."

"Then why—"

"Because he heard something he shouldn't have." Wenzel turned back to me. "You asked questions. Good questions. Smart questions. But questions that someone of his station shouldn't have heard."

My stomach turned. "You killed him because of me."

"I killed him because it was necessary." He said it like he was explaining basic math to a child. "You shouldn't feel guilty. You didn't know. How could you? But in matters of fleshcraft, you do not go around leaving dots that can be connected."

Fleshcraft? That sounded vaguely familiar.

"You said he was loyal. Then this wasn't necessary. It is just senseless murder."

"Really?" He smiled. "Tell me, Hazel. When you killed that sentinel, was that murder? Or was that necessary for you? Was it wrong? Or was it simply necessary?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't answer.

Because he was right. Again. And I hated him for it.

"We all do what we have to do to survive." Wenzel's hand came up. I tensed, but he just brushed something off my shoulder. A piece of lint, maybe or dust. "The sooner you accept that, the easier life becomes."

He stepped back and adjusted his cuffs.

"Someone will clean this up. You should return to your room and rest. I am sure it has been a long day."

He walked past me. His footsteps echoed in the gallery. Fading as he moved deeper into the estate.

I stood there. Alone except for the corpse at my feet and the painted eyes of long dead healers watching from the walls.

My hands were shaking. I shoved them into my pockets so I wouldn't have to see them.

One foot in front of the other, I'd told myself earlier. That's all I had to do.

Chapter 300: Da rules 1

HAZEL

I stared at the body longer than I meant to, like if I stood there long enough the scene might rearrange itself into something less final. The sentinel's eyes were still open, fixed on the painted ceiling as though he'd found something interesting in the wolves and moons and battles stretched across the plaster. The murals looked grand from a distance, heroic even, but up close they were cracked and yellowing in places. I noticed that now because I needed something else to look at. Anything but the way his neck bent wrong against the marble.

Wenzel's footsteps had faded minutes ago. He had disappeared down a corridor without a backward glance, leaving me in the echo of what he'd done as if this were routine, as if I were expected to gather myself and drift off like I'd just witnessed a heated conversation instead of a man dying in front of me. My feet refused the idea. They stayed rooted to the floor while my eyes kept slipping back to the body despite every effort to focus elsewhere.

Two minutes earlier the sentinel had been alive. He had been breathing. He had been listening. I had been asking questions that Wenzel called smart, and now a man was dead because he'd been close enough to hear them. The worst part was the tangle of feelings sitting in my chest, the way guilt pressed against something colder and more complicated. If I had planned it, if I had decided someone needed to die, I could have sorted the feeling into a neat little box and locked it away. But this had not been my choice, and the lack of control made everything messier.

The gallery had gone quiet in a way that felt unnatural. My breathing sounded too loud in the space, each inhale catching halfway up my throat like it didn't trust the air here. My heartbeat thudded in my ears with a stubborn insistence that made me want to press my palms against my ribs and hold it still.

I told myself to move. Staying meant being found. Staying meant questions I didn't want to answer, suspicions I did not have the strength to carry in this new place. Even knowing that, I lingered another second, maybe two, until the thought of those empty eyes pulled at me again and finally managed to shove me into motion.

I stepped away without looking back. The decision felt fragile, like a thread that might snap if I tested it by turning my head. I picked up my pace as the gallery stretched ahead of me, longer than I remembered, lined with portraits of healers whose painted smiles followed my progress with unsettling patience. Their hands, captured mid-gesture in oils and varnish, looked capable and gentle. I wondered what they could have done with a broken neck, whether the past held miracles the present had forgotten, whether anyone here had ever tried to save someone that far gone.

By the time I reached the doorway my hand was gripping the frame hard enough to sting. My fingers had gone pale, the skin stretched tight over bone. I forced them to loosen and kept walking, leaving the gallery behind with the sense that the silence would fold back over the space as soon as I was gone.

The hallway outside was empty, which felt like a small mercy. No sentinels stood watch. No Omegas lingered with curious eyes. No one waited to ask why I looked like I had stepped out of a nightmare. The absence should have comforted me, yet it left a hollow feeling that spread through my chest and settled in my stomach.

I had seen worse than a ghost. I had seen what Wenzel Asker did to people who happened to stand in the wrong place at the wrong time. The memory churned inside me, sour and heavy, and I pressed a hand to my stomach as though I could keep it from spilling over.

The word fleshcraft echoed through my thoughts. It tugged at the edges of memory without offering clarity, like a name half remembered or a song I could not place. I turned it over again and again, searching for meaning that refused to surface.

When I rounded the corner and stopped short, the reason became clear. Three Omegas approached in a quiet line, their steps measured and unhurried. A sentinel followed behind them carrying a large black bag slung over one shoulder, the kind meant for transporting heavy canvas. The lie lasted only a fraction of a second before reality settled into place. I knew exactly what it was for.

They saw me. None of them reacted. No surprise flickered across their faces. No concern creased their brows. They moved with the calm certainty of people who already knew what waited down the hall.

Of course they knew.

The sentinel dipped his head in a brief nod as they passed, a polite gesture that made the moment feel even more surreal. The Omegas did not acknowledge me at all. Their

blank expressions stayed fixed ahead as they continued toward the gallery with the bag swaying gently at the sentinel's side.

I stood there long after they disappeared around the corner, listening to the rhythm of their footsteps fade until the hallway swallowed the sound entirely. I kept waiting for something, some delayed reaction or distant shout, but nothing came. The silence returned, heavier than before.

How often did this happen? The question slipped into my thoughts without invitation. How many bodies had been carried through these corridors, zipped into black bags and erased from memory before the sun set? The estate suddenly felt older, darker, steeped in a history I had never wanted to imagine.

My feet began moving again without direction. I only knew I needed to be somewhere else by the time those Omegas returned, somewhere that did not place me at the edge of a freshly scrubbed crime scene.

I turned another corner too quickly and nearly collided with someone heading the opposite way. The apology rose to my lips on instinct, the words forming before I had time to think.

"Sorry, I—"

They died the moment I looked up. Green eyes met mine, the same sharp shade as Wenzel's but younger and rimmed red as if sleep had been a stranger for days. He studied me with open disdain, his gaze traveling from my face down to my shoes and back again with slow, deliberate judgment.

His lip curled. "Are you looking me in the eye, Omega?"

The accusation landed like a slap, sharp and unnecessary. For a split second the urge to drop my gaze tugged at new instincts I knew I would spend weeks undoing. I straightened instead, lifting my chin because surrender felt repulsive. Not after everything I had been through.

"I'm Luna Hazel Hughes of Silvercrest," I said, the title feeling unfamiliar in my mouth, like borrowed clothing that had not yet molded to my shape. "You must be an Asker."

His expression shifted the longer he looked at me. Recognition came first, quick and sharp, and then something softer settled in behind it. Amusement maybe, or pity. I could not decide which bothered me more.

"Oh." He dragged the word out as if he had all the time in the world. "The bride to be."

He stepped closer without asking, and the smell hit me before anything else did. Pot and alcohol, thick and stale, clinging to the fabric of his nice clothes. It was an odd combination for expensive tailoring to be soaked in carelessness.

"You're actually not bad looking," he said, tilting his head while he studied me like I was an item displayed behind glass. "If I were you, I'd run now. This isn't the family you want to be trapped with."

I did not move. I refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing how the words landed, even though they lodged somewhere deep and uncomfortable.

His smile never touched his eyes. "But I heard you sort of have no choice. It's been a while since I heard about a born Luna getting demoted. How does it feel?"

The disgust that crossed my face must have slipped out before I could stop it, because his smile stretched wider, pleased with itself.

I stepped around him, keeping my voice even. "Excuse me."

"I apologize if it sounds rude." His voice followed me down the hall like a stray thread I could not shake. "I was making small talk. But outcast to outcast, do follow the rules or you'll quickly fall out of favor."

I stopped before I meant to. The words snagged on something inside me and tugged hard enough to pull me back around.

"What rules?"