

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 308: The ax and the tree

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PAULINE

Marcus had a ritual.

Every night before bed, he would brush his teeth for exactly two minutes, splash cold water on his face, and then sit on his side of the bed reading whatever business report had followed him. We had done this for the many years we had been married. I knew his routine the way I knew my own heartbeat, and I had stopped finding comfort in either.

I was in the bathroom, leaning over the sink, when my phone pinged multiple times on the counter. I didn't think anything of it. I finished washing my face, patted my skin dry with the hand towel, and walked back into the bedroom.

Only to find Marcus was holding my phone.

He was sitting on his side of the bed, calm as anything, reading whatever had come through. It was locked but he would have seen something. The fact that he didn't even look up when I walked in sent alarm bells ringing in my head.

"Marcus." I crossed the room and took it from his hand before he could pull it back. "What happened to privacy?"

He let me take it. That was the thing about Marcus. He always let you think you had won something.

"It's Dimitri," he said.

I tucked the phone against my chest. "You can force them to call him that. But I will not feed your delusions." I looked down at the screen and saw Valentine's name at the top. Along with a string of messages. The phone was indeed locked, so Marcus had only caught fragments, but even fragments from Valentine were not things I wanted Marcus reading.

"You and that warlock do seem awfully close," Marcus said. His voice was light and conversational. The tone he used when he was sharpening something.

"Get your mind out of the gutter." I set the phone face-down on my nightstand and started pulling back the covers. "Unlike you, not just anything can have a taste of me. We are business partners. That is it."

"Business partners." He repeated it like he was tasting something he didn't quite believe. "He sent multiple texts. Since your phone was locked I only saw the part where he mentioned Isobel's husband's other daughter." He tilted his head. "What business could that possibly be about?"

My hands stilled on the duvet. Just for a moment. One beat too long. I smoothed the covers and said nothing.

"What are you getting at?" I finally asked.

Marcus settled back against the headboard. He was comfortable. That was the worst part. A man who was about to accuse his wife of something monstrous, and he looked as relaxed as if we were discussing the weather.

"You were there," he said. "You saw what I saw. You thought what I thought."

I said nothing.

"That girl." His voice dropped. Something crossed his face. It was not anger. Not anymore. It was older than anger. Worn smooth by years. "She looked like Athena. It was frightening. The resemblance. It stopped me cold."

I kept my face blank.

"And now some warlock you are always talking to is texting you about her. Fia, that was her name, wasn't it?" He looked at me then. Really looked.

"Pauline. It has been years. My rage has faded. You can confess. You did it. It was you who made Athena disappear."

A sound came out of me before I could stop it. Not quite a laugh. Something sharper.

"Oh, you wish." I turned to face him fully. "You wish I did it. You have wanted that to be true for so long you have started to believe it." I folded my arms. "It is not me who takes advantage of Omegas who cannot fight back. It is not me with cock for brains. You have made this accusation so many times and it has yielded absolutely nothing, because there is nothing to find." I let that sit. "That girl saw how deep your obsession ran and she ran for the hills. And even now, even sitting here, you can bring up a girl you were sleeping with in front of your wife with no shame and no scruple whatsoever. I didn't kill any of your previous conquests, Marcus. Why would I have killed her? Why? Am I just that psychotic to you? Tell me. Say it plainly."

"You knew she was different." His voice didn't rise. It never did anymore. "You were afraid."

"Fuck you."

The words came out clean and quiet and I meant every letter.

"That girl ran from you. It was convenient, wasn't it, that her parents just happened to dissent from Nocturne right after. That they joined some rogue group out of nowhere."

"Because they knew what happened to their daughter." Marcus sat up straighter. The calm was cracking, just slightly, at the edges. "Justice couldn't be gotten. Nothing that we both know you did could be proven, and you know it."

"They joined their daughter," I said. "After faking it all. That is what happened."

"Confess. For Goddess' sake. Just confess."

"I have had enough of this." I picked up my pillow and my phone. "I am going to a guest room."

I had made it halfway to the door when he spoke again.

"Really?" Something cold moved into his voice. "You're not afraid I'll find another Omega to keep me company tonight?"

I stopped. I turned around slowly.

"I will just kill them," I said. "Is that not what I do? Is that not what your crazy wife does?"

I walked out and I shut the door behind me hard enough that the frame shook.

The hallway was dark and quiet. I stood in it for a moment with my back against the wall and my eyes closed. My chest was tight. Not from the argument. We had had that argument a hundred times in a hundred different rooms. I was tired of it the way you got tired of a scab you kept reopening.

I was tight because of Valentine's name on my phone.

I was tight because of the word Isobel's husband's other daughter.

I opened my phone.

Valentine had sent several messages. The later ones were whatever Marcus had almost read. I scrolled past those. Then I reached the old ones, the ones that had come in before Marcus and I were tearing into each other, and Valentine had finally deigned to reply.

"I promise you Athena died."

The breath I let out was slow and long. My shoulders dropped. I had not realized how hard I had been holding myself until I felt some of it release.

I scrolled down.

"But there is a secret I didn't tell you. And I am sorry for that. But now is not the time to cast blame or throw hate or foolish questions. We are irrevocably linked and the things we have done, there is no unwrapping that. So take in a breath while you read this."

I read those words twice. Then I read them a third time.

Valentine did not apologize. Not to anyone. Not for anything. That he was apologizing now, before he had even told me the thing, made something cold settle into the bottom of my stomach.

Still I kept reading.

"When Athena was brought to me, she was pregnant."

The hallway tilted.

I put my hand flat on the wall to steady myself.

"She had a child and that child escaped. I was sure she wouldn't survive. But I was wrong."

My breathing was not right. I knew that. I could feel it going shallow and fast and I couldn't seem to fix it. I kept reading because stopping felt worse than continuing.

"It seemed she did survive. I have done my research. I have finally discovered how. She became the second wife of an Alpha. Alpha Joseph Hughes."

Something in my brain stopped working for a moment. Just stopped. Went completely white and still.

"The husband of your daughter."

I read it again.

...The husband of your daughter.

"...And that makes his daughter Fia Hughes her daughter."

"She is the granddaughter of Athena."

There was more. I could see there was more text below, more words Valentine had typed out, but my fingers had gone numb and I couldn't quite make them work properly and my phone was suddenly very heavy and I wasn't sure when that had happened.

The phone slipped.

It hit the floor screen-up and I heard it but I didn't move to pick it up right away. I stood there in the dark hallway of my own house and I stared at the wall.

Fia.

Isobel's stepdaughter. The girl who was so close to me at the Elder's circle. The girl with those eyes, those strange doe eyes that had made something flinch in me when I first saw her, and I had told myself it was nothing. I had told myself I was being paranoid. I had told myself my mind was just putting ideas in my head with all my obsessive memory and fear over a girl who had been dead for years.

But Fia did have Athena's blood.

Fia was the proof that Athena had lived long enough to give birth. That somewhere between what Valentine had done to her and whatever happened after, that girl had lived well and even has a child that had gotten out. A child that had built something for herself and even become someone's mother.

Athena's daughter had been in my daughter's house. Been a threat to her even before she passed. Now... That daughter has bred another one.

An Athena incarnate.

I bent down slowly and picked up my phone. My knee popped when I crouched. A small, stupid, ordinary sound in the middle of something that felt like the world folding in on itself.

I looked down at the screen to find the rest of Valentine's message.

But when I looked down, I didn't see text.

I saw legs.

Bare legs, gray with grime. Dirt and dark stains that I recognized, even after all this time, as dried blood. The legs were standing on the floor of my hallway. Right there. Right in front of me. I had not heard a door. I had not heard footsteps. There was simply nothing, and then there were legs, and my eyes traveled upward the way you did when you knew you shouldn't but you couldn't stop yourself.

She looked the same. That was the terrible thing. After everything, after all these years, Athena looked exactly the same. Her face was pale and still and she was smiling in a way that didn't reach her eyes, and her eyes were on mine with an expression I remembered from before she disappeared.

She had looked at me that way. Like she already knew what came next when she was being dragged away.

She opened her mouth and spoke with smooth venom.

"I promised you, didn't I?"