

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 309: Bo\$\$

PAULINE

My hand shot up to my mouth before the sound could get out.

I pressed my palm hard against my lips and held it there. My back was against the wall. My knees had gone soft but I would not let them buckle. I would not. I stood in that dark hallway and I stared at the space where she was and I said it out loud, quiet and steady, past my own fingers.

"You are not real."

The smile came back first. Before the rest of her. Just the smile, hanging there in the dark the way a dream lingers at the edges of your memory. Then the rest of Athena filled itself in around it, and she tilted her head at me with that same mocking expression.

Then she faded.

Just like that. Like smoke when a window opened. She was there and then she simply wasn't, and the hallway was just a hallway again, dark and quiet and smelling faintly of the lemon oil the cleaning staff used on the floors.

I stood very still. I breathed in through my nose. Out through my mouth. In again. I looked left. I looked right. I blinked and looked again. There was nothing. There was no one. There was only me and the quiet and the distant sound of Marcus turning a page on the other side of his closed bedroom door.

I looked down at my phone.

Valentine had sent more.

I read it.

"That would also make her Dimitri's granddaughter."

My jaw tightened.

"I know every bone in you wants to murder me right now. But you should know this. Aldric is interested in the girl. For reasons I am fully sure he does not know yet. But I know. I experimented on Athena's child, and that child's child inherited the powers of my creation."

I stopped breathing.

I read it again.

Then a third time, because surely he hadn't written what I thought he'd written. Surely he had not sat somewhere comfortable and warm and typed that out like it was a minor inconvenience, like it was a footnote, like he was dropping it into conversation rather than dropping it onto my chest like a stone from a great height.

Inherited the powers of his creation....

I knew what Valentine's creation was. I had known it for years, had sat across from him while he explained it with that particular brand of scholarly detachment he used when he was most proud of himself and most terrified of himself in equal measure. Fleshcraft. The extinct healer blood he had pulled back from whatever age they'd slept in. The things he had built from Athena's body and her blood and whatever else he'd used that I hadn't asked about because not asking had seemed wiser.

If Fia had inherited that...

If Aldric ever understood what he was standing next to...

My heart did something uneven. Several somethings, all in a row. I kept reading.

"We have to take the girl out before he has more things against our neck. Call me when you see this."

I deleted the thread. Every message. I watched them disappear one by one and then I opened my call log and pressed his name.

He picked up before the second ring.

"Before it comes out," he said, pleasant as anything, "I should remind you, Pauline. There is no use fighting. We are in this together."

The breath I let out was long and very slow.

"Are you insane?" I started walking. Away from the hallway, away from the spot on the floor where I had seen her legs and her smile. I pushed open the guest room door and kicked it closed behind me and I didn't bother to soften the sound of it. "Are you fucking insane? All these years. All of them. You said nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Pauline—"

"We met her, Valentine. I visited Silver Creek after another one of that bastard Aldric's lovely little blackmail attempts. And I saw her. My husband saw her. It was like the past crashed straight into him, right there in front of me, and I watched it happen. I told myself it was a coincidence only for you to kill that subtle peace. Athena was pregnant?" The word landed somewhere ugly in my chest. "She was pregnant and you didn't think to pick up a phone and call me? Not even once."

"Are you done?"

"No. But go on."

He paused. I could hear him deciding something.

"Aldric has proof that we were involved in fleshcraft. That is the only hold he has over us. It is a strong hold, I grant you that. But imagine what happens when he discovers the fleshcraft was not only real but successful. Imagine what happens when he realizes I didn't just dabble. That I actually brought back healers from the age of legend and put them into flesh that breathes and walks and that one of my little success is currently living within his reach." He

let that sit for a moment. "He would not just own us, Pauline. He would own everything we have, everything we've built, every secret we've ever tried to bury. A specimen of mine is standing next to him and he doesn't even know it yet. When he does—"

"We will never be free."

"So the girl has to disappear."

He said it the way you said anything practical. The way you said "we need milk" or "the roof wants fixing." I had always hated that about him.

Something clicked in my head then. Quietly and completely. The way a key turns when you've finally found the right lock.

"The healer you gave me," I said. "She tried to kill the girl."

There was silence in his end.

"What?"

"Number Four." I sat down on the edge of the guest bed. The mattress was firm. I'd always kept the guest rooms better furnished than they needed to be, out of habit, out of some old reflex toward appearances. "She told me she had gotten the girl to the very edge. She was confident. She said the girl was an inch from death when she left her. I didn't believe her. I thought she was making excuses, covering for herself, buying some pathetic time." I paused. "But she hadn't lied. She had actually done it. She had brought that girl right to the edge of death and left her there to die."

I let that sink in.

"But she survived it," I said. "Because of what she is."

"What does that mean? You already tried to kill my creation?"

"Forget that." I stood up again. I couldn't sit still with all of it moving around inside me. "You're not wrong. The girl does need to disappear. You're right about that much."

"Good," Valentine said. "Then leave it to me. I will handle—"

I laughed. It came out short and flat.

"I don't think so."

"Pauline."

"I don't trust you the way I used to, Valentine. I'm not sure I trust you at all."

I walked to the window and looked out at the garden. The night had settled over everything in that neat, careful way it always did here. The hedges sat trimmed and obedient. The gravel paths were pale ribbons under the lights. The rose bushes Isobel had helped me plant lined the far edge of the lawn, stubborn and thriving despite the chaos she had caused the year we put them in. She had been seven and far more enthusiastic than helpful. I had never

told her how many roots she had snapped in half that afternoon. I had just praised her muddy hands and planted the replacements later.

"You let Aldric find out about your work," I continued. "Your secrets did not stay yours. They became ours. That is how this works. That is how it has always worked. When one of us falls, the rest of us bleed with them."

I pressed my fingers against the glass, cool and steady.

"And you have been holding this back for years. Years. You knew what you created. You knew what could happen if that bloodline resurfaced, and you said nothing. Not to me. Not to anyone who could have prepared for it. If you had picked up the phone sooner, if you had spoken before Athena's granddaughter walked into a world that I built to survive men like Aldric, we would not be standing here guessing and scrambling and reacting."

I let the silence sit for a moment before finishing.

"If you mishandle this, if you make one more reckless decision that puts us at risk, we are finished. There will be nothing left between us after that."

"That will not happen, Pauline."

"You just called her your creation. I don't think so."

"Also, you don't have to worry about Aldric as much as you think."

I turned from the window. "What does that mean?"

"It means I have something for him as well."

I waited for more. He didn't give me any.

"I'll keep you in the loop," he said, and then the call was dead.

I held the phone and stared at the floor.

Fuck.

I tossed it onto the bed and pressed my fingers against my eyes. I stood there in the dark of my own guest room and I thought about Number Four. She would be in her room now, that small room with no windows and the one lock on the outside that only I had a key to. She would be awake, most likely. She was always awake. She lay very still with her eyes open and it had disturbed me at first, years ago, and then I had simply stopped going in at night.

She would be suffering now. The rot moved slowly but it moved. I considered the pill. I had held it in my head now more than once and turned it over as I thought about it. And then I had shoved it back to the pit it belonged.

I had made the right call. I was sure of it. Whatever sentiment had tried to creep in around the edges, whatever small whisper of something that was almost guilt, it was wrong. Sentiment was a luxury I had learned a long time ago I could not afford.

The girl couldn't see that I had been wrong and regardless, she has tried to kill me. she deserved to suffer for that alone even.

Then my phone lit up from the bed.

I looked over at it.

Aldric's name sat on the screen.

Speak of the fucking devil.

My stomach turned over once, slow and hard, like a stone rolling in deep water.

Still... I picked it up.