

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 310: The Making of a Cuckoo bird

HAZEL

The pamphlet was thin. That was the first thing that struck me. Something with this much power over a person's life should have weighed more.

I read the first rule twice before the words fully arranged themselves into meaning.

"Rule of Male Oversight. Every unmarried woman of substance within the estate must be assigned a male guardian. Even if she is high born. Even if she is a Luna. She cannot attend meetings alone. She cannot leave the grounds without escort. Violation results in confinement."

I sat with that for a moment. I read it a third time just to be sure I had not invented the words out of shock or exhaustion or the particular kind of delirium that came from watching a man die and then being handed a pamphlet about etiquette.

The words stayed the same.

I turned to the second rule.

"Rule of Eye Contact. Women may not hold prolonged eye contact with an Alpha male unless invited. This will be interpreted as a challenge to authority. Punishable by public correction."

The memory arrived before I could stop it. Wenzel's face leaning toward mine in the gallery. My eyes on his, steady and unflinching, because I had been raised to look people in the face when they spoke to me. I had thought that was basic dignity. Apparently here it was an offense.

My fingers tightened around the pamphlet.

"Rule of Voice. The women of Lily of the Valley do not interrupt Alpha deliberations. They may submit written opinions but cannot speak unless asked directly. Disobedience results in confinement."

I read that one again.

"Submit written opinions."

What kind of backward hell was this?

The last prominent rule on the page sat at the bottom of the page printed in red, which should have warned me before I even started reading. Red meant they knew. Red meant they had done it deliberately, because whatever this said, they understood it would land differently than the rest.

"Male Heirs Clause."

The language was careful and deliberate and vague enough to make my stomach twist, the way legal text was always vague when the people writing it wanted room to maneuver later. It implied that a bride who produced no male heir within a set time frame would face consequences. It did not name the consequences. It did not need to. The red ink was doing that work just fine.

I stared at it until the letters blurred slightly at the edges.

Then I turned the page.

The final rule informed me, in the same elegant script used for everything else, that phones were not to be used after a certain hour because the light disrupted rest cycles and health was wealth and the estate took the wellness of its members seriously. It went on for an additional two paragraphs. Two paragraphs about phone light and sleep hygiene and the importance of communal restoration. Alpha Wenzel had apparently deemed it upon himself to write an essay about bedtime.

I set the pamphlet down on the mattress.

"These people," I said to the empty room, "are completely insane."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone.

My mother picked up on the third ring.

"Hazel? How is it? How are you settling in?"

"I need you to listen to me very carefully," I said. "Because I am going to tell you something and I need you to not dismiss it and I need you to not tell me I am being dramatic."

There was silence on her end. Then: "What happened?"

I opened my mouth to speak and that was when the door opened.

Delta stepped through first, her eyes finding mine immediately. Then her gaze dropped to the phone in my hand and her face changed. She did not shout. She did not gasp. She just looked at me with wide eyes and mouthed the words "hide it", exaggerating every movement of her mouth like she was trying to communicate through glass, her whole expression tight with something close to panic.

A shape moved behind her in the doorway.

I cut the call. I threw the phone sideways without thinking and it hit the floor hard, skidding a few inches before stopping against the leg of some dresser. I winced at the sound of it landing.

Delta stepped fully into the room. The man behind her followed, and he was tall in the way that meant to take up space, filling the doorway for a moment before he cleared it. A sentinel, by the look of him. His uniform was neat. His face was neutral in the specific way of someone who had practiced being unreadable.

"Who is he?" I asked Delta, keeping my voice low.

Delta glanced sideways at the man as he stepped forward.

"I am your male guardian," he said. His voice was even and unhurried.
"Assigned effective immediately under estate protocol. My name is Laslo."

Everything that had been sitting in my chest since the gallery, the tiny little guilt and the cold and the heaviness, burned off in about two seconds.

"Absolutely not," I said. "Fucking no."

I caught Delta tensing from the corner of my eye. Her shoulders pulled inward slightly, that small careful movement of someone bracing for impact. I noticed it and I did not care. I could not afford to care right now.

"I am not a prisoner," I said. "I don't need a chaperone. This is not the dark ages. I don't know what you think is happening here but I am Lysander's intended bride and I did not agree to—"

Laslo crossed the room in four steps and slapped me.

The sound of it came before the pain did, that flat sharp crack of contact that seemed to arrive in my ears a full second before my cheek understood what had happened. My head turned with it. I stood there for a moment with my face pointing at the wall.

"That," he said calmly, "hurt me more than it hurt you. I had hoped our first interaction would be something beautiful."

I turned my head back slowly.

His expression had not changed at all.

"But you are one of the wild ones," he said. "I can see it. This room was supposed to be a demonstration. We let new arrivals see how small and airless it feels to be confined here, so that they understand what they are choosing to avoid when they follow the rules." He looked at me with something that might have been disappointment. "You broke one before I could even finish explaining."

His gaze moved past me to the floor.

He walked to the dresser, bent down, and picked up my phone. He turned it over in his hand and looked at the screen. His expression shifted for just a moment, something flickering across it before it settled back into neutral.

"Oh... Two violations actually," he said.

"I want to see the Alpha," I said. My voice came out steadier than I expected. "There has been a misunderstanding. I am going to be Lysander's bride. Whatever this is, it doesn't apply to me."

Laslo looked at me for a long moment.

"A wild child," he said, "cannot be the Alpha's favorite son's Bride. Not yet. You need to be...tamed."

He slid my phone into his pocket.

"Delta." He said her name without looking at her. "I'll be generous. First day, new arrival. Stand by your mistress tonight. I'll return in the morning."

"What?" Delta's voice came from behind me, and something in the tone made me turn. She was shaking her head, arms drawing close to her body. "I don't want to."

I stared at her.

Laslo laughed. It was a short, easy sound. "I can't force you. That's not how this works. If you don't want to, that is fine. She will be by herself then."

"Delta." I said her name and she looked at me and I searched her face for something familiar. "You are my Omega."

Delta straightened. Her chin lifted slightly. "I am training to integrate into Lily of the Valley," she said. "The health of the pack comes before anyone."

Laslo turned to look at her like she had just said something beautiful. "Your training is going exceptionally well."

Delta smiled at him. She smiled at him the way you smile at someone who has just handed you exactly what you needed, warm and genuine and grateful. Like he was fresh bread after a long fast. Like he was something fucking exciting.

"I think," Delta said, "that it would benefit my mistress to understand the gravity of what she has done."

"You are absolutely right," Laslo said. He turned back to me. "One night. I'll see you in the morning."

"What does that mean?" My voice came out sharper than I intended. "What does that mean, one night?"

Neither of them answered.

They moved toward the door together and something in my feet responded before my brain could argue with the decision. I stepped forward. I was already moving when Laslo paused without turning around.

"Do not," he said quietly, "think about it. I will hurt you if I have to."

The words landed in my chest and sat there. My feet stopped.

He pulled a key from his jacket. He stepped through the door. Delta followed without looking back at me.

The door swung shut.

The lock clicked from the outside.

I stood in the silence for one second. Two. Three.

Then I screamed.

