

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 319: The high ground

PAULINE

I picked up the phone.

"What do you want now, Aldric?"

"I like this game you want to play." His voice came through smooth and entirely too comfortable. "But am I really the one you want to play this with? You know how low I will go."

I pressed two fingers to my temple and stared at the pale ribbon of gravel paths beyond the window glass.

"I wish I knew what your psycho ass was talking about."

There was a terse pause at first. Then he broke it.

"I got the card your failure of an assassin conveniently left at the accident scene."

My hand stilled against my temple.

"Did you intend that I be found out?" he continued. "I'm sure you know how that would have ended regardless."

"That wasn't me." The words came out flat because they were true, and the truth had always come easier to me when I was angry. "That wasn't me at all."

"I really do not believe you."

"Shocking." I moved away from the window and sat on the edge of the guest bed. The mattress held firm under me. "Where else would it have come from? Is that what you're about to ask?"

"Yes."

"Well. I am not supposed to be the one answering that for you." I let that settle for a moment. "You are very easy to get rid of, Aldric. The only issue I ever remotely had was that your death meant a full exposure would follow. That same posthumous arrangement you set up, I imagine. Very theatrical." I smoothed my free hand over my knee. "Still... If you are so terrified of being exposed for the monster you are, maybe you should try being a decent human being."

"Right back at you." His tone did not shift, not even slightly. "But I am not here to discuss the issue of morality with a monster much worse than myself." Then the warmth peeled out of his voice entirely. "Don't fucking play games with me. Or your husband might just see firsthand what sort of monster he married. The very graphic details of what you let happen to that Omega whose pussy he loved so much. When I give him those, he will never look at you the same way again."

I laughed. I didn't plan to. It rose up from somewhere low in my chest and came out before I could decide whether it was wise.

"He already suspects I did horrible things." I stretched out my legs and crossed them at the ankle, staring at the ceiling. "What will knowing more change? Our marriage has not exactly been a bed of roses to begin with. You will have to do much better than that."

"It is a bit different, though." His voice stayed level. Patient in that way that was more unsettling than volume ever was. "To see with clarity rather than muddy suspicion." He let that breathe for a moment. "This is merely a warning. Next time I will not be so kind."

I turned the phone in my hand and looked at the dark face of it for just a second before putting it back to my ear.

"You think you are the only one who can threaten?" I kept my voice easy and conversational. The way you spoke about something you had already decided. "You killed your own kin. Your own brother. Or have you forgotten that. What would his son think should that come out?"

There was a beat from his end. I loved how quick I silenced his evil ass.

"You helped too." His voice did not rise. "Remember."

Oh... I remembered.

"And between kin-slaying and participating in fleshcraft," he went on, "which do you think is worse?"

"Fuck you."

"You started this stupid game."

My jaw tightened. I stood up because I could not sit still with his voice in the room and the weight of everything Valentine had dropped on me still pressing against the inside of my skull. I crossed to the window again and put my free hand flat against the glass.

"I mean it," I said. "I didn't put any card at that scene. I am telling you the truth."

"I really do not believe that. My source very much confirms this." He paused. Then, almost gently he continued. "But I'll forgive that. I'll forgive that if you give me something I want."

I looked at my own reflection in the dark glass. My face looked the same as it always did. Composed and unrevealing. Something one could only achieve through years of practice.

"What could that possibly be?"

"What did you use?" The patience in his voice sharpened into something that was almost hunger. "The delicate who came to feel out the accident site went permanently blind before she could see anything incriminating. What powerhouse do you have at your disposal?"

I laughed again. Harder this time. It came out in a short burst that fogged the glass faintly in front of me.

"Oh." I shook my head slowly. "Why would I give you that information?"

"Don't you think it is best to lap at my shoes for my kindness?"

I turned from the window. My reflection disappeared and there was just the dark garden again, all trimmed and obedient and completely indifferent to whatever was unraveling inside this house.

"You can leash and muzzle a wild dog," I said. "But it doesn't make it any less wild."

"Who is the dog, Pauline?"

"You are." I said it without heat. Just a statement of fact. "But you are not getting that from me, Aldric. You can have your secrets. But not mine. No one is allowed to have those. Goddess knows you already have enough."

"You know I will find out regardless."

"At the end of the day," I said, "you cannot control everything. That is something you must come to terms with. Maybe dissect that in therapy you fucking psychopath."

I pulled the phone from my ear and ended the call.

The screen went dark in my hand. I held it for a moment and then set it down on the nightstand beside the guest bed. The room was quiet. The kind of quiet that had texture to it, that pressed in from all corners and made the inside of your head feel very loud by comparison.

I walked to the window one more time and put my forehead against the cool glass.

Valentine's words were still in there. All of them. Turning over and over with no place to settle. Fia... Athena's granddaughter... The girl who had stood close enough to me at the Elder's circle that I could have reached out and touched her shoulder. Who had those eyes, those quiet, wide eyes that I had forced myself to stop looking at because looking had done something to me that I didn't have language for and didn't want to find language for.

She has Athena's blood.

She had more than that, apparently. She had Valentine's work living in her cells, in her bones, in whatever had dragged her back from the edge of death when Number Four left her for gone.

And Aldric was standing next to her.

I closed my eyes. The glass was cold against my skin and I let it stay there until my forehead went numb.

He would find out. He had said it and I believed it, not because I trusted his word but because I knew how he worked. He picked at things until they opened. He was relentless in that particular, bloodless way of his, the way that wore you down not through force but through sheer patient repetition. He would keep pulling at the thread of whatever happened at that accident site until the whole thing unraveled.

And then he would know what he was standing next to.

And then no amount of clever negotiation or mutual threat would keep that knowledge from becoming a leash around everything I had.

I lifted my head from the glass and looked out at the rose bushes. Isobel's roses. They were still growing. Still stubborn, the way she had been stubborn even at seven years old, with mud on her hands and total confidence that she was being helpful when she had been snapping roots in half the whole afternoon.

Just like I had replanted them without saying a word, I knew some things you buried quietly. You didn't mark the grave. You didn't explain it. You just pressed the new roots into the soil and watered them and let time do the rest.

The girl needed to disappear.

Valentine had said it and I hated agreeing with him, hated the particular taste of arriving at the same conclusion through different roads. But he was not wrong. He was many things I had no patience for and very few I respected anymore, but he was not wrong about this.

The only question left was whether I let him handle it or whether I did.

I already knew the answer to that.

I had known it before I'd even hung up the phone.

I turned from the window and picked up my phone again. Not to call anyone. Not yet. I just held it in my palm and looked at the dark screen and thought about what came next. What had to come next. The sequence of it. The careful, quiet management of a situation that had spun several degrees past where I wanted it, through no fault I was willing to assign myself, and which now required me to be very deliberate.

I had not survived everything I had survived by being completely reckless.

I set the phone back down.

Good fucking night, Aldric.