

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 320: Let it happen 1

HAZEL

The scream tore out of me and then there was nothing left. Just the walls. Just the ceiling. Just the particular quality of silence that came after a locked door and a key pulled from the outside.

I stood in the middle of the room and breathed. Or tried to. The air felt wrong, like it had been sitting in here too long before I arrived, like it was secondhand and used up and there was not quite enough of it. I breathed again and got less than I wanted. I did it again and got even less.

My knees hit the floor before I decided to let them.

I did not know when the panic started. It was not like a door opening. It was like a door that had already been open for hours and you only just noticed the cold. One moment I was kneeling. The next, my body had decided it was dying. My chest locked. My vision went strange at the edges. I pressed both palms flat to the floor and focused on the texture of the rug and that did nothing because the rug was scratchy and wrong and the room was too small and the ceiling was too low and there was no window, everything about this fuckass room seemed nowhere near enough.

I vomited.

It came without warning. One second my stomach was clenched and miserable and the next, it had simply given up trying to hold itself together. I retched hard, again and again, until there was nothing left but the effort itself. The horrible mechanical spasming of a body doing work with no material to show for it. When it finally stopped, I stayed on my hands and knees for a long moment. Then my arms gave out and I went sideways and just lay there on the floor.

I stared at the door.

"Help," I said. My voice was barely a sound. "I can't breathe. Please. Someone." The words came out soft and embarrassing. Yet I kept saying them anyway because the alternative was silence and I could not be silent right now. "I cannot breathe."

The door did not move.

That was when I saw her.

She was on the floor with me. Same angle, same position, same ruined mess of a night written all over her face. But her eyes were different. Cleaner, somehow. Like she had not wasted any of herself on crying.

She was me.

She looked at me like I was the most pathetic thing she had ever seen, and she had clearly seen some things.

"You are so pathetic," she said.

"You are one to talk," I said. "You are me."

She smiled without warmth. "I am not this version of you." She shifted slightly, settling her cheek against the floor, like lying in a pool of your own vomit was a perfectly reasonable place to hold a conversation. "I am not the version of you that needs other people to survive."

I looked at the ceiling. "We have always latched on to people. The strong and the weak. We find the person with the most power in the room and we get close and we stay close. That is how we have always worked."

"No." Her voice was sharp. "That is not what we do. We use them. We kiss ass, suck dick, smile at the right moment, and claw our way to the top while they think they are the ones holding the ladder. There is a massive difference between needing someone and using them." She looked at me steadily. "Which one are you doing right now?"

I did not answer.

"Is this where you want to be?" she asked. "Bottom barrel. Locked in a room. Whimpering at a door. A bottom barrel Omega that a sentinel treats like a child on the first day?"

"No."

"It is like you and Fia switched lives." She said the name the way it was always said between us, flat and loaded at the same time. I trust an apparition of myself to use Fia against me in a way that would cut so well.

"She is out there somewhere, breathing clean air, making clean choices, probably winning. And you are here, in this room, on this floor, covered in yourself."

Something tightened in my chest that had nothing to do with the panic.

"The last thing that needs to happen," she said, "is that she wins in life and you die struggling and in obscurity. So stop whining. Stop crying. Stop begging at doors like an animal. Be the evil bitch I know you are."

Then she was gone.

All that stuck by me was the floor, the silence, the smell of sick and the pamphlet still sitting on the mattress.

I lay there for another moment. Then I dragged myself up.

My arms shook. My legs shook. But I did not stop moving.

I picked up the pamphlet. I sat on the edge of the mattress with vomit still drying on my shirt and I read every word of it again. Slowly this time. Not looking for the insult of it. Looking for the structure.

The rule of male oversight. Every woman needed a guardian. That meant the guardian had access. Access to rooms, to corridors, to the Alpha. Access I could not have on my own but that I could borrow if I handled it correctly.

The rule of eye contact. Women could not hold prolonged eye contact unless invited. Fine. That meant the invitation was a currency. Earn the invitation. Bank it.

The rule of voice. Written opinions could be submitted. That meant there was already a channel built for women to communicate influence. Someone had thought it necessary to include it. That meant it was used no matter how degrading it was.

The Male Heirs Clause. Vague language. Room to maneuver. Consequences unnamed. Unnamed consequences were negotiating tools. Nothing real, nothing specific, meant nothing could be enforced without discussion. And discussions were where careful people won. Not that I was barren and didn't have it in me to produce a creature with a penis.

I read until the words stopped feeling like walls and started feeling like maps.

At some point I stopped reading and started memorizing. At some point after that, I stopped being awake.

I did not mean to sleep. The floor was hard and cold and I smelled terrible. But my body had spent everything it had and when I opened my eyes again, there was grey light under the door and my back ached from the floor. The pamphlet was still in my hands.

I was about to take a third look at the stupid thing when I heard a sound.

I looked up and I realized it was from outside.

I surmised that it was a key. That small metallic scrape sounded like that of a key finding its slot, and I sat up even straighter. I arranged my face. I set the pamphlet in my lap with my hands folded over it and I looked at the door.

It swung open slowly.

Delta stood just behind Laslo in the hallway. She looked like she had slept perfectly well. He looked as neat and unhurried as he had the night before, like he had simply been paused and now someone had pressed play.

"Good morning," he said. "How are you today?"

I smiled. I made it soft. I made it tired but genuine, the smile of someone who had done a lot of thinking and reflecting in the night.

"Rough," I said. "I made a mess. I'm sorry about that."

He looked at the floor. He looked at the dried state of my clothes. His expression did not change much but something moved behind his eyes.

"That will be taken care of," he said.

He stepped into the room and came down to my level, bending until we were eye to eye. He had done this before, I realized. He had a method. Close proximity, controlled calm, the patient expression of someone waiting for a specific response.

"I am certain," he said, "that you have learned your lesson."