

To ruin an Omega

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MADELINE

Sunlight fell through the tall stained glass windows, the kind that stretched from floor to ceiling and caught dust motes like they were something precious. The training hall smelled of cedar and cold stone and faintly of something burnt, the residue of a hundred spells gone wrong by students who were not me.

I was eight years old and standing barefoot on a practice circle chalked into the wooden floor.

My grandmother sat in a high-backed chair at the far end of the room with her ankles crossed and her hands folded in her lap, watching me the way she watched everything. Like she already knew how it would end. Like she was just waiting for the world to catch up to what she had already decided.

The other children were struggling.

I watched them from the corner of my eye. Bren had been trying to pull a flame for the better part of ten minutes and the most he had managed was a spark that died before it finished being born. The girl beside him, whose name I always seemed to forget, was weeping quietly because her water bowl had not so much as rippled. They were working one element at a time, the way the instructor had told us to.

Simple, slow and careful.

But that wasn't me.

I had already done fire.

I had already done water.

They were sitting in my palms, both of them at once, and something inside me understood without being told what they wanted to become together.

I brought my hands toward each other slowly. The flame touched the water and I felt the reaction before I saw it. There was a loud hiss. Then a bloom of white that rose toward the ceiling in a soft, rolling column. Steam.

Clean, as it was real and most especially , it was mine.

The room went quiet.

Then my grandmother stood up.

She crossed the floor in long, unhurried strides and when she reached me, she did not speak right away. She looked at what my hands had made, the last wisps of it still curling in the air between us, and then she looked at my face. Something in her expression shifted.

My young self had half expected surprise. But she was not surprised. Not even a little bit. This looked more like satisfaction. The particular satisfaction of a woman who had already placed her bet and was watching the horse come in.

She pulled me into her arms without warning.

She smelled like rose water, cedar and something older underneath, something that lived in the wood of our house. I pressed my face against the stiff fabric of her dress and felt her hand cup the back of my head.

"You," she said, "are going to be a great Blossom woman."

I pulled back enough to look up at her. "Really?"

She nodded. Not the perfunctory nod of someone being kind. This was a slow, deliberate nod of someone stating fact.

"Of course," she said. "The Blossom women have always run things. And when you grow up, you will be one of those women."

I turned to look at the wall behind the instructor's chair. It was lined with portraits, the way all the important walls in Primrose were lined with portraits, a long row of faces looking down at the room with the particular gravity of people who had been painted at their best. Supremes. All of them Supremes, going back generations, the gold plaques beneath each frame catching the light.

Thing was... They were all men.

Every one. Going back as far as I could see. And there at the end, the most recent, the largest frame, hung my father's face.

I stared at it for a long moment.

My grandmother followed my sight. I felt the slight shift in her posture before she spoke.

"Ah," she said.

That single sound held a whole conversation in it.

"Primrose hasn't had a female Supreme," I said.

"No," she agreed. "It hasn't. Yet."

I kept looking at my father's portrait. He was painted in formal robes with his chin lifted and his expression arranged into something meant to communicate certainty. He looked like a man who had never doubted himself for a single day of his life.

"But it could be you," my grandmother said. Her voice was quiet and absolutely certain. "I know it can be you."

I looked back at her. "Why? I'm sure there are better witches and there will be better witches."

"Because you are filial," she said. "Filial to your family. Filial to your house and your coven." She reached out and tucked a strand of hair back from my face. "And you have impressive mana for a child your age. Those two things together." She paused. "That is what makes a Supreme. Not just power. The willingness to use it for something larger than yourself." Her eyes held mine. "As long as you never change. As long as you are always willing to do what is necessary for your family, for the Blossom house, for this coven. That devotion, Madeline, that is the thing that will make you great."

I thought about the steam still fading in the air above us. I thought about the way it had felt, bringing those two forces together, the way everything in me had understood instinctively what they wanted to become.

I smiled.

And I hugged her back.

I woke up crying.

Not the soft kind. The kind that was already halfway through before I was fully conscious, the kind that came from somewhere deep and animal and had nothing to do with choice. My chest was heaving and my face was wet and for a moment I did not know where I was or why the memory had broken the way it did, tender and bright at the edges before it just went poof.

Then I felt the ropes.

They bit into my forearms, rough and tight, wound in overlapping coils that dug into the skin every time I breathed. My wrists were bound behind me, the angle awkward and aching. I was sitting upright in a chair and when I tried to move, the chair did not shift. It was fixed to something beneath me.

The room was dark.

Not dim. This was pitch black. Maybe even worse. Because my eyes kept reaching for something to settle on and yet it found nothing. I waited, letting my vision adjust, blinking slowly against the blackness.

Rocky walls. That was the first thing I noticed. Then a ceiling I could barely make out, high and uneven. Even that looked like more rock. The floor beneath the chair legs was stone. The air was cold and tasted like soil, deep and old and untouched by any window.

Cobwebs hung thick in every direction I could half-see, dense ropes of them curtaining the walls, draping from the ceiling in long grey sheets. Not the light abandoned cobwebs of empty rooms. The heavy kind. The kind that meant nothing living had moved through here in a very long time.

It felt like a cave. It smelled like the underneath of the earth.

I pulled a breath in through my nose and tried to think.

Fire. I needed light. A small flame, just enough to see by, nothing complicated. I pulled toward that part of myself where my mana lived, the steady reservoir I had been filling since I was eight years old standing barefoot on that chalked circle.

It ignited.

And then my entire body ignited with it.

The pain hit me from the inside out, searing through every nerve from my hands to my spine to the back of my skull, and the scream that tore out of me was not something I chose to make.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!"

Chapter 327: As above, so below 2

MADLINE

It was just there, huge and ragged, carrying across the dark space and coming back to me from the stone walls in fragments.

I clenched my teeth as it faded and sat there shaking, the mana collapsed back into nothing, leaving me hollow and scorched.

"Cian!"

My voice broke on his name.

"Cian! Where are you?"

I had nothing. Only the echo of my own voice and then silence.

"This is not what we agreed to!" I heard the way my own voice sounded, high and cracking, and I hated it. "Cian!"

Still, there was no answer.

I tried again with the ropes. Not fire this time. Something simpler, just a pull of force to loosen the knots, the kind of basic working I had done a thousand times without thinking. The magic moved toward my hands and something inside me opened, sharp and deep, like a blade finding the inside of a wound that had no outside. There was no visible cut. There was no blood. There was just the feeling of being opened from the inside, and I bit down on my lower lip hard enough to taste metal and screamed through my nose until it passed.

I sat very still.

What was fucking happening—

Oh... was this the pact?

I had made it with my own hands and my own blood and my own words. I had made it carefully. I had made it to mean something, to prove something, and now every time I reached for my power the binding read it as aggression against Cain somehow. It was reading the ropes, reading my captivity, reading the intent to free myself, and somewhere in its logic it was finding that that put Cian in danger.

It had been a stupid thing to do.

I knew that now in a way I had not let myself know before. I had built that pact on the assumption, the deep animal assumption, that Cian would never do this. That there was a floor beneath us. That even at our worst, we would not arrive here.

I put that thought down before it could become something I could not carry.

Think, I find myself. Think clearly.

The ropes were the problem. The ropes were the trigger. If the pact believed my magic was moving against Cian and the ropes were the obstacle between me and that, then I needed to convince the pact the ropes were nothing more than ropes. A nuisance. Not a weapon somehow being removed from the field. It had to be sold to the divine that I just wanted the ropes off.

I organized that thought carefully. I placed it at the front of my mind like a sign over a door. The ropes are biting into my arms. I want them off because they hurt. Only that. Only the comfort of it.

I gathered myself. Kept my intent small, specific and deliberately dull. Then I opened my mouth and chose a rhyme spell, simple and rhythmic, the verbal kind we learned young because the repetition was grounding, because the words could carry the intention cleanly without the dangerous compression of pure thought-cast.

The first line came out steady.

"Rope that tightens, rope that binds,"

The second.

"Hear my will and change your mind."

I took a short breath. Nothing violent was happening. That was a good sign.

"Loosen fiber, slacken thread," I had barely made it halfway through the third when the cough came without warning.

It came fast.

Too fast.

The taste hit first, thick and metallic, flooding the back of my tongue before I understood what was happening. Then it forced its way up and out of me, hot and heavy. I folded forward in the chair, the ropes cutting deeper as my body jerked, and it spilled from my mouth in a wet rush.

It didn't stop.

It kept coming, choking, dragging something deeper with it. I spat, but it clung, stringing from my lips to the floor in dark strands that looked too thick, too wrong, as if it didn't belong inside me at all.

My hands shook.

No, not shook, they tremored, sharp and uneven, like something was knocking against my bones from the inside, trying to get out.

The magic I'd gathered didn't just fade, it broke apart, scattered in jagged pieces I could still feel scraping along my nerves.

The ringing in my ears swelled.

It swallowed everything else until it felt like the sound was inside my skull, not my ears, like something had burrowed in and was screaming where no one else could hear it.

I tried to breathe.

The air stuttered halfway down my throat and came back up wrong, wet, dragging another mouthful with it.

More blood hit the floor, darker this time, thicker, and for a second I thought I saw it move, a slow, creeping shift like it was reaching for something.

The ropes tightened.

I hadn't moved.

They dug into my skin anyway, fibers twisting and biting deeper as if they were reacting, as if they could feel what I had tried to do and were punishing me for it.

"No," I said.

My eyes moved upward without quite meaning to.

Because what the fuck was happening? That didn't feel like no damn pact retaliating.

This was far more sinister.

The ceiling stretched above me, rocky and uneven. It dipped low at the edges and rose higher toward the center.

That was where I saw them.

Runes.

Carved so precisely they almost disappeared into the grain of the stone. There were dozens, maybe more, layered over one another in a tight, overlapping web. They spread across the entire ceiling, and I knew without looking that they probably covered some of the walls too, the floor, and maybe even the air itself.

Warding runes.

The old kind. The kind that did not just suppress magic but devoured it, that reached inside a working and unmade it from the root and sent the backlash straight back into the caster's body.

These looked like strong ones. If anything, I felt them. They were powerfully made, carefully layered, by someone who knew exactly what they were doing and had taken their time doing it.

The ropes were almost secondary.

I had not needed to be tied to a chair. The runes were the real prison. The ropes were just so I did not wander.

The realization settled over me cold and complete.

It felt like Cian had planned this. Not on the walk here, not in a moment of anger or panic. He had found this place or made this place, carved or commissioned those runes, bound me here, and left. He had done it before he ever stood in that room with me and asked me to prove myself.

Before I had bled for him and spoken those words and felt the pact close around us both like a hand.

I felt betrayed. The worst I had ever felt.

I opened my mouth.

"Cian." My voice came out lower this time, steadier than I expected. "You can't do this to me."

The space said nothing.

"My family needs me." The words landed in the dark and dissolved. "Cian, please."

Still nothing.

The cobwebs moved in a draft that came from somewhere I could not identify, slow and unhurried, like they had been moving that same way for years.

"Ciaaaannnnn!"

His name tore out of me and filled every inch of that stone space and bounced back from every wall, smaller and smaller until it was just a whisper, and then nothing at all.

"Please, Aldric will destroy us. Please!"

Chapter 328: Sis, Manifest 1

HAZEL

"Fuck you," I said.

And then I sat down.

The gasp that followed was almost musical. Three separate sounds, three separate mouths, hitting the air at nearly the same pitch. One of the girls pressed her fingers to her lips. Another stared at me like I had just set the tablecloth on fire.

"Haven't you been told the rules?" the composed one said.

She said it like she couldn't believe it. Like I had just walked into a cathedral and urinated on the altar.

I froze.

Not because I was afraid. More because the weight of what I had just done landed slowly, the way cold water did when it seeped through a shoe. Gradual and then all at once.

The boy laughed. He started laughing and couldn't seem to stop, leaning back in his chair like the whole morning had paid off in this one moment.

"You broke two rules, too," he said, when he'd gathered himself enough to speak. "Two." He held up two fingers and looked delighted by them. "Imagine what I could do to you if I was a cruel bastard."

He paused as he looked at me. Then he smiled with his teeth.

"You know what. I want to be a cruel bastard." He tipped his chin toward me. "Apologize. Or you might suffer some more. And trust me when I tell you my father doesn't like wild beasts he cannot tame. Even if he is very obsessed with that very taming. Every part of that taming."

The table was very quiet.

My pride sat in my chest like a stone. Heavy and hot and certain of itself. It told me not to move my mouth. It told me that the words he wanted from me were worth more than whatever consequence waited on the other side.

But I was not an idiot.

"I apologize," I said.

He burst out laughing again. A real laugh this time, not the controlled one from before. Unguarded and bright. The girls looked at each other with the particular discomfort of people who have learned that the safest response to their brother was no response at all.

"I'll let it slide," he said finally, wiping the corner of his eye with his knuckle. "But don't worry about me. I'm not all about stupid rules the way my father is. Or my dear brother. Your husband-to-be." He picked up his phone from the table and glanced at it. "Speaking of which. The devil will be here in twenty seconds. Where the hell are those Omegas? Do they have a death wish or something?"

Then I heard loud clinking footsteps which made me turn toward the door before I could stop myself.

Lysander walked in at exactly that moment. Nineteen seconds. Maybe twenty.

He came through the threshold the way he seemed to exist in every space, like he was aware of every surface in the room and where he stood relative to each of them.

He was dressed like he was going for a board meeting, instead of breakfast.

His shirt was crisp white, the kind that held its shape without a single crease, cuffed neatly at the wrists with understated silver links that caught the light when he moved. A charcoal waistcoat fit him perfectly, tailored close to his torso as though it had been measured against his skin. The trousers were pressed sharp enough to cut, the line down the front precise and deliberate. Even his shoes were polished to a quiet shine, dark leather reflecting the morning sun that slipped in through the windows.

There was not a single thing accidental about him.

His hair was combed back with intention. With not a strand out of place. His watch rested heavy and expensive against his wrist, more statement than necessity at this hour. A faint trace of cologne followed him, clean and controlled, something chosen carefully rather than grabbed in haste.

For breakfast?

It felt excessive. Performative.

As if he were not simply coming to eat, but to be seen eating. As if the table were another stage and we were the audience whether we agreed to be or not. Even the way he adjusted his cuff before stepping fully into the room carried a quiet declaration. He was prepared. Composed. Impeccable.

Too impeccable for what could as well come out and be coffee and toast.

His eyes found me.

I felt them. And then I looked away.

It was quick. Automatic. It felt a lot like pulling your hand back from something hot before your brain had finished telling you it was hot. And the second I did it, I felt disgusted with myself. Like I had performed a trick I hadn't been taught yet and some part of me had already learned it on its own without my permission.

I felt like a dog sitting before it is told to sit.

I stared at the surface of the table.

Lysander moved toward one of his sisters. The chair nearest to her pulled back slightly and then stopped.

He took a long pause.

Long enough that I noticed it without looking.

Then he turned to my direction and that followed with the sound of a chair pulling out beside me.

He sat down next to me.

His brother made a sound low in his throat. "Ohhh," he said, dragging it out like he was tasting it. "Lovebirds."

Lysander's hands were on the table. I could see them from my peripheral. They closed slowly. Fingers pulling inward. Controlled.

"Shut up, Sofiane," he said. Quiet, as it was even and utterly cold.

Sofiane said, "Sorry," without meaning a syllable of it.

That was when the door opened again.

I didn't need anyone to tell me. I felt it before I saw it. Because there was an immediate shift in the room. Like the temperature dropped a single degree and everyone registered it in their spine at the same moment.

Everyone straightened.

It was almost invisible, the way it happened. No one announced it. No one gestured. They just did it. Their backs found the backs of chairs and their chins leveled quick. The terse conversation was gone. Even the breathing in the room seemed to become more deliberate.

And then Alpha Wenzel came in.

I looked at Sofiane from the corner of my eye. He had straightened too. His spine was flat against the chair, shoulders squared, the easy careless posture gone. Just for a moment. And then, slowly, deliberately, he let himself slouch again. His shoulders dropped. One elbow returning to the armrest. Like he was correcting the correction. Like the pull to sit up straight was still there in his muscles and he hated that it was.

I filed that away carefully and said nothing. A black sheep with something to prove was an important piece to have.

Chapter 329: Sis, manifest 2

HAZEL

Wenzel took his seat at the head of the table.

He looked at me.

I kept my eyes down. I was still working out whether that was the right call. The conversation at the gallery had been almost normal. He had spoken to me like a person speaking to another person, no theater to it. So maybe eye contact was permitted here. Maybe it was expected. But after the Sofiane situation, I needed to be safe.

I stayed down and waited.

"How was your night, Hazel?" he asked.

His voice was the same as it had been before. Pleasant and measured and giving nothing.

But I knew better.

"It was fine," I said.

"Laslo says he has to punish you."

I let a beat pass before I answered. "I wasn't privy to how firm the rules were. I'm getting better now."

"Well," he said. "That is good to hear." There was a pause, and then he continued right where he stopped: "You and Lysander can talk to your heart's full today. I allow it."

I allow it? Allow it?

The two words sitting inside that sentence like a fist inside a glove. He allowed it. He allowed a conversation. He allowed the air I breathed and the chair I sat in and probably the particular shade of blue I had chosen this morning without realizing I had chosen it for a reason.

I thought of the dress. I thought of Delta's face when I'd told her to find me something with innocence in it. I thought about how deliberate that had been.

All of it seemed suddenly useless in this stifling environment.

"Father—" Lysander tried to say, only to be cut off by his father with the raise of his hand.

The man didn't want to hear it.

Wenzel turned away to look down the table.

"The food isn't here," he said.

His voice hadn't changed. That was the thing. The temperature of it was identical to how he had asked me about my night.

"This streak hasn't broken in ten years," he went on. "The fact that we have a guest of honor here. And they choose to disappoint at this particular moment." He let that word sit. "Unforgivable."

The side door opened then and two Omegas came through with the speed of people who already knew they were too late. They stopped when they saw him. One of them went to her knees. The tray in her hands rattled but she held it.

"The dish was complex," she said. Her voice shook. "We wanted the guest to feel at home. We did not mean disrespect. We didn't mean—"

Wenzel snapped his fingers once.

Her mouth closed. Her whole body was shaking. But she still kept her lips sealed tight. The girl still standing behind her had gone the color of dry clay.

Wenzel stood.

He moved the way I had noticed he always seemed to move. Without urgency. Like the room rearranged itself to accommodate him rather than him navigating around it.

"There is a reason for these rules," he said. He picked up one of the small cutlery knives from the table as he passed. "They are there to guide this pack. To keep it from falling into despair. When a rule is broken, it shows the weak links." He looked at the knife for a moment, turning it slightly. "And the best thing to do is cut your losses."

He turned to look at me and that look me off guard. Underneath the table, I fondled with my hands.

Why was he looking at me, I wondered. What the fuck did he want?

"What do you think?" he asked. "What punishment would you say is deserving of them?"

I looked at him.

Not quickly this time. Not the practiced avoidance I had been running all morning. I let my eyes meet his and I stayed there.

He was watching me with something close to amusement.

That was when the rules again registered in my mind and I quickly averted my gaze.

This, of course, only earned a chuckle from him.

"It is okay," he said softly. "You can look."

I considered the question. I considered it the way I would consider anything that could go wrong if I rushed it.

He had told me himself, that night at the gallery. He did not believe in waste.

"They are still integral to this pack," I said. "This mistake has not happened in ten years. That matters. Punishment should be tendered in equal measure to that." I paused. "They should carry a reminder. Something that stays with them for days... maybe weeks."

He was still watching me. Like he was actually going to follow through with what I was going to say and not make this a lesson.

This was meant to mock me. That had to be it. It was what I would do with power like that. It was what anyone would do with power like that.

"Omegas have pathetic healing factors. Wounds and cuts are slow to heal. Bone restoration is even slower." I kept my voice level. "I believe both of them should lose their left thumb. They can still work. But they won't forget."

Wenzel smiled.

It was a full thing. Not the careful version I had seen before. He looked genuinely pleased.

I wondered if that was a red herring of sort. You never knew with these people.

"I like that idea," he said.

He turned back to the kneeling girl. He took her hand. She did not pull it away. She laid it against the push tray surface herself, fingers spread, like she had already decided this was the end of the argument and the only thing left was to let it happen.

Then he brought the knife down hard.

The sound was immediate. So was the screaming.

Around the table, people flinched. Lysander went very still beside me. Sofiane looked at the ceiling. The girls turned away or stared at their empty plates or pressed their hands flat to the tablecloth.

I watched.

And something in my chest settled. Quiet and warm and entirely certain of itself.

He had taken my advice. Mine. He had looked at me across the dining table and asked me what I thought and then he had done it.

The useless former ideas in my head immediately died. Sofiane and his beautiful rebellion. Sofiane, his slouching resistance and his useful resentment. All of it could wait. All of it was just noise.

There was one person in this building whose attention was worth having. One person whose regard could mean anything in a place like this. One person who sat at the head of the table and decided what was cut and what was kept.

I needed his eyes on me.

I was going to make sure they stayed there.

That was the smart thing to do.

ALDRIC

The spoon slipped.

I did not drop things. I was not the kind of man who dropped things. And yet there it was, catching the edge of my plate with a sharp little ring that cut right through the room and brought every pair of eyes to me at once. I felt them. Every single one.

I picked it up. I adjusted it in my hand. I let the silence close back over it like water over a stone.

What the fuck was going on. I looked back at Cian and he was talking again. Like everything was fucking fine.

"Oh," I said breaking his small talk. I still needed a second. So I used the word to buy it. "Really. It is surprising to hear. I'll be honest."

Cian looked at me with the same unhurried ease he had worn all through breakfast. Nothing tight in his jaw. Nothing guarded behind his eyes. Just a man eating his eggs and delivering information the way you might read out a weather report.

"Like I said, Uncle. It was this morning. Very early." He reached for his juice, turned the glass slowly before lifting it. "I was surprised myself. But I think it was time."

I made a sound that I hoped passed for agreement and looked back down at my plate.

It didn't make sense. That was the thing sitting in the center of my chest, taking up too much space. Madeline could not disappear quietly. She was not built for quiet exits. I had made and unmade that girl long enough to know the shape of her, the way she clung to things she wanted and pushed at the edges of situations she found herself. She would not have packed a bag before breakfast and slipped out without a word. She didn't have that kind of fucking freedom.

Unless something had changed.

But I had my girl in a cage so sealed, it would be impossible to get out. Why the heck would that have changed? How?

I realized I was eating faster and made myself slow down. I set the spoon against the bowl with deliberate care and reached for my brioche instead, tearing a small piece along the seam. The bread was warm still. I did not taste it.

Something had happened. Something had moved her out of this house before the rest of us had finished sleeping, and no one at this table seemed particularly troubled by it

except for me. I looked around once, casually, the way a man might scan a room out of mild interest. Elara had her eyes on her plate. Morrigan was refilling her cup. Fia was staring at the empty chair across from her like she was working something out.

And Cian.

Cian was eating.

I kept my eyes trained at him and said, measured, "You seem to be the only one to have known."

He glanced up. "Hmm?"

"That she was leaving. You seem to be the only one who knew."

"Because she told me," he said, simply. "And I saw her leave."

There was nothing wrong with the answer. The answer was perfectly reasonable. And yet something in the way he said it, the absence of any friction in it, made the back of my neck feel warm.

"Uncle... You seem..." He stopped and he paused, as if trying to find the question he actually wanted to ask. "Is something wrong?"

I blinked. "No!"

But then I heard how I sounded. I adjusted in my seat slightly and let my expression reset into something more neutral, more composed, more like the version of me that sat at the head of this table and was supposed to be without concern.

"Nothing," I reassured. "I just." I set the brioche down and folded my hands around my glass. "I'm a bit close to the girl. You know how it is. I'm surprised she didn't bid me farewell."

That did it.

Cian's eyes came up properly this time. Not the casual glance he had been offering the rest of the table all morning. A real look. And at the same time, from my left, my daughter Elara turned to look at me too. The timing was almost funny. Almost.

"Really?" they both said.

Elara's voice had a soft note in it. Cian's had something else. I could not name it immediately and that bothered me.

I looked at my daughter first. I held the look a beat longer than I intended and whatever she saw in it made her drop her eyes back to her plate without pressing further. Good.

"Of course," I said, keeping my voice mild. "After everything it took to get her here. After all the arrangements. We spent time together. I thought we understood each other well enough that she might at least say goodbye. It would have been the proper thing to do."

I turned to Elara then, deliberate, because the question needed to look like nothing more than passing curiosity. "Did she tell you goodbye?"

Elara shook her head lightly. "No. But I don't blame her." She reached for her water. "She's clearly going through something. I'd like to think our friendship runs deep enough that she knows I'll reach out. I'm not worried."

I nodded. I kept nodding for a second longer than necessary and stopped.

Then Morrigan spoke.

"I might have had something to do with it."

The table went quiet in a different way. Not the polite, careful quiet from before. Something more attentive than that. I turned toward her.

Cian looked the most surprised I had seen him all morning. "What?"

Morrigan set her cup down. She had the look of a woman about to say something she had already made peace with. "Yesterday. I talked to her. I said some things." She paused, glanced at Fia with something apologetic in her eyes. "Everyone knows the history. Her history with Cian. I didn't want her presence here to keep unravelling things that are only just beginning. New starts don't do well when the past keeps walking through the front door. It breeds resentment. For both people involved."

She folded her hands on the table.

"What happened to her was real, depressing and sad. I told her I was grateful for what she had given up. I offered her compensation. Significant compensation. She refused it. She has always been stubborn, that one." There was a small pause then. "I didn't think I'd gotten through to her at all, honestly. But maybe I did."

I sat very still.

She was saying that she had spoken to Madeline and Madeline had left. She was saying it cleanly and without hesitation, the way people say things they believe completely. And every person at this table was nodding along in quiet agreement, as if this explained everything, as if this tied the whole thing up into something that made sense.

But my piece did not move without permission. That was not how this worked. That had never been how this worked.

I reached for my phone before I knew I was doing it. I had it off the table and in my hand, already unlocking it.

From across the table, Ronan made a sound. A short, sharp half-cough, the kind that meant nothing and everything at the same time. I felt his eyes. I did not look at him. But I felt them.

That told me enough and I proceeded to I put the phone down.

I picked up my spoon again.

Something was very wrong. I could feel it the way you felt a change in pressure before a storm, not in any one thing, but in the accumulation of small things. The timing. The ease. The way no one seemed to find any of this strange. The way Cian had eaten his way through the whole announcement as if he had rehearsed being calm about it.

"Well," I said.

Everyone looked at me.

"If that's the case." I reached for my glass. "I wish her the best."

"Right," said Cian. And he went back to eating.

I did not look at him again. I focused on my plate and finished what was on it, chewing slowly and carefully, because the last thing I was going to do was give anyone at this table the impression that I was anything other than entirely fine. I talked when it was required of me. I laughed once, briefly, at something Morrigan said. I refilled my own water.

But I was counting the minutes.

Cian set his napkin down first. He stood, picked up his phone from beside his plate, and glanced once in Ronan's direction. Something passed between them that I couldn't read. Then he looked around the table with that easy, morning warmth he wore so well.

"If you'll excuse me. I have some business to see to."

He left through the main doors. I listened to his footsteps until they disappeared.

Then I stood. Unhurried. I placed my napkin on the table with the same deliberate calm I always did. I offered Elara a small nod and touched Morrigan briefly on the shoulder as I passed.

I walked out of the dining room.

I turned the corner.

Only then did I dial Madeline.

It rang four times. Then five.

After that, the flat disinterested recording of her voicemail came through. Telling me she wasn't available and to please leave a message.

I pulled the phone from my ear. Looked at it and put it back.

"Pick up the phone," I said. My voice came out very quiet. That was intentional. Quiet was more honest than loud, in moments like this, I could not appear desperate and weak. "Pick it up right now. Or I swear to you. I will ruin you. I will ruin everything attached to you. You know I mean that."

I ended the call.

I stood in the corridor with my phone at my side and the morning light coming in at the wrong angle through the window at the end of the hall, and I made myself breathe evenly.

Something had gone wrong. Something had been moved that I had not moved myself.

And whoever had done it had done it well enough that I was standing alone in a hallway with a dead call and no clean way to ask the question that mattered most without showing exactly how much I needed the answer.

I put the phone in my pocket.

I walked back toward my room.

I need a safe space to reach out to Valentine and give him a fucking piece of my mind.