

# To ruin an Omega

*Chapter 346: Salvation*

## **GABRIEL**

Hunger was a living thing.

It crawled through my stomach like an animal with claws. It scraped at my insides and twisted my gut into knots that never loosened. Every breath I took felt hollow. Every movement required effort I didn't have. My body had started eating itself weeks ago. No... More like months. Years even. I had lost track of time down here.

The floor was cold against my cheek.

I lay there and stared at the bars across from me. They glowed faintly in the darkness. I wondered if it was a mirage or maybe it was the fucking pure wolfsbane that was infused into the damn metal.

It was a constant reminder that even if I had the strength to break free, I wouldn't make it past the threshold.

My brother was meticulous like that.

He fed me just enough to keep me breathing. Never more. A bowl of thin broth. A piece of stale bread. Water that tasted like rust. And a few times I something actually decent. Just enough so my heart wouldn't stop. Just enough so I couldn't die.

I didn't understand it at first. Why keep me alive? What was the point? If he wanted me dead, he could have killed me a hundred times over by now. A knife. Poison. A wolfsbane infused bullet to the head. It would have been easy.

But he didn't.

He kept me here. In this cage. In this space. And he fed me scraps like I was some kind of pet he couldn't quite bring himself to put down.

I had thought about it. The easy way out. Plenty of times. There were ways. I could refuse the food. Let my body shut down eventually. Or I could find something sharp. A loose stone. A piece of metal by forcing the bars open and burning myself with wolfsbane before I ended it myself by calling into the torn bar.

It was supposed to inconvenience him. Before he had the chance to use me for whatever twisted plan he had brewing.

But every time I got close to doing it, I stopped.

Because Aldric hadn't put any safeguards in place. No runes to stop me from hurting myself. No chains to keep me from reaching my own throat. Nothing.

It felt deliberate. Like he was daring me. Like he wanted me to know that he didn't care if I lived or died. That the choice was mine. That he had already won and my survival or death was just a footnote in whatever game he was playing.

So I stayed alive.

Out of spite. Out of stubbornness. Out of some stupid, flickering hope that someone would come. That Gabriel Donlon wouldn't die in a cage like a dog.

The hunger made everything sharper. My senses had adjusted over time. Over time, I could now hear things I never noticed before. The servants moving upstairs. Their footsteps light and quick as they went about their duties. I could hear water somewhere. A faint drip that echoed through the walls. It grounded me. Gave me something to focus on when the hunger got too loud.

I lay there and listened.

Footsteps above. The creak of floorboards. A door closing somewhere far away.

Then something new.

A hum.

I frowned and shifted slightly. My body protested. My muscles were weak and my joints ached. But I pushed myself up onto my elbows and tilted my head.

The hum came again. Low and vibrating. It wasn't mechanical. It didn't sound like anything I had heard before. It felt wrong. Unnatural and inhuman.

Then the screaming started.

My heart lurched. I sat up fully. My hands pressed against the cold stone as I steadied myself.

The screams were distant. Muffled. But there were a lot of them. Voices overlapping with panic and even more terrifying scream.

The hum rang out again. Louder this time.

Then more screams followed.

Footsteps thundered overhead. Now people were running and they were fast. But too many to count.

What the hell was happening?

I strained to hear more. My ears picked up fragments. Shouts. Orders being barked. Someone sobbing. Someone else yelling about the perimeter.

Then the footsteps started getting closer.

Not the chaotic ones above. These were deliberate. Purposeful. Coming down the stairs and... heading toward me.

I tensed. My heart pounded in my chest and my hands curled into fists even though I knew it was pointless. I had no strength. No weapons. If someone was coming to kill me, there wasn't much I could do about it.

Was it Aldric?

Was something happening?

The scent hit me before I saw anyone.

Blood.

Fresh, metallic and fucking pungent.

I forced myself to my feet. My legs shook and my vision blurred for a second. But I stayed upright. I moved back until my shoulders hit the far wall of the cage. My eyes locked on the door.

The footsteps stopped just outside.

Then I heard the lock.

Someone was fumbling with it. The sound was clumsy and rushed. Nothing like the smooth, practiced motion of my little brother who had done it a hundred times.

The scent grew stronger. The blood. But it wasn't just any blood. I could make what what blood it was. Omega blood. Sentinel blood. Mixed together. Killings had definitely happened up there.

Whoever was out there, whoever this was, they had cut through people to get here.

I heard a voice then. I made it out to be male and a young one too.

"Why don't we just blast it open?" A different voice asked.

Another voice answered in irritation.

"Because there's a rune that will hurt us like crazy if we do. It's why I told you to bind my magic in the first place."

The lock clicked.

The door opened slowly then. A crack at first. Then wider.

A face peeked in.

Then another.

The first was a boy. Blonde. Maybe seventeen or eighteen. His face was streaked with blood. His clothes were soaked in it. He looked like he had walked through a massacre.

He stepped inside and his eyes swept the room. When they landed on me, they widened.

"Fucking hell. It's actually a person."

I stared at him. My throat was dry and my voice came out rough.

"Who the hell are you people?"

The boy stepped closer. His eyes traveled over me. Over the cage. Over the bars.

"You're a Donlon," he said. His voice was quieter now. Almost awed. "I know you from the pictures. Gabriel. Alpha Gabriel."

He paused and shook his head as if he stated to realize a lot of things.

"Hekate. You're here. You've been here all this time."

I felt something twist in my chest. Recognition first. Hope second. Confusion came last.

The boy was a warlock. I could feel it now. The faint hum of magic around him. Bound but still there.

"Are you a friend or a foe?" I asked.

He raised his hand. His palm facing me in a gesture that was meant to be reassuring.

"I can be a friend," he said. "My name is Wilhelm. I'm the son of Valentine Blossom."

Valentine Blossom.

I knew the name. I knew the Supreme too. He was a powerful and influential man. Father to the girl that Cian was interested in. If his son was here, then this wasn't random.

I nodded slowly.

Wilhelm moved closer to the cage. His eyes stayed on mine.

"We want to take down the monster who trapped you here," he said. "Aldric. And you're integral to taking him down."

He tilted his head.

"What do you say?"

I stayed where I was. My hands still curled into fists.

"Do you have clean clothes?"

Wilhelm blinked. His expression shifted to confusion.

"What?"

"Clean clothes," I repeated. "Do you have them?"

He stared at me like I had lost my mind. Maybe I had. But I needed to be safe. I needed to hide what I had on me now. The warlock wouldn't understand. He couldn't.

Wilhelm turned toward the door. Toward someone standing just outside. Hidden in the shadows.

"Get clean clothes from one of the rooms."

A voice answered from the hallway.

"Okay."

Wilhelm turned back to me.

"Yes. We do."

I took a breath. My chest hurt. My stomach twisted. But I met his eyes and nodded.

"Then get me out of this cage."

I paused. My voice dropped lower. Colder.

"That fucker needs to die."

*Chapter 347: For your consideration*

## **HAZEL**

New Omega maids came in.

They moved quickly and even more professionally. Like nothing had happened at all. Like there wasn't blood still on the floor near the door, like the screaming hadn't stopped echoing in my ears just seconds ago.

They served the food without looking at any of us. Plates came down in front of me. Something with roasted vegetables and meat I didn't recognize. The smell was good though. It was rich, savory and entirely at odds with what had just occurred.

I picked up my fork.

Around the table, everyone else did the same.

We ate.

The silence was complete. Not the comfortable kind where people were simply focused on their meal. This was the kind that pressed down on your chest. The kind that made you aware of every small sound. The scrape of a knife. The soft clink of a glass being set down. Someone's breathing, slightly too fast.

I looked up.

Just a glance. Just enough to take in the table without seeming like I was studying them.

They all looked fine.

Composed and I could even add calm. Perhaps this was just another Tuesday morning and nothing unusual had occurred. Forks moved to mouths. Food was chewed. Swallowed. The rhythm of it was almost mechanical.

But it was a lie. A lie that they throw half to keep sewed in.

If I was being frank, only Lysander seemed truly unbothered.

His posture was perfect. His expression neutral. He ate the way someone might complete paperwork.

I went back to my own plate.

That did make me feel like something wasn't adding up. This had to be a regular thing. Wenzel didn't get that kind of obedience, that kind of immediate compliance, without repetition. Without history. These people had seen this before. They had lived through versions of this before.

So why had they flinched?

Why had the girls turned away? Why had Sofiane looked at the ceiling like he couldn't bear to watch?

If this was normal, if this was routine, then the shock should have worn off by now. They should have been as detached as Lysander. As unbothered as their father.

But they weren't.

I cut into the meat on my plate. It was tender. Cooked perfectly.

When I looked up again, Alpha Warren had finished his meal.

He stood. The movement was unhurried. He dabbed at his mouth with his napkin, folded it, set it down beside his plate.

"I'll leave you kids to your devices," he said.

His voice was pleasant. Light, even. It was so odd seeing him act like he was a normal father excusing himself from a normal family breakfast.

He turned to Lysander. "Remember. Spend time with the Lady."

Lysander nodded once. "Of course, Father."

Wenzel started toward the door.

Then he stopped. Right beside Sofiane's chair.

I watched without lifting my head. Just my eyes. Just enough to see.

"The least you should be able to do," Wenzel said quietly, "is know how to use your cutlery right."

Sofiane didn't move. He didn't look up either. His hand simply tightened around his fork.

"You never stop disappointing me," Wenzel finished.

Then he walked out.

The door closed behind him.

For a moment, nothing changed. We were still sitting there. Still silent. Still eating or pretending to eat.

Then the air came back.

I felt it. The way the pressure in the room shifted. The way shoulders dropped just slightly. The way someone let out a breath they had been holding too long.

One of the girls started crying.

Not loud. She knew better. All she let out were soft, broken sounds that she tried to muffle with her hand.

Another of the girls reached over immediately. Put an arm around her shoulders and leaned in close.

"I'm so tired of being afraid," the crying girl whispered. Her voice shook. "I just want to leave this place."

The girl comforting her murmured something too low for me to hear.

Then her eyes lifted.

They found me.

I watched them darken. I watched something cold and sharp move across her face.

"The rumors about you were true after all," she said.

I set down my fork. "What rumors?"

"I saw your eyes," she said. Her voice was steady now. Harder. "When my father demanded how they be punished. Glee. You looked pleased."

"You're sick," she added.

I frowned. "I only gave a response to what he asked me. I would have been punished if I didn't give him one."

"No." She shook her head. "That isn't the issue. We both know that isn't the issue."

She gestured toward Lysander without looking at him. "Lysander is our father's favorite. I see him when he bends the knee to our father and does something he doesn't enjoy. Everyone can see how he punishes himself afterward."

"That's enough," Lysander said.

His voice was quiet. Controlled.

His sister ignored him. "You know I'm not wrong. You must have seen it too. There's something seriously wrong with the girl."

She turned back to me. "It's no wonder she tried to take out her own sister. Kinslaying. Even her own pack sentinels aren't safe. How are we sure she won't—"

"Our guest deserves respect," Lysander cut in.

The sister stood. Her chair scraped back hard against the floor.

"Fuck Father," she said. Her voice was shaking now. "And fuck you for putting up with it because you don't want to end up like us. Like Sofiane."

She stormed out.

The other girls followed. One by one. Their chairs pushed back. Their footsteps quick and uneven.

I dropped my cutlery.

The sound was louder than I expected.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'll go for some air."

I stood.

Lysander stood as well.

"Food is a privilege," he said. His tone was even. Polite. "It's best you finish eating before you go for some air."

"I hate when you sound like that," Sofiane muttered.

He picked up his plate, stood up and immediately carried it toward the door.

When he reached it, he turned back and looked at me.

"If I were you," he said, "I would run before I cannot get out."

Then he left too.

Lysander sat back down.

He picked up his fork and started eating again like nothing had happened.

I stood still.

"Don't pretend their words hurt you," he said without looking up.

"They did," I said. "What makes you think I'm made of steel?"

He glanced at me then. Just briefly. "You don't have to put on the act with me, you know. I've dealt with your kind before. I would like to think I know you inside out."

I waited.

"You were going to run out," he continued. "Bursting into tears. Making it as dramatic as you can. Just so you can curry pity from someone." He cut into his food. "After all, bending to my father's whim will only earn you a sour reputation. Not that you had much to begin with. Better to be controversial and polarizing than a straight up bitch."

He took a bite, chewed, then swallowed.

"But don't waste your breath," he said. "The Omegas here will be kind regardless of what they truly think of you. The sentinels too. Your guardian. As long as you don't break the rules."

I pulled my chair back in and sat down.

"What an astute psychoanalysis," I said.

He didn't respond.

"You never made mention of the misogynistic rules though when you came to Silver Creek," I added.

"Regardless of them," he said, "you would have held my hand. You're a woman demoted to Omega. Reputation in tatters. No prospect of strong mates. You would have done it grumbling. But you would have done it." He paused. "I simply didn't want you whining in my ear. Like you're doing now."

I picked up my fork.

Looked at him.

Really looked at him.

"You think you're so above it," I said.

He didn't answer.

"You know this works both ways too," I continued. "You can see me. I can see you too."

I leaned forward slightly. "Let this monster tell you. It doesn't pay at all to be filial. Especially to a man like that."

His jaw tightened.

"I would know," I said.

"Really? You don't seem the type. Sorry if that sounds rude."

"My sister was filial. There was nothing she wouldn't do for her family and the people she loves. But at the end of the day, sometimes the well of water you give is purer than most would care to give back when you become in need."

I watched his face. Watched for the crack.

"She suffered relentlessly," I said. "Though perhaps if I hadn't made a callous impulsive move, you would have maybe eventually crossed paths with her and it would have been possible for a romance to fly."

His hand formed a fist.

"It would have been more epic," I went on. "She would never survive here no matter how much she was born to endure."

"Do not talk about Fia," Lysander said.

His voice was low. Tight.

"Why?" I asked. "She's my sister. And you know it's just wishful thinking."

I tilted my head. "What would have happened if the girl had come here? Would you be like this too? Cold and unfeeling? Loyal only to your father and his whims?"

He turned to me. "I am only cold and unfeeling because it is you."

I smiled.

My hand came up and reached for his face.

He caught my wrist before I could touch his lips.

"I never really noticed," I said softly. "But your lips look very soft."

"Not even if hell freezes over," he said.

I smiled wider. "Well, I don't think you're just cold and unfeeling because it's just me."

I leaned in closer. He didn't pull back.

"I think Fia would have suffered if fate connected her to you," I said. "You cannot be filial to two ideals. You can only be one with the dice life threw at you. A filial son or a great husband. Never both."

"Are you trying to get into my head?" he asked.

"It only feels that way because you know I'm right," I said. "It doesn't feel nice when the mirror is turned on you, does it?"

He didn't answer.

He dropped my hand and kept his eyes on it for a moment.

"You're wrong though," he said finally. "I can be both. But not for you. Never for you."

He looked up and met my eyes.

"So whatever new idea is burning into your mind, it won't happen. You won't be happy with me. I'll fulfill my duties if it gets to that. But that will be the end."

"I'm not used to not having what I want," I said. "You'll learn that quick."

He smiled. It was cold. "Are you insinuating that you will have me?"

I smiled back. "I could. But perhaps Sofiane would do. He pretends to be above it. But deep down, he wants your father's approval. And he might not admit it, or even realize it, but he despises that you have it. He'll do anything to chase that high. He might like your rejects."

I made eye contact with his forest green eyes.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"If Sofiane helps me out with your lewd fantasies," he said, "I would be happy. So knock yourself out."

I smiled in response. "Heat season is coming soon. Maybe I will."

I paused.

"Or maybe I'll have you both. I have done brothers. But at the same time, no."

*Chapter 348: Flip it*

## **CIAN**

With Valentine threatened to submission and with two new soul kisses in my pocket, I was prepared to go back down when I heard it.

The knock came first. Then the door opened before I could even turn around. Whoever it was didn't wait for permission. The handle turned and the hinges swung and someone stepped into my study like they had every right to be there.

My blood went cold for half a second. Then I moved.

I turned away from the bookshelf. Away from the spot where the wall had just been solid again. I crossed the room in three strides and grabbed the first book I could reach from the desk. Some leather-bound thing about old Skollrend records. I opened it and pretended to be absorbed in whatever was on the page.

Then I looked up.

Ronan stood in the doorway. His hand was still on the handle. His face was pale. His eyes were wide and there was something in them that made me almost mad.

Fear.

Real fear. The kind that didn't come from nothing.

"Is something the problem?" I asked.

It took everything to act calm. But I was getting better at it. Because no matter how I thought about it, I still couldn't reconcile it. Why my best mate would be a traitor like this.

Regardless, my voice came out steady. I closed the book halfway and held it against my chest like I had been reading it this whole time.

Ronan blinked. He opened his mouth. Closed it. Then he shook his head.

"I'm fine," he said.

He didn't look fine. Mostly because of me I would like to assume.

"Mostly," he added. "Actually."

I waited. I didn't say anything. I just watched him. Watched the way his throat worked when he swallowed. Watched the way his hands flexed at his sides like he didn't know what to do with them.

"Alpha Aldric does seem very disturbed about this Madeline situation," he said finally. "He called me even. He couldn't reach out to her."

I raised an eyebrow. "I never knew you and my uncle were close."

"I'm your Beta," Ronan said. His voice was firmer now. More certain. "Of course he'll talk to me if he feels you're being unreasonable."

I didn't react to that. I just kept looking at him.

He took a step into the room. Then another. He was closer now. Close enough that I could see the tension in his jaw. The way his shoulders were tight.

"I believe Aldric feels you maybe said something," Ronan continued. "Perhaps after your mother did. Something that might have really hurt her."

He stopped a few feet away from me. He looked at me. Really looked at me. Not like a Beta looking at his Alpha. He made it seem like a friend looking at someone he was worried about.

It was almost hilarious to see in real time.

"And being your friend," he said and it took all I had not to laugh, "I know it's a possibility. Considering what you've confided with me."

I held his gaze. I didn't let anything show on my face. Nothing at all.

"No," I said. "I thought about it, and you were wrong. It wasn't because of a lack of closure or some twisted kind of holdout of love that I had for Madeline. What I did... What I did was suspect Madeline of being the witch who killed Ophelia. That was all it was."

Ronan's expression changed. Something shifted behind his eyes. Surprise. Maybe confusion.

"Oh," he said. "I thought..."

"I know." I cut him off. "You're thinking it now."

He didn't deny it.

"I didn't say anything to hurt Madeline," I continued. "She simply didn't want to stay here anymore and I understand."

Ronan was quiet for a moment. He seemed to be turning something over in his head. Working through it. Trying to make sense of it.

"What are you thinking about now?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said.

But he was thinking about something. I could tell.

"What are you doing by the way?" he asked. His eyes flicked to the book in my hands. Then to the desk behind me.

I glanced down at the book. I turned it so he could see the spine. The title was barely legible but it was there.

"This binding is useless," I said. "But it is just useless record. I've been all about Fia these past few days given what has happened and neglected my duties as Alpha. So I'm catching up."

Ronan nodded slowly. He looked like he wanted to say something else. Like there was more on his mind.

"Well," he said. "I do think you should try calling Madeline. People have been trying to reach her and she cannot just be reached."

I set the book down on the desk. I didn't look at him when I spoke.

"I'm sure she's fine," I said. "But it's none of my business or yours at this point I fear."

"When you say that," Ronan said, "it makes me think you did say something."

I turned to face him. I met his eyes.

"No," I said. "But I do hold some resentment. She could have helped that delicate. You know. It's why she probably left. The guilt."

Ronan's jaw tightened. He looked at me for a long moment. Like he was trying to see past my words. Like he was trying to find the truth buried underneath.

I would admit that it was a bit fun. Lying to the liar.

"You're better than this," he said.

"Whose side are you on?" I asked. My voice came out sharper than I meant it to. "Mine or hers?"

"You of course."

"Then drop it and just let me work."

Ronan flinched. Just slightly. Just enough that I saw it.

"I apologize," he said.

"Thank you."

He nodded. He took a step back toward the door. His hand reached for the handle.

"I'll leave you be," he said.

He was halfway through the doorway when I spoke again.

"Ronan."

He stopped. He turned back to look at me.

"I'm glad to have you," I said. "Ever since that day we met, you've been a rock and a brother. I love you man."

Something in his expression softened. The fear was still there. The worry. But there was something else now too. Something warmer.

"I love you too," he said.

I wonder if he meant that... How he reconciled being a traitor with this.

He smiled. It was a small thing and it was barely there. Then he turned and left.

When the door clicked shut behind him, I waited. I counted to ten in my head.

Then I walked to the door and turned the lock. The mechanism slid into place with a soft metallic sound that felt louder than it should have.

Only then did I move.

I went back to the desk. I pulled the drawer open again and reached for the pin. I pressed the tip into my palm. The same spot I had cut before. It had healed but the skin was still tender. The blood came easier this time.

I walked to the bookshelf. I pressed my bleeding palm against the smooth spot on the wall. The blood soaked in. The runes appeared. They glowed red and pulsed and the wall shimmered and I stepped through.

But I didn't go to Madeline. Not yet.

I turned left instead of descending the stairs. There was another corridor here. Narrow and short. It ended in a jagged corner where the stone walls met at an odd angle. The space was tight. Uneven. Like whoever had carved it hadn't cared about symmetry or comfort.

There were bags here. Three of them. Black canvasses. Worn but sturdy. I had put them here hours ago.

I grabbed the first one. It was lighter than the others. I slung it over my shoulder and turned back toward the main passage.

Then I descended the stairs.

The air was cold down here. It always was. Cold, damp and heavy with the weight of magic that had been layered into the stone over centuries. My footsteps echoed. The sound bounced off the walls and came back to me distorted.

When I reached the threshold, I stepped through the cloaking spell. It parted around me like water.

And there she was.

Madeline.

Still tied to the chair. Still pale. Still shaking. Her eyes were red. Swollen. She had been crying again. The tear tracks were fresh on her face.

She looked up when I entered. Her expression went from despair to confusion and then something harder. Something angrier.

"You are here again," she said. Her voice was hoarse. "Why?"

I dropped the bag on the floor in front of her. It hit the stone with a dull thud.

"Your father has made a choice," I said. "He held my hand. So it's time for you to play a little game and if you play it well, we all win. You even get to let your father get away with his crimes. Against our society and against my wife."

I crouched down. I looked at her. Really looked at her. At the way her hands were still bound behind her. At the way her wrists were red and raw from the rope.

"You should know this doesn't come easy," I continued. "But I'm willing to do it. For old times sake."

Madeline stared at me. Her breathing was shallow now.

"What deal did my father cut with you?" she asked.

"A soul kiss," I said. "Like you."

I reached behind her. My fingers found the knots in the rope. They were tight. A mighty great job if I might add..

I started to pull. The rope loosened. I worked through the first knot. Then the second. Then the third.

"Since you're good at acting," I said, "what comes next is going to come very easy to you."

The rope fell away from her wrists. Her hands came forward. She brought them into her lap and rubbed at the red marks. Her fingers were shaking.

I moved to her ankles. I untied those too. The rope hit the floor in a coil.

Madeline didn't move. She just sat there. Looking at me. Looking at the bag. Looking at the room around us like she was trying to figure out what was real and what wasn't.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

I stood up. I reached down and unzipped the bag. Inside were clothes. Clean ones. A jacket. Shoes. Everything she would need to look like she hadn't been tied up in a secret basement for hours.

"You're going to go back upstairs soon," I said. "When your father comes, it has to feel like he found you and brought you right back. Then you'll be in tears and start confessing your sins. The real reason you escaped. The things that my dear uncle made you do. You'll reveal his underlings too. My Beta included."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

She looked at me. Her eyes were searching my face. Looking for the catch. Looking for the trap.

"And if I don't?" she asked.

I didn't answer at first. I didn't need to. She already knew. But I needed to make it clear at least.

"Soul kiss aside, your life depends on it, your father's life depends on this," I said instead. "Your family's life depends on this. So you're going to do exactly what I say. And you're going to do it convincingly."

Madeline swallowed. Her throat worked. Her hands were still shaking but she nodded.

"Good," I said.

*Chapter 349: Ignorance is a wine*

## **ALDRIC**

I stepped outside because I needed air. Real air. Not the recycled kind that circulated through the estate's halls carrying whispers and lies and the stench of paranoia that I couldn't seem to shake off anymore.

The grounds were quiet. Peaceful even. The kind of peaceful that felt too good to be true. Like the calm before a storm that everyone knew was coming but still pretended not to see.

Because... Well... Ignorance was bliss.

I walked along the stone path that wound through the gardens. My hands were in my pockets. My shoulders were loose. To anyone watching I probably looked relaxed. Like a man simply enjoying the weather and taking a moment to himself.

The truth was different. Starkly different.

This felt like a last hurrah. A final breath before everything went to hell. Before I had to make the call that would either save me or destroy me. Before I had to decide if this game was worth playing or if I should just cut my losses and run.

My phone buzzed.

I pulled it out and looked at the screen. The message was short. Choppy. Whoever sent the text, it was clear that it had been sent when they were in a hurry or scared or both.

"We hve been compromized by mad wrlocks. Thy r killing us. I mangd to hid."

I read it twice. Then I smiled.

Warlocks.

That was interesting.

Very interesting.

There were not many warlocks who would want me in a predicament. Actually there was only one. Valentine Blossom. The supreme who I had made my little bitch in his Armani expensive suits. The man who had a daughter I had leverage over and who definitely hated me for it.

He hadn't made a move before. But if power was moving, the weak follows the currents.

It was starting to piece together now. The whole picture was becoming clearer, sharper even.

This was a game. Cian's game.

The boy was using pawns now. Actual pawns. Moving pieces on a board I hadn't even realized we were playing on. I didn't think he had it in him. I really didn't. But apparently in that thick headed skull of his there was a competent mind after all.

I had to give him credit for that.

Still...

There was something I didn't understand. Something that didn't quite fit.

What could Valentine possibly want from my estate? Did he think there was a file there to ensure his vile secrets didn't come out at the end of the day?

Then it occurred to me. Quick and sharp like a blade between the ribs.

Gabriel. They had already learned Gabriel existed in my grounds.

Of course. But I needed confirmation.

I typed out a message and sent it back to the sentinel who was supposedly hiding from mad warlocks. "What do they want?"

I waited. The seconds stretched out. Then my phone buzzed again.

"They r goin down."

Going down.

To the basement.

To where I caged my brother.

I smiled again. It was wider this time. Then I laughed. A small sound at first. Just a chuckle that bubbled up from my chest. But it grew and it turned into something louder. Something that probably sounded unhinged to anyone who might have been close by and listening.

I looked down at my hand. At the blood stoned ring sitting on my finger. The red stone caught the light and gleamed like a promise.

"I guess it might be time to play after all."

"Aldric?" I heard a voice say which caused me to turn.

Morrigan was walking toward me. She had a bottle of wine in her hand and a smile on her face. That warm, genuine smile that she always seemed to wear. The kind that made people trust her. The kind that made them think she was harmless. The same one I had adopted to use to my advantage.

I knew Morrigan well. Very well I would like to think. So I knew there was no way my sister in law could be this cool headed if she knew anything about what was happening. If she had even the slightest clue what I had done to her or the very dangerous play that her son was orchestrating at the moment, she would have flipped.

But that wasn't the case. She didn't see me as an enemy.

Cian must have kept her in the dark.

Smart boy.

It was pathetic to see though. How she would stay blissfully unaware to the very end.

I smiled back as she reached me. "What's the wine for?"

Morrigan looked down at the bottle as if she had just remembered she was holding it. "Oh. Well... I feel at peace mostly. So I just wanted to have a good time and enjoy it at the parasol. Care to join me?"

"I shouldn't."

"Nonsense." She waved her free hand dismissively. "We deserve it."

We walked together toward the parasol. It was set up near the edge of the garden. A white canopy that cast soft shade over two chairs and a small table. The view from there was beautiful. Rolling green hills. Trees in the distance. Sky so blue it almost hurt to look at.

Morrigan popped the bottle. The cork came out with a satisfying sound. She took a sip straight from the neck and then handed it to me.

"It's just as beautiful as I remember it."

I took the bottle and drank. The wine spread across my tongue in a slow, velvety wave. Dark cherry and ripe plum came first, deep and sweet, followed by a hint of oak and warm spice. The finish lingered, smooth and full, with a trace of cocoa and something earthy I could not quite name. It was the kind of wine that demanded you slow down and taste it properly.

"Why are you being sentimental?" I asked. It seemed like the most appropriate thing to say at the time since I didn't remotely care to have a deep conversation with her.

Morrigan leaned back in her chair. Her eyes were fixed on the horizon. "I almost died and I'm back like nothing happened. I'm allowed to be sentimental, Aldric."

She paused. Her fingers traced the edge of the table.

"I simply wish... I wish he was here you know."

I drank a little more. It was easier to hide the scoff that way. Easier to keep my face neutral when all I wanted to do was roll my eyes and tell her that her precious husband had been a weak fool who got himself killed because he couldn't make hard choices and underestimated me.

At least the wine would dull my senses. With the game Cian was playing now, with him having figured me out, I wasn't sure I could keep up appearances anymore. Not without help from wine.

I passed the bottle back. "I'm sure my brother is watching you from above and protecting you. You and Cian."

Morrigan nodded. "Sounds like him."

She took another drink. Then she looked at me. Really looked at me.

"I'm sure he's doing the same to you. You always were his favorite."

My stomach twisted. A sharp, visceral reaction that I couldn't quite suppress.

That wasn't favoritism. That was pity. My brother had pitied me. He had looked at me and seen someone broken. Someone who needed saving. Someone who couldn't save himself. A pet bunny and his personal project.

I gave a louder sigh than I intended. "But more than he loved and favored you."

Morrigan chuckled. A soft, sad sound that made her sound even more pathetic. She poured more wine down her throat. When she lowered the bottle her eyes were glassy.

"I hope the monster who did that to Fia is caught and this pack can just have a moment of fucking peace. It's been a while don't you think?"

"I'm sure everything will fall in order."

"I bet too. I bet too."

She passed me the wine again.

I knew the only way this conversation of sentimentality and fucking memories would end was if I downed the whole thing. So I did. I tipped the bottle back and let the wine pour down my throat. It burned in that pleasant way alcohol did when you drank too much too fast.

"Woah. Easy."

I pulled the bottle away from my mouth. "Don't worry about it, Morrigan. This pack will see great days again. Skollrend will be great again."

I put my hand in my pocket and pretended to check my phone even though there was no new message. "Oh. Business calls."

I looked at Morrigan. She was watching me with those kind eyes. Those trusting eyes.

"Enjoy the view Morrigan. Rest your heart. It will be fine."

She smiled at me. Wide and genuine. "You're so right. Thank you, Aldric. I needed that."

I smiled back. Then I turned and walked away.

My head felt light. The wine was working faster than I expected. Or maybe it was just the exhaustion. The stress. The weight of everything that was about to happen crashing down on me all at once.

I headed back toward the main estate. My feet carried me across the stone path. Through the garden. Past the flowerbeds and the fountain and the perfectly manicured hedges.

Then I saw them.

Cian. Valentine. And Madeline.

They were standing near the entrance. Cian had his hands in his pockets. Valentine was smiling that infuriating smile of his. And Madeline...

Madeline was present. Very much so.

I stopped walking for a second.

My brain was trying to catch up. Trying to process what I was seeing. Trying to make sense of it.

Because that was quick.

Then Madeline turned to face me and shuddered. Oh, the act has reached its climax.

Hadn't it?

*Chapter 350: The Crash and the Burn*

## **HAZEL**

I watched something shift behind his eyes. A hardening. Like I'd finally pushed him past politeness into something sharper.

"Your compulsive nature," he said slowly, "is what led you here."

I opened my mouth.

He kept going.

"You don't know your place in the grand scheme of things. You never have. That's why you're sitting at this table instead of being in control of your autonomy. That's why your sister is living a far better life than you now. That's why everyone who ever trusted you or holds your hand seems to end up worse for it and I bet they deserve it if they don't see the signs sooner."

My chest tightened.

"And you still haven't realized how far from grace you've fallen," he continued. His voice was calm. Measured. Each word landed with precision. "Because you're already thinking about heat season. You just said it. Out loud. Which means you've thought about it. Hard."

I felt my face flush.

"That puts it into perspective, doesn't it?" He tilted his head slightly. "The supposed great Hazel Hughes. Reduced to a scheming Omega plotting about which brother she can manipulate into her bed during heat."

"I wasn't—"

"You were." He cut me off cleanly. "And it repulses me."

The word hung there between us.

Repulses.

"Even under the influence of the worst kind of heat," he said, "I wouldn't touch you."

I forced myself to hold his gaze.

"And I trust my brother wouldn't touch you with a ten foot pole either. He might have Daddy issues. We might all have it. But we have some class." He picked up his knife, cut into what was left on his plate. "You're not the right color anyway."

My nails dug into my palms under the table.

He chewed. Swallowed. Took a sip of water even.

"My advice, stop scheming," he said finally. "Start assimilating. Or you will face an even worse fate soon."

"Assimilating," I repeated. My voice came out flat. "Into what exactly? Your world where it is starting to feel like women get caned for holding hands wrong? Where your father gets to decide who suffers and when?"

"Into reality." He didn't look up from his plate. "The one where you have no power. No leverage. No allies. The one where your best option is to be quiet, obedient, and unremarkable. If you cannot handle it, leave."

"That's not reality," I said. "That's surrender."

"Call it what you want." He speared a piece of vegetable. "But if you keep pushing, keep testing, keep trying to turn people against each other or into your pawns, you won't last long enough to see another heat season."

I leaned forward.

"You think you're so different from your father," I said. "You think because you feel bad about it, because you punish yourself afterward, that makes you better. But you're not. You're just a coward with a conscience."

His fork paused halfway to his mouth.

"You let him terrorize your siblings," I continued. "You let him cut and hurt servants. You sit there and eat while people cry and you tell yourself it's fine because you feel guilty later. That's pathetic. You and I... We are the same. So don't you fucking judge me."

He set the fork down and looked at me.

"I'm not my father," he said quietly. "And you and I... We are not the fucking same. If I was, trust me, with the amount of rules you just broke, I would have a field day with your ass."

"You're right." I smiled. "You're worse. Because he doesn't pretend to care."

His jaw worked.

But he didn't snap. He didn't raise his voice either or lose control.

Instead, he picked up his fork again and finished his meal. Every bite slow and deliberate. Like I wasn't even there. Like I hadn't just said any of that.

When his plate was empty, he dabbed his mouth with his napkin, folded it, set it down and then looked at me.

"Lovely talk," he said.

Then he stood and walked out.

The door closed behind him with a soft click.

I sat there alone.

My hands were shaking.

Not from fear. From rage. Pure, hot, burning rage that had nowhere to go.

He had beaten me. Again. Every single point I tried to make, every jab I threw, he deflected or turned back on me. And he did it while staying calm. While finishing his breakfast like we were discussing the weather.

Oh. I hated him.

I hated that he was right about some of it. I hated that I had thought about heat season. I hated that I'd let it slip. I hated that he saw through me so easily and I couldn't do the same to him and with similar intensity.

I shoved my chair back hard enough that it scraped loudly against the floor.

Then I walked out.

The hallway was cooler. Quieter. My footsteps echoed as I moved toward the front entrance, toward air that didn't feel like it was pressing down on my lungs.

When I reached the door, I saw Laslo standing just outside.

He turned when he heard me. His expression shifted immediately. He took in whatever was written on my face and his posture straightened.

He bowed slightly.

"Was there a difficult conversation?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said.

I didn't elaborate. I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't want to think about it. I doubted he cared anyway.

"Can I have my phone back now?" I asked. "It's morning."

"Of course." He reached into his jacket pocket. "I was going to give it to you after breakfast."

He pulled it out and was about to hand it to me.

That when my stomach growled in the loudest and insufferable way..

His hand stopped.

He pulled the phone back just before my fingers could close around it.

"Are you still hungry, Miss Hazel?" he asked.

I stared at him.

"Give me the phone," I said. "I'll eat when I'm done with it."

His demeanor changed slightly then returned to normal which made me wonder what I did wrong.

He looked at me solemnly. His expression didn't change further but something in his eyes grew firmer.

"You asked me to call you to order anytime you dissent," he said. "So I will call you to order right now."

I felt my teeth grind together.

"Understand, Miss Hazel, that food is a privilege and shouldn't be disrespected."

He slipped the phone back into his pocket.

"Please go in and eat," he said. "Do not step out until you are done with the plate."

"But one of them, Sofiane, he—"

I stopped.

The words caught in my throat.

Because I realized what I was about to say. That Sofiane had left. That he walked out with his plate. That if he could do it, why couldn't I?

But that would break a rule. Another Lily of the Valley rule.

Laslo smiled. It was a small smile. Almost kind. But I knew better than to think of it as kind.

"I understand your frustrations," he said. "But he is an Alpha. A man. It is callous, but it is allowed. You are none of those things."

He paused.

"So please," he continued, "do not force my hand to punish you as your guardian."

The rage inside me built.

Higher.

Hotter.

It pressed against my ribs, against my throat, against the back of my eyes.

But I couldn't let it out. I couldn't scream. I couldn't hit him. I couldn't do anything except stand there and take it like a fucking good girl.

So I smiled. The widest and brightest fluoride bullshit I could manage.

"Thank you, Laslo," I said. My voice came out steady. Sweet, even. "You're a lifesaver."

Then I turned and walked back inside the empty dining room.

Someone has seemingly come to get the rest and the only plate that remained was mine.

Still half full. Still sitting where I'd left it.

I sat down and picked up my fork.

And I began to eat.

Every bite tasted like ash. Like humiliation. Like defeat.

But I ate it anyway.

Because I had no choice.

Because this was my reality now.

I chewed slowly. Mechanically. Each swallow felt like swallowing glass.

Lysander's words kept circling in my head.

Compulsive nature. Doesn't know her place. Haven't realized how far she's fallen.

'Repulses me.'

'Not the right color.'

I wanted to throw the plate across the room the more it consumed my mind. I wanted to flip the table. I wanted to storm upstairs and set something on fire just to feel like I had control over anything.

But I didn't. Wasn't it that bitter pill?

So all I could really do was sit there and eat my breakfast like a good little Omega.

Goddess, it was repulsive. I was repulsed.

I felt small and insignificant.

Like someone who knew her place in this world after the great shift.

The fork scraped against the plate. The sound was too loud in the empty room.

I thought about Fia.

About how she would have handled this. She would have smiled through it. She would have found some way to make peace. To smooth things over. To endure without breaking.

But I wasn't Fia.

I was a pathetic little good two shoes.

This was also not the life I wanted for myself when I made this choice. I deserved better than this. I deserved to live good.

I finished the last bite and set my fork down.

Folded my napkin the way Lysander had. Neat and precise.

Then I stood and walked back out into the hallway.

Laslo was still there.

He looked up when I emerged.

"Finished?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out my phone.

This time, he handed it to me.

I took it.

Our fingers didn't touch.

"Thank you, Miss Hazel," he said. "For cooperating."

I nodded.

I didn't trust myself to speak.

Then I turned and walked away before he could say anything else.

Before I could do something stupid.

Before the smile I was wearing cracked completely and he saw what was really underneath.

But I realized how quickly that didn't matter. Because Laslo started to follow me.

Was this the life I deserved?

It was like it started to burn into my mind then.

Was this what demotion meant? Was this my life now?