

To ruin an Omega

Chapter 274: Sympathy 1

MADELINE

The silence at the breakfast table after that felt like a living thing. It breathed. It waited. It watched me the same way Aldric was watching me right now.

I reached for the serving platter of eggs and bacon and scooped a small portion onto my plate. My hand didn't shake. I made sure of that. The fork clinked softly against the porcelain and I set it down with care before moving to the pitcher of water.

Aldric's gaze burned into the side of my face but I didn't look at him. I just poured the water into my glass. Slow and steady. The liquid filled the cup halfway and I set the pitcher back down.

"Elara," Aldric said suddenly.

His daughter looked up from her plate where she'd been pushing around a piece of bacon. "Yes?"

"I noticed something odd this morning when I returned to my room." His tone was casual, almost conversational. Like he was discussing the weather. "A watch I kept in my dresser drawer seems to have moved."

I lifted my fork, speared a piece of egg and brought it to my mouth before chewing it slowly.

"It wasn't where I left it," Aldric continued. "I'm wondering if you might have been looking for something and disturbed it by accident."

Elara wrinkled her nose. "Dad, I hate your watches. You know that. They're all so boring and old-fashioned." She waved her hand dismissively. "Besides, the sentinel you posted at your door wouldn't let anyone in. So no. I didn't touch anything."

"Mm." Aldric made a thoughtful sound. "I must have dropped it somewhere odd then."

The egg tasted like cardboard in my mouth but I swallowed it down and took a sip of water. My pulse stayed even. My expression remained neutral and mildly interested in the conversation happening around me.

Even if I knew exactly what he was doing.

"There's also a book missing from my personal shelf," Aldric said.

He turned to face me fully now. His eyes locked onto mine with the precision of a predator who'd just spotted movement in the underbrush.

"Self help book," Elara scoffed. "Dad, you should know me better."

I reached for the salt shaker and sprinkled a bit over my eggs. Then I grabbed the pepper and did the same. My movements were unhurried and methodical.

"I heard your brother came to visit," Aldric said.

I looked at him then and met his gaze head-on without flinching. "Well, I am to be ostracized." My voice came out steady and calm. "They came for my blood and I handed Wilhelm a vial of it to give to my father."

It was code for what he needed to know. Since Elara was here.

I set the pepper shaker down and picked up my fork again.

"He wouldn't have stayed long," I continued. "But he loves me. More than he would like to admit. So we just spent the night talking."

I paused and tilted my head slightly. "Did you want to see him or something?"

"No." Aldric's expression didn't change. "I hope your father does fight for you. Ostracization is a cruel thing."

The words would have sounded sympathetic if anything I had just said was remotely true or if the look in his eyes didn't tell a different story.

He was testing me. Probing for weakness. For any crack in my armor that he could exploit.

I hated this. I hated performing for Elara who sat there oblivious to the real conversation happening beneath the surface pleasantries. I hated pretending that Aldric wasn't my captor. That he hadn't threatened everyone I loved to keep me here playing his games.

"How was yesterday though?" Aldric leaned back in his chair. The picture of relaxed interest. "When your siblings visit, it's natural to want to act out. Did you do something fun yesterday?"

My jaw tightened for just a fraction of a second before I forced it to relax.

"Not really." I stabbed another piece of egg with more force than necessary. I was losing my quick cook and I hated it. "I was too busy crying my eyes out because Cian thought I was an enemy of his."

I sighed and the sound came out genuine because it was. The hurt was real even if the delivery was calculated.

"You could never understand how much that hurts," I said quietly. "Because I would never. Not in a just world."

Elara gasped as she took in what I said. Her hand flew to her chest in an exaggerated gesture of shock. "Oh my goddess. He said that? Unbelievable."

She shook her head and her curls bounced with the movement.

"That girl must be poisoning his mind," Elara continued. "I would ask you to keep your distance for the time being. Goddess knows what she says to him and poisons him with. The mate bond is indeed one hell of a drug."

Aldric smiled then. It didn't reach his eyes. "My daughter can be a broken clock but even a broken clock is right sometimes."

"Dad!" Elara's voice pitched higher with indignation.

He chuckled. The sound rumbled low in his chest and it made my skin crawl because it sounded so normal. So fatherly. Like he wasn't a complete monster wearing the skin of a man.

"I do apologize for my nephew," Aldric said. He waved his hand in a placating gesture. "Things are quite tense for him now and he is not wrong to be terrified. It will get better though. You will get everything you want."

He paused and his eyes found mine again.

"Just stay true to what you need to stay true to."

The threat landed like a knife between my ribs. Precise and deliberate.

I smiled anyway. Soft and grateful like he'd just offered me comfort instead of a reminder that he owned me. That he could destroy everything I cared about with a single order if I stepped out of line.

I turned my attention back to my plate and cut into the eggs with careful precision. The yolk broke and spread across the white porcelain in a golden puddle.

My stomach turned but I brought another forkful to my mouth anyway.

Footsteps echoed from the hallway outside the dining room. Fast footsteps. Someone was running. Or close to it.

All three of us turned toward the entrance.

Cian appeared in the doorway.

He looked like he'd run the entire way here. Sweat dampened his dark hair and made it stick to his forehead. His chest rose and fell with quick breaths. Those blue eyes of his were wild and bright with something I couldn't quite name. Panic maybe. Or desperation.

He was still beautiful. Even disheveled and sweaty and clearly in distress. The kind of beautiful that made your breath catch. Those sharp jaw. Those strong shoulders and the way his shirt clung to his frame from the exertion... Hekate, it did things to me.

I hated that I noticed. I hated that some small part of me still responded to the sight of him even after everything.

"Mads," Cian said. His voice came out rough. "I need your help."