

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 312: Tell me Lies

CIAN

I was not asleep.

I had been close, somewhere between the drag of the tonic smell lingering from the vial and the weight of Fia's head against my chest, but I had not crossed over. I stayed still because she needed me still. Because whatever had broken open in her at the pool was still bleeding quietly and the last thing she needed was for me to push at the wound.

But then she started talking.

She thought I was under. I could feel it in the way her voice changed, that particular quality it could only take because she believed nobody was listening. Low and unguarded and very, very careful, like she was handling something that could shatter.

"I never got to protect my first family. I had been too young and too ignorant and by the time I understood what was happening it was already done."

My chest tightened.

"I had lived with the shape of that failure ever since, the particular grief of not knowing what you were losing until it was gone. I am not going to do it again. I am not going to stand at another grave and catalogue everything I could have done differently. Cian, you have to be fine."

I kept my breathing even. I kept my body loose. Every trained instinct in me screamed to open my eyes and make her tell me everything, but I held it. She pressed her lips to my forehead and I felt the warmth of that for a long moment before she slipped out from under my arm.

I waited. I listened to the soft sounds of her moving through the room, the drawer opening, the fabric of my clothes being pulled on. I counted her footsteps to the door. When it clicked shut behind her, I lay there for another thirty seconds before I sat up.

The room felt hollow without her in it.

I followed her into the corridor, keeping the bond sealed tight. She had been doing the same for a while, which told me everything and nothing all at once. Something had happened when she touched me at the pool. I had felt the spike of it before she threw her walls up so fast it nearly gave me a headache. Whatever she had seen or felt in that moment, she had looked like a person who had watched something horrid happen.

She had called it a flashbang. A memory of the accident.

But it was not that. I was almost certain it was not that.

I tracked her through the building without getting close. When she turned toward the infirmary, I slowed. I stopped at the door and stood there with my hand raised and then let it fall back to my side.

She would already be talking to Thorne. Whatever she was keeping, if she still intended to keep it, I would get nothing.

If I walked through that door, she would lock down entirely, and I would get nothing except another careful lie delivered with those dark eyes that never quite met mine when she was hiding something.

Thorne I could handle tomorrow. He would not enjoy or dare lying to my face.

I stood in the corridor a moment longer. The building was quiet around me, that specific late-night quiet where even the walls seemed to be resting. I could go back to bed. Wait for her. Pull it out of her slowly if I had to.

She would certainly make me work for it. But I was sure I could get something. Even if that was something she did not want to give.

But there was something else sitting in the back of my mind, something that had been sitting there for hours now and sharpening every time I tried not to look at it. What Ronan had done. My uncle. The pack traitors who were supposed to be my most loyal sword and yet pointed that blade right back at

me anyway and the ones I probably didn't know about, moving in the shadows now.

There was also... Madeline.

It had clicked while I was talking to Fia this afternoon. The particular shape of what had not happened when it should have. Madeline had always been there. Every difficult thing, she had been beside me or at my back. She had bled for me twice. Even now.

That was the story. That was the version I had believed so completely I had never thought to turn it over no matter what.

But the delicate situation. That was different. That one I had turned over and over thanks to Fia while trying to understand why someone with Madeline's instincts had held back at the worst possible moment. She should have moved. She had the position, the clearance, the reason. Every variable was right.

Unless that would have exposed her.

I had thought the bullshit story about the falling out we had being the cause of it was enough. But one critical sit down and it started to fall apart completely.

I was walking before I finished the thought, and I did not stop until I was standing outside her door.

I knocked.

There was silence. At first.

Then I heard the quiet shift of someone who had been awake, the particular sound of a person not quite sleeping deciding whether to pretend they were. That followed with footsteps and then the door opened.

Madeline looked at me and for exactly one second, something moved across her face that she did not manage to suppress in time. It was not guilt. No. Not quite, but the thing that lived just under it. The brace.

Then it was gone and her expression smoothed out and she said, "Hey. You know it's late... Right? If you want to—"

I stepped inside without waiting to be asked.

She moved back to let me in, then pushed the door shut behind me. The room was dim, one lamp burning low on the bedside table. I turned and looked at her and she crossed her arms over her chest and lifted her chin and waited.

"Sure come in. But if this is about the girl—" she said, not finishing before I cut in.

"How could you, Madeline."

The words came out quieter than I expected. I had thought there would be more heat in them. There was not. There was just the question and the hollow space around it.

She blinked. "What? Oh. Whatever happened to the delicate, it wasn't my fault. I—"

"You know damn well I am not talking about the delicate."

The shift was small but I caught it. The way her shoulders changed by a fraction, a tiny stiffening that she was very good at hiding and that I had spent a good number of fucking years learning to read and read well.

"But she is the reason I see it now," I said. "Fia too. Everything I would not let myself look at directly, they have somehow made me look at."

"Cian—"

"I was right about you that time." My voice came out steady. I had not expected that either. "You are a traitor."

I watched tears form in her eyes and I held myself very still because I knew her face. I had known her face since we were teenagers daring each other to do stupid things in the forest. I had known her face through grief and through joy and through every complicated thing that fell between those two. I knew what her tears looked like when they were real.

I was not sure about these ones.

"Wow," she said softly. "You really are just..." She stopped. Shook her head. "Because I didn't help... You're gonna do this again? See... This is why I didn't help."

Something flickered behind my eyes. "Please do not try that with me again. Because I might actually hurt you Mads. And I am trying my best not to give in to violence right now."

She froze. "What?"

"Your new routine," I said. "The one where you make me feel like the monster for asking the question. It has worked for a while now. It worked because I wanted it to work. I needed to believe you were just as difficult and dignified and that underneath all of it you were still my person." I breathed. Just breathed for a second because the next part was going to cost me. "It only clicked when I was talking to Fia this afternoon. You have helped me. Many times. Even against your own wellbeing. That is the story I know well. That is the story you have sold me. But the delicate situation was different, wasn't it. If you had helped, you would have been seen for what you are...Maybe what you have always been."

The tears spilled. She let them, which told me she had decided they were her best argument.

"Come on," I said, and I hated how tired my voice sounded. "Make something up. Tell me lies. Because you know me. I will believe you. I will want to believe you. I have spent days finding reasons to believe you. How could Madeline ever betray me? It does not make sense. It should not make sense." I looked at her. Really looked at her, the way I had been avoiding for the past several hours now since the truth sat with me in its full weight because some part of me still knew what I would find. "But my eyes have been forcibly opened. A lot of the people I love are traitors. Even you. So which one of them owns you? Is it Aldric?"

The flinch was minute. A single involuntary tightening around her eyes that she killed immediately.

But I had caught it.

"Huh," I said. "It is him, then."

She said nothing. That was almost worse than a lie would have been.

"Of course it is," I said. "At least you did not try to deny it. At least you gave me that."

"Cian." Her voice broke on my name. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I swear. I love you." She stepped forward and I stepped back and the distance

between us in that moment felt like a physical thing, like a wall going up that I could hear being built. "I didn't have a choice." She swore.

I looked at her. I looked at the tears on her face and the hand she had held out toward me and the way her whole posture was reaching, still reaching, the same way she had always reached when she was trying to pull me back from being angry with her.

"You don't love me," I said. "If you did, you would never have hurt me this badly."

The words were not dramatic. They were just true. They sat in the air between us and neither of us could take them back, and I did not want to.

She was still crying. Her mouth worked like she was trying to find something to say that would undo it.

I walked in a circle. Unsure of what to fucking do now.

"I didn't have a choice," she said again, behind me. Quieter. Almost to herself.

I stopped walking but I did not turn around.

"Everyone has a choice," I said. "You had plenty too. In my delusion, I gave you plenty of chances to make the right one. But you didn't. All you did really

was look me in the face and lie. You lied. You made me look crazy. Insane for suggesting what was true. You even let a girl go fucking blind to prove a point and you didn't have a choice? Make that make sense to me. Please, I am begging you."