

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 325: Tag, you're it

FIA

The dining room was already full by the time we walked in, the kind of full that made you feel late even if you were not.

Aldric sat at the head of the table, spine straight, hands placed just so, his expression arranged into something that passed for calm if you did not know him well enough to recognize the effort behind it. Elara was beside him, shoulders slightly tucked in as if she could make herself smaller in the morning light pouring through the tall windows. Morrigan sat across from her, wrapped around a cup of something steaming, looking bright and alert in a way that felt unnatural for the early hour.

She saw us first.

Her gaze dragged slowly over me, paused at the shirt hanging off my shoulders, then returned to my face. The smile that followed was slow and deliberate, like she had already reached the end of a thought and found it amusing.

"Oh... I'm sure you had a good night," she said.

The heat rose before I could stop it. It crawled up my neck and spread across my cheeks in a way that felt almost visible, and I hated that I could not will it away. I opened my mouth with no plan at all, just the instinct to defend myself from something that had not even been said outright.

Cian beat me to it.

"Goddess mother, get your mind out of the gutter," he said lightly, already pulling out a chair for me as if the comment had not landed exactly where Morrigan had meant it to.

She laughed, low and pleased with herself. "What did I say?"

Nothing. That was the problem. She had said nothing at all and still managed to imply everything. I pressed my lips together and reached for the glass of water set at my place because I needed something to occupy my hands, something that did not involve swatting at invisible accusations in the air.

Before I could take more than a sip, the doors at the far end of the room opened again and Ronan walked in.

I did not look at him immediately. I let my gaze drift in that direction like it had somewhere else to be, like I had not noticed the shift in the air. He crossed the room with his usual easy confidence, eyes already mapping the table. For a second it looked as though he meant to sit beside Aldric. He slowed just a fraction, the change so subtle it would have slipped past anyone not watching

for it. Then he adjusted course, moved two chairs down instead, and took his seat there, unfolding his napkin with careful precision, as if that had been the plan all along.

Maybe it had. I did not know anymore. I told myself it did not matter and reached for my water again.

The Omegas entered through the side door in a quiet, practiced line. They moved around the table with the kind of efficiency that made the whole thing seem seamless, setting down covered dishes and lifting the lids with gentle, synchronized movements.

The smell hit first.

Smoked salmon laid out in neat rows, the faint brine of it mingling with butter and herbs. Poached eggs resting in pale pools of sauce that gleamed under the light. Toasted brioche sliced thin and fanned beside small jars of preserve. Braised mushrooms, dark and glossy, scattered with herbs. A dish of something creamy and pale that carried the sharp, earthy scent of truffle.

It was indulgent in a way that did not need to announce itself. This was simply how things were done here.

One of the Omegas paused at the empty chair across from me. She glanced down at the plate in her hands, then at the seat, then toward the girl beside her. They hesitated just long enough for it to feel noticeable. Neither of them set the food down. They moved on without speaking, leaving the place setting untouched, the plate bare.

Aldric saw it.

He looked at that empty spot for longer than he looked at anything else that morning. Not staring, exactly, but not glancing either. Measuring. "Odd," he said at last.

Cian did not look up immediately. He had already started on his eggs, cutting into one with quiet concentration. "What is?"

"Madeline." Aldric set his fork down. The sound was soft, controlled. "She doesn't usually miss breakfast."

Cian's gaze shifted to the empty chair. There was something in the way he looked at it, something resigned, like he had been waiting for this moment since he sat down. Then he turned back to his plate and lifted his spoon again.

"Madeline won't be joining us," he said.

The silence that followed was brief but dense.

"She found a place," he continued, breaking the surface of his egg and watching the yolk spill out in a slow golden line. "She decided to leave very early this morning. I was a little surprised myself, but." He paused, set the

spoon down, picked it back up as though he needed the motion to anchor himself. "We had a bit of a scuffle."

No one interrupted him.

"After the delicate we hired was blinded, I thought of bringing Madeline in to help with the girl." His voice remained even, steady, almost detached. "She refused."

He took a bite, chewed slowly, swallowed.

"I think she's going through something. It makes sense." His eyes skimmed over the table without settling anywhere. "She was ostracized from her coven because of me. I don't blame her for carrying resentment."

He reached for the brioche, tore off a piece with deliberate care.

"Even I would. But I think that is what pushed her to not stay for long anymore."

I kept staring at the empty chair across from me like it might rearrange itself into something that made sense if I gave it enough time.

It didn't.

I barely knew Madeline, not well enough to claim insight, but she had never struck me as someone who would walk away lightly. If anything, she had seemed pulled toward Cian in a way that was almost embarrassing to witness, the kind of infatuation that made you forgive more than you should. Refusing him, leaving before breakfast, disappearing without so much as a scene, it felt less like indifference and more like self preservation. As if staying would have cost her something she could not afford to lose.

Around us, cutlery resumed its quiet clink against porcelain, conversation picking up in cautious threads as though the room had decided that whatever this was, it would not be addressed directly.

I saw Aldric reach for his spoon. It slipped from his fingers.

The sound it made when it struck the edge of his plate was sharp enough to slice through the room. Every head turned toward him at once. Even the serving Omegas paused mid step. The silence that followed pressed in from all sides, heavy and expectant.

He cleared his throat. Picked the spoon up. Adjusted it properly in his hand as if the entire thing had been nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

"Oh," he said, testing the word before letting it settle. "Really."

A small pause stretched out between him and Cian.

"When was this?"

Cian looked up, unhurried. "Like I said Uncle. This morning. Very early this morning." He reached for his glass of juice, took a measured sip. "I was surprised, like I said. But I think it was time."

Aldric made a sound that might have been agreement. He looked back down at his plate, his expression smoothing over into something neutral enough to pass.

I watched him longer than I meant to. The way his jaw shifted once, subtle but tight. The way his hand stayed very still around the spoon before he forced it to move. Something had flickered across his face and then disappeared, fast, like a door pulled shut before anyone could see what was inside.

Then I looked at Ronan.

He was already looking at Aldric.

Not casually. Not with the vague interest of someone following the flow of conversation. It was sharper than that. Intent. Like he was waiting to see how Aldric would take information he had been anticipating.

He caught me watching him. Our eyes met for half a second. He did not react, not in any way I could point to. He simply lowered his gaze back to his plate and continued eating.

I reached for a piece of brioche I did not actually want and tore off a corner, mostly so I would have something to do with my hands. The bread felt too soft between my fingers.

Cian kept talking, filling the space with easy details. She had packed light. She had been calm about it. He supposed it was for the best. His voice stayed level and warm, the cadence steady, and if I had been sitting anywhere else at the table I might have believed him without question.

But I was close enough to feel the absence and he had stopped shielding.

I did not know if he had done it on purpose or if the morning and the talking had thinned whatever guard he usually kept in place, but the wall between him and the room felt fragile now.

It felt like standing near a fire without looking directly at it, heat brushing one side of your face while the other stayed cool.

What I felt was not regret.

It was not satisfaction either, not the simple kind.

It was steadier than that. Dense. Contained. The kind of stillness that comes after a decision has already been made and carried out, when there is nothing left to argue about and all that remained was to let the consequences arrive in their own time.

He glanced at me and caught me watching him. He smiled, easy and warm, the kind that would have reassured anyone else at the table.

I smiled back without thinking.

He returned his attention to his plate.

I let my gaze drift to the empty chair again and tried to place the unease sitting low in my stomach. Madeline gone before breakfast. No announcement. No discussion. Just an absence dressed up as inevitability.

My mind kept circling back to the conversation that we had before we came here.

Was this Cian's contingency? I looked back at Aldric.

The man had turned into a fidgety mess. It was the first I had ever seen.

It almost brought a smile to my face.

Almost.