

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 355: Paternal Bond 1

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ALDRIC

The guards shoved us through the doorway so hard my shoulder struck the stone frame on the way in.

That bastard would pay for that.

I staggered a step into the cell before I caught my balance, boots scraping against the damp floor. The door slammed behind us with a heavy clang that echoed through the corridor, the kind of sound that carried finality with it. For a moment it seemed to linger in the air, bouncing off the walls before fading into the silence.

The place smelled wrong. Damp earth, rusted iron, the stale scent of somewhere people were not meant to stay long.

I walked toward the far wall without thinking about it, needing distance from the door, from the guards, from the way my pulse had started hammering in my chest the moment the bars closed behind us. When I reached the stone, I pressed my palm flat against it. The surface was rough beneath my skin, cold enough that it bit into my hand.

For a few seconds the cold steadied me.

Then the heat beneath my skin surged again and I pulled my hand back.

Something felt wrong with my body.

I could feel it crawling through me, spreading from the center of my chest outward like a fever that had been waiting for the right moment to rise.

Was my body succumbing to the factor that I might be cornered?

Behind me Ronan started pacing.

His boots scraped across the floor in an uneven rhythm, back and forth between the bars and the wall like a caged animal that had not yet accepted the cage.

"How did this even happen?"

His voice sounded strained, thinner than I had ever heard it.

I kept my eyes on the cracks running through the stone wall in front of me. Lines of old mortar split apart by time, thin veins spreading through the rock.

I did not answer.

"Aldric... I mean father..."

The heat crept up my neck.

Still I said nothing.

"Father, answer me."

I turned slowly.

Ronan had stopped pacing. He stood in the center of the cell now with his hands clenched at his sides, his chest rising and falling faster than it should have. His face was flushed and his jaw looked tight enough to crack a tooth.

He looked like he wanted to hit something.

What were the chances it was going to be me?

I met his eyes and held them.

"You have always been smart with this," he said, his voice dropping lower now that he had my attention. "Calculated. You taught me how to think ahead. How to read people before they opened their mouths. You taught me to anticipate the moves before they were even made."

He stepped closer.

"I cannot believe Cian played us."

The words settled in the space between us.

I felt sweat forming along my hairline, sliding slowly down my temple. My shirt had begun sticking to my back, damp where the heat kept rising through my body.

Something was happening inside me that I could not control.

The thought slid into my mind again before I could stop it.

Fear.

My body was reacting to fear.

The realization made something twist inside my stomach. I hated the feeling immediately. It felt weak, humiliating, like some part of me had surrendered without asking permission.

I had spent my entire life mastering control. Control over men, over situations, over my own reactions. Panic belonged to other people. Panic belonged to those who had never learned how the world truly worked.

And now I stood in a cell sweating like a man who had just realized the rope had already been tied.

Pathetic.

"You aren't saying anything."

Ronan's voice dragged me back.

I straightened, rolling my shoulders back and forcing the tension out of my hands before he could see the tremor there.

"You believed my cause, didn't you?"

My voice came out for the first time steadier than I felt.

"Then keep doing that. Keep believing me."

He studied my face, searching for something in it. I could see the flicker of doubt in his eyes, brief but unmistakable. Ronan had always been quick to trust, but he was not blind.

"I am not like the others," he said finally.

He took another step forward until only a few feet separated us.

"I stood by your side because you are my father."

The word hit me harder than I expected.

Father.

For a moment something old and buried stirred in my chest, something I had spent years refusing to examine too closely. I pushed it down before it could grow teeth.

I couldn't be paternal now. That was just plain dumb.

I closed the remaining distance and reached for his hand.

His fingers were warm when they closed around mine, strong in the way only youth could be.

Solid.

Loyal.

"And unlike the man who raised you," I said quietly, "have I ever failed you?"

Ronan did not hesitate.

The uncertainty vanished from his expression like it had never been there. His grip tightened around my hand.

"No."

I nodded once.

"You are my blood," I told him. "I would never abandon you. Not the way that man did. When someone stands against us..."

"They fall."

He finished the words without hesitation.

I allowed myself a faint smile.

"That is the truth."

I released his hand and turned away before the heat surging through my body could betray me again. Each pulse of it felt stronger than the last, like something building beneath my skin.

I crossed the small cell and lowered myself onto the narrow stone bench against the wall. The moment my back touched the cold surface I felt a brief wave of relief.

Not enough to stop the sweating.

But enough that my legs stopped feeling like they might give out.

Ronan remained standing near the center of the cell. I could feel his eyes on me as he folded his arms across his chest.

"How do we get out of this?"

His voice sounded calmer now. The panic had settled into something sharper.

Strategy.

I leaned my head back against the stone and closed my eyes for a moment. The cold seeped slowly through my shirt and into my spine.

It did help me think.

"War has to happen," I said.

The words tasted bitter in my mouth.

For years I had held it back. For years I had balanced the line between patience and power, allowing peace to stretch longer than it ever should have.

Ronan of course would think it was because of Cian. So I just had to keep selling it to him.

"I prioritized peace because Cian is my nephew," I continued slowly. "And because I loved him."

I opened my eyes and looked at Ronan. He was taking it all in. As always.

"But he has grown wings," I said.

I could picture him clearly now. The stubborn set of his jaw, the way he carried himself like the world would eventually bend if he simply refused to yield.

"Wings that need to be clipped."

Ronan did not interrupt.

He had shifted slightly now, his attention fully locked on me the way it always was when I began laying out a plan.

Even through the fever burning under my skin, the sight of that obedience brought a small measure of satisfaction.

No matter what Cian believed he had in his arsenal, I still had loyal blood standing beside me.

"During the trial, we attack. It will cost me a lot. Politically and emotionally, which is why I have avoided this. But it is clear it needs to be done."

Silence filled the cell for a moment.

Then Ronan nodded slowly. "I'll give the signal to one of our allies when the trial starts. So the files and everything we have on Valentine come out."

I shook my head.

"That is a waste of time now. Even if it will do damage."

Ronan frowned. "But—"

"Think about it," I interrupted. "Right now, we stand accused. And suddenly something comes out against the father of who accused us. What would it look like? The truth or a lie and retaliation?"

Understanding dawned on his face.

"They'll think we fabricated it."

"Exactly. That is probably one of the reasons why Valentine is so confident now."

I pressed my hand against my chest. My heart was racing. Too fast. Uneven. The heat had spread to my limbs now. My fingers tingled.

Stop it.

Control yourself.

Ronan watched me closely, which caused me to quickly adjust myself.

I really wasn't sure what was happening now. But I didn't feel good.

"Cian will hate me," he said softly. "I deserve it, don't I?"

I forced myself to focus on him. On his face. On the guilt written there.

Goddess. This was pathetic. But I managed a smile.

"You did nothing wrong."

My voice was firm. Absolute.

"A son stands by his father regardless of everything. You are a filial son. That Beta monster didn't deserve you as a son."

Ronan's jaw tightened.

"It repulses me every time you are still referred to as a Beta," I continued.
"You are my son. You are Ronan Donlon and you are an Alpha. No matter what happens, we'll win this."

"Will the coup be horrible?"

He whispered the word like it was sacred. Or cursed. Maybe both.

"If that is what needs to be done."

I stood slowly. My legs shook but held. I crossed to where he stood and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I have two strong supporters in the Elder's circle. They owe me debts they cannot refuse to pay. When the trial begins, they will sow doubt. They will question the evidence. They will demand proof that cannot be provided. And when chaos breaks out, our allies will move."

Ronan nodded. His eyes were bright now. Focused. He was seeing it. The path forward. The way out.

"What about Cian?"

The question was quieter. More hesitant.

I dropped my hand from his shoulder.

"If he bends the knee, he'll live."

"And if he doesn't?"

I didn't answer right away. The heat inside me surged again. Sharper this time. It felt like something clawing its way through my chest. I gripped the edge of the bench to steady myself.

"I know you care about him," I said finally. "In your own way. But remember, when it comes to it, I am your blood and you're mine. The bond we have is

stronger. Stronger than whatever mess you have with Cian. He is your cousin. Yes. But I am your father."

Ronan nodded again. Slower this time.

"I understand."

"Good."

I sat back down. The stone bench felt like ice against my back but it did nothing to cool the fire burning through me.

Ronan moved closer. His brow furrowed.

"Are you okay? You look pale."

I forced a smile. It felt wrong on my face. Stretched and unnatural.

"I have never been better."

The lie came easily. Too easily. I had spent a lifetime building lies. Stacking them one on top of the other until they formed something that looked like truth.

This was just one more.

But even as I said it, I felt my body betraying me. The sweat. The trembling. The heat that wouldn't stop spreading.

Something was wrong.

Very wrong.

But I couldn't show it. Not to Ronan. Not to anyone. Weakness was death. Hesitation was defeat. I had taught him that too. Drilled it into him until it became instinct.

So I held his gaze and kept smiling.

"We'll get through this," I said. "Together."

Ronan nodded. He believed me. Of course he did. He always had.

"Together," he repeated.

I leaned my head back against the wall and closed my eyes. The darkness behind my eyelids spun. My thoughts scattered and reformed and scattered again.

War was coming.

I had started it the moment Cian chose to be brave. No. Actually, it had started the moment I decided Cian's father needed to go. The moment I let Gabriel rot in that cell while I took everything they had built including reputation.

And now it would end the same way.

In blood.

In fire.

In whatever remained when the dust finally settled.

I opened my eyes and looked at Ronan. He stood near the bars again.
Watching the corridor and waiting.

He had so much faith in me. I still didn't know why. Because when it came down to it. I was going to save myself. Even now... The things I was feeding him with, they wouldn't come true.

But I guess a side of me was paternal afterall. Lying to him spared him. It would spare him heart ache still the very end.