

To ruin an Omega

Chapter 305: I want to break free 2

FIA

It was only then it sort of dawned to me that I was irrevocably connected to Athena and there was a clear cut reason that Isobel's mother had said I looked so much like Athena.

Muna was my mother and Athena was her mother.

Athena was my grandmother.

My heart skipped multiple beats.

The woman looked up.

I did not know if she could see us. My mother had not said. But her eyes moved across the doorway in a slow, searching sweep, like someone who had learned to pay attention to the edges of rooms, the places where things could come from. Her gaze passed through me and came back and lingered for a moment.

It did not look like recognition. This was something lighter than that. The way you felt the sun on your skin on the first warm day after a long winter, nothing you can name yet, just warmth where there was cold.

"Does she know we're here?" I asked.

"Sometimes." My mother's voice was careful. "When we connect, the walls between moments get thin. She's felt me most of her life too without knowing what I was. I think she decided it was the Goddess."

I watched the woman rest her head back against the stone. Her eyes closed. Her chest rose and fell in the deliberate, disciplined rhythm of someone practicing at being calm.

"She has our hands," I said.

"Yes."

"And your jaw. And—" I stopped. There was too much to list. "She looks like... Except older."

"She is older."

I pressed my own palm against the doorframe and the thin membrane resisted and gave slightly. A flash came through it, brief and sharp as a knife: a corridor very much like this one, a woman being half-carried by two men who did not care if she could keep her feet, a door shutting, the sound of a lock. Then it was gone and all that remained was just stone under my hand.

"How long has she been here?"

My mother's expression did not change but something behind it did.

"A long time," she said. "Most of her youth... and then mine too."

The cold of the room felt sharper than it had a moment ago.

"You were here," I said slowly as I shuddered. "You grew up here."

"Parts of me did." Her voice was even. The evenness of someone who has had a very long time to decide how they felt about something. "The other parts I will grow somewhere else. After."

After. The word carried the whole weight of everything she had never told me about where she came from. Every question I had asked as a child that she had answered with silence or deflection or a gentleness so careful it was its own kind of wall. After she escaped being 'trafficked'. After she was found. After she became just a woman with no pack and no history and a daughter she was raising in a place far away from all of it.

I thought of Pauline. Her sharp eyes. The way she had looked at my face like she was finding something she had lost intentionally and hoped to never find.

"Athena!"

The name came back to me the way it always did. Like something I should know. Like something written in a language I had almost learned.

"Athena," I said.

My mother went very still.

"That's her name." It was not a question. "The woman against the wall... Her name is Athena... Is it not?"

There was a long silence.

"Yes," my mother finally said.

The name settled in my chest with a weight that felt old. Older than me. Older than the dream where a man with a chainsaw had brought it down like a blade. It felt like something that had been waiting a very long time to be spoken in the right place by the right person.

"She's my grandmother," I said. "Isn't she?"

My mother looked at me then. Really looked. The way she used to when I was small and said something that surprised her, when she was trying to decide how much of what she felt to let me see.

"Yes," she said again. Soft. Like the word had cost her something.

I moved into the room.

The membrane resisted and gave and I was inside, properly, as inside as I was capable of being in a place that was not my own time. The air tasted different here. Heavier. Like breathing in something that had been breathed out too many times already.

I crouched down a few feet from the woman against the wall.

She did not open her eyes. But her chin tilted slightly toward me, the way an animal did when it sensed a presence it could not yet see. Her hands loosened around her knees, just fractionally. Like something had told her body to ease.

I looked at her face up close.

My hands. My mother's jaw. The brow that I had, the one that made me look serious when I was only tired. The particular shape of the mouth that meant nothing felt done by half, that meant when this woman loved something she loved it completely and when she decided something she had already finished deciding it by the time she said it out loud.

All of it mine. All of it hers first.

"This place looks different than my dream."

My mother's voice carried across the room, soft and young in a way that still made my skin prickle. Every time she spoke like this, sounding both like a child and someone who had seen too much, it left me off balance. I never quite got used to it.

"He changes things sometimes to make us feel normal," she continued, her eyes drifting over the walls like she was searching for pieces that used to be there. "To give us hope. This tiny prison is better than a small cage."

The words settled in my stomach like something spoiled. I did not want to picture what counted as a cage to her, or what counted as mercy to whoever kept them here. If this was the version meant to feel normal, I did not want to imagine the alternative.

I swallowed and forced my attention away from her, away from the heaviness creeping into my chest, and focused on Athena instead.

"She's been through something recent," I said quietly. I could feel it. Not the specifics but the shape of it. The freshness of a wound underneath the practiced composure. Something had happened and she was sitting here choosing not to break.

"They tried something new today." My mother's voice came from the doorway behind me. She did not come further in. "A new serum. To try to accelerate the process."

"The process of what?"

"His game... Fleshcraft."

"*Fleshcraft?*"

"Yes."