

To ruin an Omega

Chapter 307: What we carry forward

FIA

My mother was quiet for a moment.

"Like I said, every time that we falter," she said carefully, "the same thing happens. You find us. You tell me mostly to be strong and I do. I am strong. I try to be. You tell me. The cycle will be broken..." She stopped and then she started again. "But.. it feels like we will carry this damage into the next life and the next one. I can never get far enough away. I don't think I can ever get far enough ahead."

I thought of my mother's silence. All those years of it. The way she never talked about her pack, her family, where she was from. The way some questions made her go somewhere behind her eyes and come back slightly emptier than she had left.

But... she was wrong. She had gotten out. She had not have gotten away in every sense. Not entirely. Not from the inside of it. But she did get far enough. She got far ahead.

"It will be fine," I said. "You will live. It will all be fine at the end of the day. Your mother will live—"

"She won't." She cut in, shaking her head. "You do not need to lie to me. I see glimpses of a grim future for us. Nothing for myself. But plenty for her. She dies in a pool of her own blood. I cannot even bring myself to tell her and I just have a feeling that it will be all because of—"

"Because of you?" I probed.

"Yes."

I looked at her across the room. The woman who had carried my mother through the worst thing possible and had paid for it by making herself into a reason to stay.

For a moment I could not answer her. The words sat heavy in my throat, tangled with a thought I did not want to examine too closely. I looked at the woman again, at the stillness that clung to her like a second skin, and something cold slipped into the space behind my ribs.

I had always believed survival was the victory. That staying alive, no matter how broken the shape of that life became, was the part that mattered most. It was the ending every story clawed toward.

But as I watched her sit there, unmoving and unreachable, the certainty I had clung to began to loosen.

What if staying had not been mercy?

What if it had been another kind of sentence.

The idea made my stomach twist, sharp and guilty, like I was betraying her just by letting it exist. She had fought so hard to remain. She had forced herself to breathe through years that never gave anything back. She had made herself into the reason my mother kept going.

Yet the thought kept creeping in anyway, quiet and unwanted.

What if death had once looked like rest to her. Not failure, not escape, just the end of the constant fight.

I hated myself for thinking it, even as I could not stop.

But the fact was the fact. Athena did not exist in our present and currently, Athena and my mother were each other's cages.

"You get out," I finally heard myself say.

Mother looked at me in surprise. "What?"

"You get out," I repeated. "She needs to know that you get out. That whatever happens to her, you will make it."

My mother inhaled slowly.

"Fia—"

"She's staying to protect you." I looked back at her. "If she knew you will be safe she wouldn't have a reason to torture herself. It's the only thing keeping her here. Her fear for you." I felt the truth of it settle into something certain and clear. "It's the only thing keeping you here too. That's what the cycle is. She stays for you, you stay for her. Something happens to her and then it becomes your burden. The shoe fits when passed around. And then one day it would become mine. The same thing. Perhaps with a different name. But the same nonetheless."

The silence that followed felt vast.

I could feel the tonic working at the edges of my consciousness. This dream was getting less solid. The torchlight was starting to blur at the periphery. I was running out of time in this place.

"Tell me I'm wrong," I said.

My mother did not tell me I was wrong.

"She's already gone, Mom."

The words came out quietly. I had not planned them. They arrived already finished.

"Athena... Whatever happened to her, it already happened. I'm standing here. Which means you made it out. The future is not set in stone. Maybe your vision does happen. Maybe it doesn't. Maybe she runs too. Maybe she is found, or something shifts. But look at her, she's already gone from this place. I know it. You know it too."

My mother's breath came out unsteady. She pressed her lips together. The grief on her face was real and I hated being the one to put it there but I had run out of time for doing this gently.

"She doesn't know that," my mother said quietly.

"No," I agreed. "She doesn't."

We looked at each other.

I was fading. I could feel it. The stone under my feet was going less solid. The edges of the room were softening into something less defined.

"I don't know how to make her hear me," I said. "But you do. You've been reaching her your whole life." I held my mother's gaze. "Tell her. Tell her you make it. Tell her it's done. Tell her she is allowed to go."

My mother looked at Athena against the wall. Long and searching, the look of someone reading a page they have read so many times the words have stopped being words and become something else, texture and weight and the smell of a specific kind of paper.

Then she walked into the room.

She crossed to the wall. She crouched down the way I had. She reached out and placed her hand over Athena's, and this time there was no membrane, no resistance. Her hand covered her mother's completely.

Athena's eyes opened.

I watched it happen. The way her breathing shifted. The way the careful composure loosened in a way that was not collapse but was the thing just before it, the moment before a person lets themselves cry after deciding for a very long time not to.

Her eyes swept the room and stopped on the space I was standing.

I did not know if she could see me or only sense something at the edge of her. But she was looking directly at me, or through me, or at the place where I almost was.

My mother leaned close to her ear and said something I could not hear.

Athena closed her eyes.

Her shoulders came down from somewhere around her ears so slowly that I had not even realized they had been there. Her hands unclenched from each other. She sat there for a moment with her head tipped back against the stone and her chest rising and falling in something that was not quite the practiced, disciplined breath of before. This was different. This was the breathing of someone who had just been given permission to feel the weight of something and had taken it.

Then she stood up.

She stood up like someone who had made a decision. No hesitation. No backward glance at the cot and the tiny table and the window. She pulled her clothes straight and she lifted her chin and she walked toward the corridor with the first full stride I had seen from her, that was not careful, nor contained. For the first time, it seemed like she was not apologizing for the space she took up.

She walked off.

My mother stayed crouched where she had been. Her hand still extended over the place where Athena's had been. She looked at her own palm for a moment.

Then she turned and looked at me.

The room was almost gone. The edges of everything had softened into something like fog. I had almost no time left.

"Fia," she said.

"I'm here."

"Thank you."

I nodded. But I had a gnawing question of my own.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why did you never tell me?" I asked.

"I don't know yet."

She did have a point. I couldn't hold this version of her accountable. Part of me still felt this was mostly a dream. But then another thought came.

"What are you running toward?" I asked her. The question I had needed to ask since I arrived. "All those years. What kept you going? What did you tell yourself when it was worst?"

My mother looked at me across the dissolving room.

Her mouth curved. Tired but real. The smile I knew.

"*You*," she said. "It must have been you. In the glimpses I see, it is always you."

I woke up without a scream. Just all at once, like something had grabbed me out of deep water and dragged me back to the surface before I even knew I was drowning. The ceiling above me came into focus first, pale and familiar. Then the warmth of the sheets twisted around my legs, the faint blue of early night pressing at the edges of the curtains.

Cian's heartbeat thudded softly under my ear, steady and alive.

I stayed still for a long time, afraid that if I moved too soon the last pieces of it would slip away. Dreams usually fell apart the second I reached for them. They blurred and thinned until all that remained was a feeling I could not explain. This one did not fade. Every part of it stayed sharp. The corridor, the stone, the woman who had lifted her chin and walked out of a room she had spent her whole life inside.

My mother's voice echoed in my head again. *You*.

I stared up at the ceiling and let the truth settle, heavy and strange and impossible to ignore. I had a grandmother named Athena. I had known her name before I understood why. I had known her face without realizing it belonged to my own blood. Somehow, through years I had never lived, I had kept finding my way back to her because something in me refused to leave her behind.

My mother had grown up there. She had been born inside that place and known nothing else until something shifted and she ran, or was found, or was carried out. She never spoke about it afterward, and I had spent years misunderstanding the silence. I thought it meant distance. I thought it meant she did not trust me enough to tell me the truth. That she didn't care for her old family.

Lying there now, I understood it differently.

It was survival. The quiet, deliberate kind that refused to let the past breathe if it did not have to.

My chest hurt so badly it stole the air from my lungs. Beside me, Cian shifted in his sleep and his arm tightened around my waist, the small instinctive movement of someone who sensed I was no longer fully there. I covered his hand with mine and held it in place.

I thought about Athena standing up. I thought about my mother as a girl moving through those corridors with her shoulders drawn inward, carrying weight that should never have been hers, and still finding a way out.

Then my thoughts drifted to the vision of Cian's death that I still had not spoken aloud, the one sitting heavy inside me like a secret I could not outrun.

Cycles. The ones passed down. The ones chosen. The ones broken once you finally understood what they were.

Somewhere deep in the quiet of my mind, I heard the faint echo of a chainsaw that was not there, and beneath it, softer than breath, a name.

A name that was now clearer than ever before.

Athena.