

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 313: Conjoined

CIAN

She said nothing.

The silence stretched between us until it felt like something physical, like a rope pulled tight enough to hum. I waited. She kept her mouth closed. Her eyes stayed wet. She stood there like if she didn't move, if she didn't speak, the whole thing might pass over her.

Something shifted in my chest. It started as grief. It hardened fast. Turned into something with edges.

"Answer me."

She didn't.

Her lips pressed together. Her shoulders stayed squared in that careful way she did when she thought stillness made her smaller, less visible, less guilty.

"Madeline." My voice came out low at first, then it ripped free of my control and echoed off the walls. "Answer me."

She flinched. Actually flinched. The tears were still clinging to her lashes but her spine went straight, like she'd remembered who she was supposed to be. I watched something reorganize itself behind her eyes. Fear shifting into calculation.

"Aldric put a sentinel to watch me," she said, barely above a whisper. "If you keep yelling, you could alert them."

I stared at her. It took effort not to laugh.

"I wasn't followed," I said. "I made sure of it. That ends that."

She held my gaze like she wanted to argue, then let it drop.

"Can I cast a spell?" she asked.

The request did something ugly to me. I didn't think. My hands reacted before my mind caught up. The claws pushed through my skin slow, which was worse than if they'd torn out clean. I felt the pressure build, the split, the sting. I looked down and saw the blood well against my palm, bright and immediate.

Then I looked back at her.

"Do not," I said, and my voice was steady in a way that surprised me, "even consider it."

"It's just to seal the room," she whispered. "So no one can hear us."

The fact that she thought lowering her voice would soften me almost made me furious all over again.

"The problem," I said, pressing my bleeding hand against my thigh, "is that I don't trust you anymore. Not even a little. So no spells. Just talk."

She wiped at her face with the back of her hand. The gesture made her look young. Too young. She had always looked younger when she cried, and that had always been my weakness. It used to undo me.

It didn't tonight.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," she said. "Cian, I swear."

"Yet you did." I kept my tone even because if I let it slip I didn't know where it would go. "More than once. You killed a witch. You stirred hate against me from your own people. You shaped it carefully. Made me the problem. Made yourself the solution. Why? So you could circle back and look clean?"

I had to breathe. Just breathe. Because saying it out loud made it real in a way that thinking it hadn't.

"How long?" I asked. "How long have you been working for Aldric?"

"Cian..." She said my name the way she always had when she wanted to slow me down. In that soft, weighted and intimate manner.

It dragged against me.

My hand moved before I chose to move it. The claws caught the light and her eyes dropped to them instantly. She stumbled back and hit the wall, but that was pointless. I was already too close. Close enough to see the red threading through the whites of her eyes. Close enough to see where her tears had cut clean tracks down her face.

Something in me pulled back at the last second. I forced my hand down.

"Please," I said. It came out rougher than I wanted. "Just talk. Don't say my name."

She started crying again, and this time it wasn't careful. It wasn't pretty. It was messy and loud and humiliating. I watched her fall apart and felt two things at once. The years of knowing her. The refusal to let those years soften me.

"When your father died," she said.

My stomach dropped so fast it made me dizzy.

"What."

She covered her mouth like she could shove the words back inside herself. Her shoulders shook. She kept crying.

"I didn't want to do it," she whispered.

The drop in my stomach flattened into something cold. Clean, as it was exact.

I stood there and made myself understand what she had just said.

"So when you asked me to choose," I said slowly, because if I rushed I might lose control, "between you and the seat of Skollrend. That was because..."

She nodded.

I laughed. It sounded wrong in my own ears. Scraped raw.

"Wow," I said, shaking my head. "How could you? That was my father. You knew how much I loved him. You knew. How could you even think—"

"I had no choice."

The words snapped something.

"What does that mean?" The cold cracked open and heat poured through. "You keep saying that. I had no choice. What does that functionally mean, Madeline? Because from where I'm standing you made plenty. You planned. You maneuvered. You lied."

"He threatened me." Her voice fractured around the words. "Aldric threatened me."

I stopped moving.

She pressed her hands together like she was praying, eyes fixed on the floor between us.

"With what," I asked. My voice had gone flat. "What could he possibly threaten you with."

"My father's sins," she said. "My family's."

I felt my jaw tighten.

"Don't be vague." I stepped closer. She didn't move this time. "Do not be vague with me right now. I promise you, Madeline, your magic will not save you from me. Not tonight."

"I would never hurt you."

The words hit wrong. Hollow.

"The feeling," I said, and I could feel the anger threading back through me, slow and rising, "is not mutual."

She swallowed again and I watched her throat work like the words were sharp on the way up.

"Aldric found out my father was involved in fleshcraft," she said. "He found out and he kept it. He used it. I couldn't let that come out. I couldn't let my family—"

Fleshcraft.

The word settled in my head heavy and immediate. I did not need an explanation. I knew what it meant in our world. I knew what it would do to a family name. The kind of stain that did not wash off, the kind that followed bloodlines for generations. Standing lost. Alliances dissolved. Safety revoked in quiet ways that ended in very loud consequences.

I understood her fear.

I also understood that she had weighed it against me and decided I was lighter.

"So you were willing," I said, and my voice did not rise because it did not need to, "to burn everything we were. To burn my life. To burn the love I had for you, which was considerable, because your family.... No, your father... Because he needed protection from consequences he earned."

I took a breath and it scraped on the way in.

"They held priority. Over me. Over my father. Over my entire family." I looked at her properly then, not at the tears, not at the shaking hands. At her. "It's a good thing we never actually ended up together."

"Cian—"

"Why are you here."

The question came out flat and I was already answering it for myself as I spoke. The shape of it had been there all along. I just had not wanted to look directly at it.

"The witches had to be turned against me so you could step in as my rescuer. That was the plan. Yours and Aldric's. You make the wound, then you offer the bandage. Goddess..."

The realization hit and with it came something ugly and humiliating.

"...I am so dumb," I muttered. "How did I not see it."

"He wants me to destroy what you have with Fia," she said.

There was no venom in it. No flourish. Just fact.

I nodded slowly because of course that would be the next move. Isolate me even more using her. Strip me. Make me easier to unseat.

"And you were fine with that."

She did not answer right away. She looked at the floor like there might be something written there that could save her, then she lifted her gaze back to mine. For a moment her face did something complicated. It did not look like she burning through that manipulation juice. At least...not entirely. Something raw this time slipped through.

"I won't lie to you," she said. "It was one of the reasons I came."

The honesty almost made me laugh.

"Because as vile as I know I look to you right now, I still love you. I love you very much." She inhaled, steadying herself. "So yes. I came to break you up. But I started to see that you had already moved on. That I don't sit at the front of your mind the way I used to."

Something in her expression shifted and I hated that part of me could still read it. The grief there was not staged. It did not look around for approval.

"It hurt," she said. "Watching you choose her in ways you could never choose me. No matter what I did. I thought we were conjoined. That neither of us could survive separation. I... was... wrong."

I stood there and let that hang between us.

"Fuck you," I said finally.

There was no fire in it. Just exhaustion. "As much as I want you dead right now, I can't bring myself to do it."

I looked at her and I felt the truth of that settle in, unwanted and solid. I could not kill her. Even now. Even knowing what she had done. That weakness, or mercy, or whatever it was, lodged itself under my ribs and refused to move.

"The good thing," I continued, "is that I don't have to keep the traps I set for Aldric and Ronan in reserve anymore. You'll do just fine in their place."

She went completely still.

It was the stillness of someone who had just realized they had stepped somewhere they did not understand.

Her eyes lifted to mine slowly.

"Ronan," she said. "Your Beta?"

I stared at her.

"Please," I said, the word coming out sharper than I meant it to. "Like you don't know."

Something crossed her face then that did not belong to performance. I couldn't ignore the tiny tells. The shifts of breath. The way her gaze hardened.

"Hekate," she whispered, and for the first time, she sounded more than genuinely terrified and relieved all at once. "He's the dead man's switch."