

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 316: Once upon a time 1

CIAN

The memory did not knock. It did not ask. It just slid in and took over.

I was seventeen.

The pool had still been warm that October. Father had gotten the sentinels to do something to the pipes that summer, some complicated rerouting that meant the water held heat longer than it should have. Even after he died, I barely touched the damn error for almost two years because it sort of comforted me.

But this was a pleasant memory. My father was alive. I could still be callous and full of stupid selfish ambitions. This was one of the many nights that Madeline was there, and she liked the water.

She floated on her back in the deep end, hair spreading around her in a light halo that caught the underwater lights and turned almost gold at the edges. Her eyes were closed. Her face tipped up toward the sky like she was listening for something in it. The air above us had that sharp October edge, cold enough to bite at your shoulders when you climbed out, but the water wrapped around you and held.

I sat on the edge with my feet in, watching her drift in slow, lazy circles.

"Your father talked to you again," I said.

She opened one eye, just a slit. "How do you always know."

I had plenty to say. Because I watched you. Because I learned the way your shoulders shifted when you were carrying something heavy. Because you got quiet in a way that wasn't peaceful.

But I settled for something smaller.

"Because you get like this," I told her. "Quiet, but not the good kind."

She rolled over and righted herself, treading water. The lights under the surface caught her face from below and made her look unreal, like something pulled out of a painting and set down in my backyard. There was always something older in her expression, something that did not match the number of years she'd lived.

"He's not wrong," she said. Even. Careful. Like she had practiced it so it would not shake. "That's the thing. He's not entirely wrong and I can't argue him out of it because I know that."

I slid into the pool before I could think too hard about it. The water closed over my shoulders and the cold air vanished. I moved toward her, cutting through the light ripples until I was close enough that she reached out without looking and steadied herself on my arms.

"What did he say," I asked.

She hesitated. Just long enough for me to feel it.

"That you'll still have to marry a werewolf woman." Her hands tightened slightly where they held me. "That a witch wouldn't be enough. That when it comes to it, bloodline will matter and I don't have the right one. Not for you." She swallowed and kept going anyway. "Still... this is fine now. But fine now doesn't mean anything later."

Something hot and ugly moved through me at that. Not at her. At him. At the idea of him sitting somewhere, reaching into her head with that calm voice and rearranging her thoughts like furniture.

"He's wrong," I said.

"Cian—"

"He's wrong. It'll only be you."

She looked at me then, really looked. That weighing look she had, the one that made you feel like you were being measured against something you could not see. It had always been there, even when we were younger. Even when we were just two annoying kids who met by accident and never quite untangled after.

"You know there is a chance," she said slowly, "that we will not last forever. I understand that. I'm not being dramatic. I understand that things change and people change and—"

"Nonsense."

I cut her off because I could not stand the shape of the sentence. The way it bent toward an ending that did not include me.

"I did research," she went on, stubborn as ever. "It is rare. Wolves and witches. It happens, but it is rare, and the rare cases... most of them end up in some kind of polygamous arrangement. Because of the pack. Because of bloodline pressure. Because of expectation."

"That's not me."

"You don't know—"

"That's not me, Madeline."

I meant it with everything in me. I meant it in the way seventeen year olds meant things, like the world will bend if they pushed hard enough.

She looked away, toward the far end of the pool. The water lapped softly around us, small sounds that filled the space where her voice stopped.

"When my dad talks to me," she said after a moment, quieter now, "he gets in completely. I don't know how he does it. I'll be perfectly fine and then he'll say something and it's like he just reaches in and rearranges things. And I know it's happening and I still can't stop it."

I hated that more than anything she had said before.

"Hey." I waited until she looked back at me. "Do you want me to promise? I'll promise you right now."

Her brow furrowed. "Forget it."

"I'm serious."

She shook her head, something soft flickering across her face before it shut down again. "I'm being dramatic. It's nothing. It's just him. I'll get over it. I always do."

"No." I moved my hands to her waist and held her there so she could not drift away from me, even by accident. "I mean it. Anything to settle your mind completely. Even if it's a fucking blood covenant."

That pulled a sound out of her. Not quite a laugh, but close.

"A blood covenant," she repeated, incredulous.

"If that's what it takes."

"You're ridiculous." But she was smiling now, just barely. The small smile she gave when she did not want to give too much. "We do actually have something like that. Closer to it."

"What thing?"

"A lot of people call it a soul kiss. It's a binding vow. Between two souls." She tilted her head slightly, searching for language that did not make it sound absurd. "It's not a small thing. It's... meta level shit."

I almost laughed at the way she said it, half academic, half embarrassed.

"Sounds important," I said.

"It is."

"Let's do it."

She blinked at me, water sliding off her lashes. "What?"

"Let's do it."

"Cian." She was studying my face like she expected to find the punchline there. "You don't have to do that. Really. I was just... I wasn't suggesting—"

I reached for her hand under the water and laced my fingers through hers. The pool lights made everything below the surface look softer, distorted, like we were already somewhere else.

"I want to," I said.

And I did. Not because I understood the full weight of it. Not because I had thought through consequences. I wanted something that would shut his voice out of her head. I wanted something that would root us so deep no one could pry us apart with talk of bloodlines and pack expectations.

She held my gaze for a long moment. The sky above us was dark and wide, pricked with stars. The air beyond the edge of the pool was already too cold for bare skin. The water held us in its warmth like a secret.

"Okay," she said softly.

That was all she said.

The memory thinned and cracked at the edges.

The warmth of the pool drained away. The October sky disappeared. I came back slowly, like surfacing from deep water. To the hard floor under my palms. To the present. To her face inches from mine, older now, sharper in places time had carved.

To everything that had happened in the years between that night and this one. The fights. The silence. The things neither of us had predicted at seventeen.

I looked at her for a long time without speaking. I could still feel the phantom heat of that water on my skin, the certainty I had carried like armor.

It felt almost naive now. Almost.

But not entirely.

"Make your stupid pact," I said again, quieter this time, because even now some part of me was still that boy in the pool, willing to bind his soul just to quiet the doubt in her eyes. "Or are you having second thoughts?"

"No," Madeline said.