

TO RUIN AN OMEGA

Chapter 317: Once upon a time 2

CIAN

Her hand found mine before I could pull it back or rethink what I had asked of her. She turned my palm upward like it was the most natural thing in the world and held it between both of hers. I watched her close her eyes, not in hesitation but in focus, like she was reaching inward and lining something up properly before she let it loose.

When she opened them again, there was a thin thread of light sliding between her fingers. Pale silver. Fine as wire. The kind of magic she used when she was being careful.

It sliced across my palm in one clean line.

I did not flinch. The sting was sharp but brief, honest pain, nothing dramatic. I had expected worse. A thin red line welled up immediately and she held my hand steady, her grip firm but gentle, like she was trying not to waste what she had just drawn out of me.

Then she brought that same thread of light to her own palm.

She went slower.

I saw her jaw tighten. A muscle flickered there but she did not make a sound. The cut opened, red blooming against her skin, and for a second I had the strange, dislocated thought that we were too young for this and too old at the same time.

She pressed our hands together.

The blood met between our palms, warm and slick. She laced her fingers through mine to keep them locked, to keep the contact unbroken. Her eyes dropped to where we were joined. When she spoke, her voice was low and steady, every word placed like it had weight.

"What passes through my hands, let it not become a weapon against him. What I carry in the dark, let it turn to smoke before it reaches him. What I am, bind it to his protection. Should I move against him with intent, should I act to break, to harm, to betray the life that holds this pact, let it come back on me threefold. Let me carry what I meant for him."

The air shifted.

That was the only way I can describe it. It thickened. Pressed in. Like the moment before a storm breaks when everything goes charged and tight. Something moved through the room that was not wind and not sound. It settled around us, heavy and certain, like something vast had leaned closer and decided to stay.

Madeline gasped. Not controlled. Not graceful. A sharp, involuntary pull of breath. Her free hand shot out and gripped my forearm hard enough to bruise. The silver thread that had been so fine and contained bloomed bright, raced up our joined hands in a flash, and then vanished.

I felt it hit my chest like surf meeting rock.

Not pain. Not exactly. A rush. Deep. Wordless. Something inside me recognized something in it, the way instinct recognizes a cliff edge before your eyes fully register it. I felt her there. Not her thoughts. Not her plans. Just the undeniable fact of her existence braided into mine in a way that felt deliberate.

Then it was over.

The room went still again.

She let out a long breath, like she had been underwater and had only just surfaced. Her eyes lingered on our hands before she looked up at me.

"There we go," she said. The edges of her voice were uneven. "Do you believe me now?"

"What does that even entail exactly?" I asked.

She turned our hands over once, examining the cuts that were already beginning to knit closed under her magic. Then she let me go.

"If I act against you with intent," she said, "not accident, not circumstance. Intent to harm. To betray. To move against your life or your safety. The binding turns on me. Whatever I meant for you, I receive. Threefold." She held my gaze. "I have made myself the guarantee."

I stayed quiet.

"It also means," she continued, "that my magic will resist me if I try to use it against you directly. We have done this before. Something similar at least." She paused, swallowed. "It is just like that. Just stronger."

I looked at her properly then.

The tear tracks on her face. The redness in her eyes she had not bothered to hide. The way she was holding herself upright through force of will alone. She was watching me carefully, like she was braced for something but refusing to show it.

"So about Aldric," she said quietly. "I know that is what you're thinking. Tell me where to start and I will give you everything."

I did not answer right away.

Something moved through me that I did not want to name. It was not softness. It was not forgiveness. It was something older and more complicated than either.

"I'm sorry for this," I said.

Her brow creased, confused.

My hand closed around her throat.

Not wild. Not explosive. Measured. I set my thumb to one side and curved my fingers around the other and tightened just enough to take her air. I felt the instant her body went rigid, shock traveling through her before her mind caught up. The sound that left her was cut off halfway to a scream.

Her hand flew to my wrist.

Her mouth opened. Her eyes locked on mine.

I watched her face because I owed her that much. I watched the understanding land. I watched the hurt flare behind it. And then I watched her try.

I felt the magic before I saw it. It gathered in her chest, a swell of power pulling toward her hands. It surged forward and then stuttered; collapsed in on

itself. A broken sound slipped out of her. The magic flickered weakly between her fingers once, twice, then died.

The pact.

She had built it exactly as she said she would.

Her grip on my wrist weakened as the lack of air took its toll. Her eyes stayed on mine. There was betrayal there, yes, but something else too. A kind of ruined clarity.

"I'm sorry," I said again, quieter. "But I have to hold all the cards this time around."

Her knees buckled. I eased her down with my other hand before she could hit the floor, lowering her carefully. Her head tipped to the side as her eyes slid closed. I kept my hold long enough to be sure her breathing had settled into something slow and steady.

Then I let go.

I stayed crouched over her for a moment, my hand hovering uselessly above her shoulder. The room was silent except for the faint sound of her breath.

My family name first.

It always had. She knew that. She had always known it, even when she convinced herself she was folded into that definition.

Well, once upon a time, she had been.

I stood and flexed my fingers, feeling the faint echo of the pact still sitting under my skin like a second pulse. Then I looked toward the door.

There was no space left for hesitation.

I had work to do.