

Symphony of Death

Chapter 1

I paused before the mirror in the corridor as I stepped out of my room. Everything had changed—except for the dark circles that came with too little sleep.

"That's the only constant thing," I said breathily and went to the dining table.

As the darkness thinned with daybreak, the weight in my chest didn't lift. It never did.

Angie, immersed in her DS-consoles, barely looked up when I sat at the dining table. With her black hair tied in a sleek bun, she looked extremely professional and mature, which she was not—mostly. She was an outspoken social butterfly.

One look at her outer appearance, and a person would categorize her as a pretentious, spoiled, rich girl, but she was the opposite of what she presented. She'd fought tooth and nail to work at that media house.

We had met in university and quickly became lifelong friends.

"Are you okay?" A grim look marred her face as Angie scrutinized me closely. "Did you forget to turn on your lights last night?"

"It's work," I sighed. "The designs for the new launch kept me up all night. Nat left?" I inquired, reaching for the toast.

Nat, our third musketeer, worked as a hotel manager at The Moonlight—and unlike Angie's career, she was ice cold unless provoked.

Angie only bobbed her head without looking at me.

"Laurel called me yesterday," Angie said out of the blue. Her hazel eyes focused on me in all seriousness. "You have not been answering her calls? You didn't fight with her again, did you?"

"I don't fight with her, Angie," I replied. Her brow shot up at my defensive tone.

"Can we not talk about this first thing in the morning?" I sighed.

"Call her. She seemed to have something important to tell," Angie pressed. "Besides, haven't you punished her with your silence for long enough?"

Ten years.

I will be turning twenty-five soon.

A lot changed, but sometimes, I felt as if nothing changed. However far away I was, she was still hovering over me.

"She is your family," Angie tried to reason.

Not really.

The past was a closed book—no memories of my parents, only Laurel's guardianship. Yes, she raised me, but I didn't quite feel a warm familial feeling when I thought of her. Laurel did everything a parent should do—except for loving me.

Her care was rooted in obligation and responsibility rather than emotion.

I used to live in Medford with her for most of my life. Things called for a change. I left for Seattle and moved in with my two best friends.

I don't regret it.

I changed the subject, eyeing the iPad in her hand and her bitter expression. "What's going on with you? Wasn't this your dream place? Got fed up in two years?"

"Don't start," Angie groaned. "It's the new boss. DS-con was taken over last week."

I blinked in surprise.

"We were just informed yesterday. The new boss is coming today," Angie sighed. "It now belongs to Blackstone Co."

"You're not losing your job, are you?" I asked in all seriousness.

"Can you not jinx me?" Angie raised her hand. "You know who owns Blackstone Co., right?" she inquired.

"Seriously!" She jumped out of her chair at my lack of quick response.

"Relax," I cringed. "Everyone knows about the phantom family. Geez! You are going to make me go deaf."

"They are not phantom people, Ana," Angie scooped. "They just keep a low profile. Besides, I did some research... The new boss is quite hot."

I rolled my eyes at her. Angie was hopeless when it came to men. Nat and I were constantly subjected to her—way too elaborate—stories about a new guy she had met, only for her to declare a few weeks later that he was never worth her time to begin with.

"Don't look at me like I'm some creep. I was just investigating."

"Aren't you getting late, Angela Roberts?" I checked my watch and Angie did too. With wide eyes, she jumped up and ran for the door.

"Wish me luck!"

"Good luck," I responded nonchalantly.

A few minutes later, I got up to leave as well. Just as I reached the main door, my feet halted again. I stared at my reflection once more.

A redhead with brown eyes, standing before me with a figure I worked hard to maintain, stared back at me—replacing the small, scared girl I once knew.

But still, my eyes only saw her in my reflection.

I sighed and walked out. Work was just a few blocks away, and I usually liked to walk. I pushed through the sea of people, eyes on my watch.

I hissed softly when my left wrist tingled, just for a second. I shook it off. I stepped forward into the street, the sound of a scream slicing the air behind me.

Then—silence. A pause. A flash of black.

I fell on the hard road. My glasses and bag fell, and the designs flew all over the place. Miraculously though, I wasn't hit. The car stopped before it could have sent me flying or crushed me. I wonder how it stopped when it was coming at that speed.

I didn't even hear the tires screech.

Once the shock faded, I sat up and glanced at my palms—they were badly scraped.

"Damn it." I scrambled to gather my scattered things.

"Are you okay?" someone asked.

"I'm fine." I studied the papers in the glasses and finally looked at the audience around me.

"I'm totally fine. See!" I flexed my knees after standing up. "Nothing serious."

I glanced at the car that almost signed my death warrant. *A black hawk.*

Few people drove such cars anymore. It had black plates—rare, expensive, and always a sign of danger.

Better leave than get in trouble with an egocentric rich lunatic.

I started sprinting and didn't stop until I was inside the building and had reached my door. This little accident had made me late for my meeting, which was the last thing I needed right now.

"What a fantastic start to the day!" I dumped my bag on my table and rushed to the meeting room. As expected, everyone was ready to murder me.

"Anastasia!" Hannah groaned in frustration.

"Scold later." I gave the USB to Nia and passed the designs around.

After the meeting—which thankfully went smoothly—Hannah beckoned me, a frown on her face. But when she saw the scrapes on my palms, her anger softened into concern.

"What happened?"

"I'm fine," I said quickly. Hannah looked at me with a scrutinizing gaze.

"Audrey's pissed." I muttered. "You took this launch from her and dumped it on me last minute."

"This old demands the best, Ana," she said sternly. "Being too empathetic will cost you."

Harsh. But true.

Hannah's assistant, Chris, approached us. "They're here," he announced.

I glanced at Hannah, but she just ushered me toward the auditorium and told Chris to gather everyone.

I was mildly perplexed when we entered the hall.

"Sit," Hannah said before moving toward the stage.

She clapped once, and everyone fell silent.

"Our company was taken over last week," Hannah said. She didn't beat around the bush. "The Alicere is now part of Blackstone.Co."

You have got to be kidding me.

The doors opened, and every head turned.

"Meet the new owner of The Alicere."

A sharp pain shot through my left wrist. I looked back just as three men descended toward Hannah.

Their strides were arrogant, their postures dripping with conceit. I felt a dangerous aura.

The pain in my wrist ached violently, a sharp pulse that hadn't visited me in years. Beneath the skin, something stirred—uttering like a wing—and I froze.

"Ana?" Nia touched my shoulder. "Is everything okay with you?"

I thought I'd buried everything when I left Medford. But some things don't stay dead.

"Excuse me," I ran out of there.

I cradled my wrist to my chest until I reached the restroom. I locked the door after making sure no one was inside and rushed toward the washbasins.

I rolled the sleeve up to reveal my wrist—and nearly collapsed.

The symbol—it pulsed with fire under my skin, like molten ink etching itself all over again.

After all these years—why now?

I turned on the faucet and put my wrist under cold water. The sting ached beneath my skin like fire. Cold water didn't soothe the burning symbol, only my rising panic.

"Not again."

I stayed in the restroom for ages. Luckily, no one came, giving me time to compose myself.

I rushed to Hannah's office, knocked once, and entered without waiting.

"Hannah, do you have a—"

She wasn't alone.

"Yes, Anastasia?" Her smile was forced.

"Can I take the day off?" Her brow furrowed at my abrupt request.

I looked at the three men seated across from her. *Our bosses.*

"Anastasia Grace?"

The deep, haunting voice chilled me.

I hid my left wrist behind my back as the sting pulsed again.

"Something urgent came up," I said, trying not to wince as the man who spoke rose and approached.

"Urgent?" he echoed, amused and dark. "What could be more urgent than meeting your new boss?"

"Work."

"Anastasia!" Hannah shot me a warning glare. "I'm sorry, Cain. She is—"

"Untamed," he said calmly. "I don't tolerate insubordination and arrogance."

Cain Black.

The eldest son—and ruler—of the Black Empire.

I studied him slowly, despite myself. No wonder the scorn and arrogance.

Cain Black didn't just have money and power—he had looks that made it unfair to call him human.

He wore a charcoal gray suit tailored to his tall, muscular frame—easily six-two, with broad shoulders and lethal grace. His face was unnervingly perfect: turquoise eyes, perfectly styled black hair, sharp cheekbones, full lips, and an aristocratic nose.

His complexion was perfectly balanced.

So, he's the one no one ever spots in public.

The phantom lord. *No wonder he fuels endless gossip.*

"Ana!" Hannah's voice interrupted my mental check-out session. "Meet Cain Black and his brothers, Aeron Black and Xic Black." She motioned toward them. "Cain will look after The Alicere."

This is bad news.

"She seems fiercely displeased," Xic mused. "Interesting."

"Ana is—"

"I will decide, Hannah," Cain cut her off. "You may leave, Ms. Grace."

I didn't need to be told twice. "Arrogant ass," I muttered, stomping toward the elevator.

I stepped onto the ground floor and rushed out. "I need to tell Angie and Nat." I rubbed my left wrist softly.

I need to call Laurel.

Three sleek cars pulled into the driveway. I didn't have to guess who they belonged to. Cain walked past me right on cue.

Xic and Aeron got into their rides, while Cain's chauffeur opened the door to the same car that had nearly run me over.

I kept my face blank when he glanced back. I felt the piercing gaze behind those shades.

Cain Black would mow someone down and sleep just fine.

My heart pounded with something between fear and dread. The pulse under my skin throbbed again as he got inside his car.

I frowned at my wrist when their cars drove away. "Definitely nothing good."