

Chapter 17

I was exhausted from the months spent setting up the studio, but it was finally set to soar. Butterflies swirled in my stomach. It was finally happening—my studio boutique. I named it *Pink Carnation*, in memory of Laurel.

I could never repay her for everything she did for me, but I would honor her by staying strong. I was determined not to lose. Laurel might not be here with me in person, but she was watching over me, guiding me. She would've been so proud seeing me living my dream.

I vowed to make the best out of it—for her, for my friends.

I still couldn't believe I had found such a perfect place. The rent was cheap, the location amazing. The only thing was the owner... I had only met him once, and the meeting was...strange.

Flashback

"I assume you found the place to your liking?" a velvety voice interrupted my thoughts.

The intruder walked closer with a bright smile and extended his hand.

"I'm Logan Usoro. A pleasure to meet you."

"Owner?" I asked.

He nodded.

I was expecting an old man, not this Greek god. Young, handsome, and tall with a nice lean build. Among every other feature, his icy blue eyes and platinum hair stood out.

"Is this your real hair color?" I blurted out unthinkingly while shaking his hand.

"As far as I can remember," Logan chuckled, making me flustered. "People compliment me all the time, but this is new."

His blue eyes danced with amusement, but there was something...ominous about his look, too. A shiver ran up my spine, and it was different from the one I experienced in Cain's presence. I frowned slightly at Logan. He was handsome, but it wasn't attraction that was messing with me.

I pulled my hand out of his grasp rather roughly.

"Sorry," I mumbled, feeling moronic for my action. I suddenly didn't like him touching me.

"Have I offended you?" he asked politely.

"No," I answered quickly while checking my watch. I didn't want to be in his presence.

"I need to be somewhere."

"Looking forward to seeing you in action, Ms. Grace," he said, his smile not faltering for a moment.

I could feel his eyes following me on my way out.

End of flashback

Still, I couldn't believe my luck. It felt like freedom—though Cain's home was still a prison.

But somehow, it was becoming familiar, and that was even more unnerving. The mere reminder of him left a bitter taste in my mouth.

He pretended indifference, yet I knew—every little detail of my day made its way to him.

I was about to take a quick shower before heading to bed early, but when I opened the door to the bathroom I froze mid-motion. The air shifted, sharp and sudden.

I hissed at the sharp sting coursing through my eyes. The lights flickered. The temperature dropped. Three or four Anima appeared out of thin air. I stumbled back, crashing into the closet. My eyes switched completely in their presence.

These were abnormal.

"Cain!" I ran for the door—only to crash into his hard chest.

Relief flooded me and I latched onto him. "They're here."

He scanned the room, eyes sharp. "You screamed, so I came to check," he said, his hand moving to my hair, brushing away the damp strands from my face.

I followed his gaze, turning slowly toward the corners of my room. Nothing.

"They were here," I insisted, my voice trembling. "Not the usual kind. My eyes hurt this time. They switch when they are near."

His stoic face flickered with mild surprise. I didn't move when he cupped my left cheek.

I instinctively leaned into his touch when his thumb stroked the skin under my eye. *I was expecting coldness—he was warm.*

"Your eyes shift in the presence of Anima?" he asked, his thumb still rubbing under my eye.

"Only at night," I whispered. "I can't sense them during the day. They look normal then."

Cain cupped my face with both hands, tilting it back. My heart hammered as he moved closer.

His scent was all around me. I clutched his shirt when his eyes flickered from turquoise to electric blue.

The lights blew out through the whole room. I didn't dare look away from him as Anima appeared, summoned by his call.

Their hollow screeches made me tremble in his hold.

"They can't touch you," he murmured, reassuring but cold. He stared into my pale eyes. "Phenomenal."

These moments reminded me how inhuman he was—how terrifying he could be.

"Cain!" I gripped his wrists. "Please, stop."

Light flickered back and Anima vanished.

"Laurel said they fear you." I collapsed on the bed. "Then why did they show up here?"

There was a blunt accusation toward him in my tone.

"I'm equally interested in knowing," Cain said darkly. "What gave them the guts?"

I shuddered at the menace in his voice. I pressed the heels of my palms to my eyes.

"When did this start?" Cain asked after a moment, making me look at him.

I was confused at first, but then I realized. "At first," I said. "Laurel looked for the cause but found nothing. She said it might be the wing."

I rubbed my arm nervously. "Do you know anything?"

"No," he replied flatly, and he turned to leave.

Panic set in immediately.

"Cain—"

"What?" I asked without looking back.

"I can't sleep here." I began, stuttering. "They fear you, not me."

I stepped closer unconsciously. "Please let me stay in your room." I tried to smile. "Just for a while. I won't be a nuisance."

I wanted to die.

"You want me in one piece, right? Your wing—" I continued despite the warning in his silence. "Laurel always stayed with me. Angie and Nat slept with me when things got bad. Now they're gone and I can't call them because of you."

I was desperate. "Please, I don't want to be alone." I reached for his sleeve and grabbed it reluctantly. "I'll be quiet. You won't even notice I'm here."

Cain looked like he was about to snap my neck.

"Say something," I tilted my head to the side.

"Dare run your mouth like this again and I swear I'll sew it shut," he said.

But he let me stay.

I took some time moving my stuff to his room. As expected, Cain settled on the couch.

He'd removed his jacket and tie, unbuttoned his shirt, but still looked sharp. I'd never seen him out of suits yet.

"Stop staring," he grumbled suddenly.

"I'm not staring," I protested. "I was just..."

His head shot up.

"Observing," I finished sheepishly. "I've been wondering... Why do you work?"

The question had been bugging me since I learned his truth.

"You don't eat, don't sleep, don't care about human things. You have enough fortune for a lifetime. So why do this?"

"I like putting humans in their places," he smirked. "Nothing beats controlling humans out of their so-called pride. It's a good pastime—keeps me entertained in your dull world."

"Why fashion?" I asked.

Cain poured himself a drink. "It's more versatile than my other businesses. I'm actually enjoying it."

"Yes, I've seen that," I muttered sarcastically.

I sighed and stared at the ceiling.

Silence stretched between us, but I knew he kept glancing my way.

"Why do you think it happened?" I asked softly. "The curse... Why did the binder doom me with you?"

Before I could blink, Cain straddled me, pinning my hands above my head.

"Stop staring, Anastasia," his breath warmed my lips and raised my heartbeat. "Else, I'll teach you how to shut up."

I turned my face away.

"Don't ask questions you'll regret," he whispered. "Laurel told you half-truths for a reason."

I frowned and looked at him.

Our noses brushed as I did so.

"Sleep," he ordered, climbing off and retreating to the couch.

Bastard.

I stared at my reflection while fastening the wristwatch.

I hummed in satisfaction at my look—professional and nice, like a true fashion designer.

"Perfect—" I turned toward my bed and screamed.

Cain barged into my room. Well, his room. He scanned the space before glaring at me. "Must you create a ruckus first thing in the morning?"

"There's a monster on my bed." I pointed at the beast.

"It's a cat," Cain said, his tone reproachful.

To my utter horror, he carried it in his arms and came to me.

"Why are you so scared?" he asked, adding humor to my misery. "She won't harm you, Anastasia. I brought her for you."

"Don't be considerate." I pushed against the mirror when it stirred in his arms while looking at me. "Get it away, Cain. Please."

"She's not a mere feline," he said. "She's here for your protection."

"A cat will protect me?" I looked at her.

"She came from Acreoterra."

The cat jumped out of his arms and transformed into an auburn-haired, green-eyed young girl.

She was dressed in a black leather tight outfit. A sword hung at her waist, its hilt bound by a belt of wicked, glinting chains. Multiple daggers were strapped to her thighs and shins.

"Meet Shae," Cain introduced.

I looked at Cain in utter disbelief. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Even asked me to deal with the issue last night," Cain said, grabbing my arm to keep me steady. I hadn't even swayed yet. "To keep you in one piece, remember? Shae is a warrior, my best. She deals with rogue Animas. She will keep you safe in my absence."

"Am I to take her with me?" I asked.

Shae transformed back into a cat on cue. She leapt onto the dressing table and Cain picked her up.

I pointed toward myself while looking at Cain.

"I wasn't expecting you to cower away from a cat," Cain said, thrusting her into my arms. "Big day, right?"

He poked my forehead with his index finger.

"Have fun," Cain smirked. He straightened, shoved his hands in his pockets, and left my room, tall and proud.

"That brute..." I looked at the cat in my arms. "Do you talk?"

"Yes." I was psyched out by her telepathic reply. "*You look pale.*"

I grabbed my purse and rushed to the door.

"We should just stick to listening."

Shae meowed.

That felt much better.