

Chapter 18

The opening was a huge success. People were lining up outside of the studio, and many were interested in becoming a future client. I couldn't be happier, though I missed my friends terribly. I just hoped one day I could explain myself to them.

The thought had not left my mind yet when, as if by a miracle, there they were. I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Surely you didn't think that we would miss the opening of your own studio!" Angie exclaimed, pulling me into a hug.

"No matter how much of a bitch you are, we are here for you, I told you that," Nat added. She beckoned us with her hand, and we found a quiet corner to talk.

"We know about the Black brothers." Angie dropped the bomb without any warning.

"What?" I couldn't believe my ears.

"Ana!" Nat caught my hand, her expression crumbling. "Are they...involved in Laurel's..." She stopped, then pulled me into a hug. "I'm so sorry."

I couldn't speak. I wasn't shedding tears, but my heart was screaming. I thought I'd never get to see them again, and here they were. And they knew the truth. No more secrets.

"How did you find out?" I croaked.

"You really scared us, Ana." Nat looked at me sternly. "We couldn't believe that you would just up and leave without explaining yourself, so we figured there must have been more to the story."

"We spied on the brothers," Angie said proudly. "One day, I heard Aeron and Cain talking. A cursed... wing?"

I just nodded.

"Are they...," Angie whispered. "Really dem—"

I clamped a hand over her mouth.

"They are at the top of the food chain," I muttered. "And I'm the unfortunate *damse* caught in a personal brawl."

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"What a day, no?" I asked Shae as we were closing up. Angie and Nat had stayed at my side the whole day, helping me put out a million small fires. They had offered to help me clean up afterward, but I ushered them out. They had already done so much, and besides, I could use a moment of quietness.

Shae lounged on the countertop, her tail swaying lazily from side to side. As we were cleaning up, I had asked her more about her past.

It was gut-wrenching and brutal—what she'd faced at such a delicate age. When I asked her why she preferred her feline form, she told me she didn't remember much of her life before death.

One day, she woke up and she was a cat—before anyone taught her how to shift. She had been only fifteen when someone pushed her off the cliff.

Who did it? She couldn't recall.

She would've turned into an Anima if Cain hadn't found her soul. Vengeful and wild, she was destined for the Abyss Sea—a hellish detainment for rogue Anima, where the cruelest punishments awaited.

Cain had tamed her. Given her form, her mind, her life.

Two hundred years. She'd wandered as a lost soul for fifty of them, then spent the last one hundred and fifty under Cain's command.

And still, after all that time, she'd whispered with a shiver, "Humans are scarier."

She respected Cain. She was loyal to him. From her perspective, Cain was kind, a savior, even. It boggled the mind.

Shae stayed in one spot as I was cleaning the floor, silently watching over me. Suddenly she turned her head toward the door.

"*I sense danger.*" Shae bared her canines. "*Get back.*"

"I'm not here to harm, so avoid jumping for my throat, Shae darling." Harold appeared through black smoke. "I would hate to spill your blood."

Shae snarled while pacing on the countertop. She didn't switch, meaning the orders were clear from Cain.

"You chose one hell of a place, Ana dear." He looked around. "I sense so much divine energy. A god's blessing?"

"I haven't forgotten what you did to my friend that day," I snapped.

"Oh, don't be so dramatic, Ana dear. I merely helped with the age-old hide and seek, that's all."

He waved his hand dismissively. "Something's amiss about this wholeiasco."

Harold hummed thoughtfully while looking at me. "This is not how I imagined the aftermath."

I frowned. I had no idea what he was talking about.

His expression twisted maliciously. "You don't know yet?"

"Get out!" I yelled.

"This is interesting," he mused darkly.

"Just leave before I—"

"Call Cain?" Harold added, his tone mocking. "You wouldn't if you knew your history with him."

My brow furrowed deeper at his cryptic talk.

"Let me help you," he said wickedly. "Try asking Cain about Omisha. You will love this part of Cain's past." Harold whispered dramatically. "She holds the answers to your sufferings."

He disappeared.

"*Don't listen to him,*" Shae's voice was firm in my mind, though her tone softened. "*Harold thrives on chaos. You know about Beelzebub, one of the trinity? Harold's father was his firstborn. Their bloodline is the strongest and highest-ranked demons—but they were exiled for rebelling against the Blacks.*"

"You know Omisha?"

"No," Shae replied. "*I need to tell Master Cain.*"

I leaned against the counter as she communicated with Cain using telepathy.

"*Omisha, huh?*"