

## Chapter 21

I looked up at the towering bookshelves, awed by the sheer size of the library.

I wasn't forbidden here, but I was warned not to touch the gigantic double doors at the north end. Cain wasn't back. Shae had left on another errand. The timing was perfect.

I stood before the giant oak doors. The fear made my gut coil. My heart pounded wildly.

*If Cain found out...*

A click echoed through the silence, followed by the slow, moaning creak of the doors pushing open. It was ominous.

The study was barely lit. The dome and curved walls soared sky-high, crowned with towering windows and skylights. It had an archaic touch, an almost otherworldly feel. Torchlights ickered on the columns. Unlit candles sat in their holders. A giant chandelier of wax and iron hovered in the center of the dome. Everything looked like a remnant of some dark myth, forgotten yet alive.

The walls and ceiling were full of murals—a past woven in paints. A shift to my left caught my breath, but it was just a curtain, swaying gently over an archway leading into darkness.

I was already risking enough. Crossing that archway felt like walking into the jaws of death.

*And yet, I did it.*

The chamber beyond was smaller, cloaked in shadows. Bare, except for a crimson chaise by the replace and a full-length mirror in a gilded, intricate frame facing it.

My brow furrowed further when something moved *inside* the mirror. I stepped closer, hesitant.

It was a portrait of a woman in a white dress. Breathtakingly beautiful—eyes closed, as if dreaming.

Her red lips curved in a faint smile, and her long hair shimmered softly in the darkness. I staggered back as her icy blue eyes snapped open, locking onto me.

Something about her smile was profoundly sad, haunted. *Same eyes as Logan and Sophia. Same hair.*

"What did I say about wandering?" Cain's voice ghosted behind me.

My heart thundered in the silence as he stepped into my line of sight, blocking the portrait.

"What kind of sick magic is this?" I asked, hoping I sounded calm. "There's an alive person inside the mirror."

There was something deeply unsettling about her.

"It's not a living person," Cain said, his eyes darkening with a dangerous edge. "It's a fragment of a memory."

I couldn't explain why my heart thudded harder.

"Mine," Cain murmured, staring into my eyes. "She's Omisha."

My left wrist burned, sharp and erce. It hadn't done that in a while, and I was surprised by the pain.

"Curious about her?" Cain's tone dripped with dark sarcasm.

"Harold mentioned her name," I grunted through pain. "You have a history with her—I'm not interested."

Cain grabbed my left wrist to stop me from pulling away.

"Don't you want to know..." He pulled me closer and raised my left arm. "Who's responsible for this?"

The pain ared, almost unbearable.

"She was a Blue Blood," Cain said, leaning close. "My lover. She stabbed me in the back."

"What?" I whispered, ba ed by his bitter smirk.

"She deceived me expertly. I believed her false a ection," Cain sco ed. "It was a scheme, orchestrated by her kind. She was the perfect pawn."

I was stunned by this revelation.

"Omisha was bait." His gaze burned into mine. "Beautiful like no other immortal. She was sent to lure me so they could seize my power—my wing—with the eternal ame."

His thumb dug roughly into my wrist. "I ignored the warning of my kin. I trusted her. And that trust cost me everything."

His eyes shifted from turquoise to electric blue.

"I brought her into my world. She called her kind here. They slaughtered my parents. Here. In our home." He gestured around the room. "Because we were evil and they were good."

"It was their sacred duty to eliminate a hazard like me." Cain chuckled, bitter. "So, I returned the favor a hundredfold. I killed every one of them. Made her watch, made her su er."

"I killed her with my own hands. I plunged my sword here." Cain touched my abdomen. "She died before my eyes. I counted her last breaths."

A black dagger appeared in his hand.

"This," he said, grabbing my waist. "She severed my wing with this."

I gasped as he embraced me.

"She begged me to hold her for the last time—then she stabbed me," Cain whispered in my ear.

I looked at his face as he pulled back.

"This bound us with the curse," Cain pressed the dagger's tip against my neck before twisting me roughly to face Omisha's portrait again.

He locked my head with his elbow and pulled me close before pressing my left hand against the cold glass.

I gasped when her hand met mine on the other side.

I saw it all—everything that happened between them.

Tears rolled down my cheeks at their last moment, falling next to each other.

"Why did Laurel hide her identity from you?" Cain whispered in my ear. "You poor little soul."

I broke free from Cain's hold and ran. I wiped my cheeks furiously as I ed through the hallways.

A shield of bluish-black ames appeared around me, halting my sprint.

Gigantic vipers hovered midair—fangs bared, mouths dripping molten lava. Their red eyes xed on me.

Had I not been protected by the ames, my head would have been crushed between their jaws.

Cain yanked me behind him. I peeked around his bicep just as the black vipers turned to ashes.

"You insolent fool!" Cain raged at the woman who'd unleashed them.

She stood unfazed, eyes locked on me with pure loathing. Aeron and Xic appeared behind her, tense, but still.

"Step aside, Cain," she snarled. "You want a repeat of the past?"

"Clarissa!"

Cain's voice held calm, undeniable authority.

*Clarissa? Their sister?*

"You weren't even planning on telling me," she accused, pointing at me. "Why is she here? She killed our parents."

Another punch to the gut—brutal, breath-stealing.

"She failed to steal your power, so she cursed you instead." Her words slithered with venom. "Kill her. Tear your wing from her—she's a stain on your fate."

"L—"

"Don't pretend, Omisha," Clarissa glared at me.

The world stilled.

"Still acting?" she sneered.

Xic and Aeron stepped in front of her.

"Get out of my way." She shoved past them, eyes never leaving mine.

I could only look, mute and frozen, as she invaded my space.

"Strange," she muttered, inspecting me closely. "Di erent face. I can't smell your disgusting Blue Blood scent."

She grabbed my left wrist roughly and yanked it up. "But you returned with this," she hissed. "Return what you took from my brother, you lthy Blue Blood."

Cain shoved her toward Aeron and Xic.

"Take her away," he ordered, voice tight with fury. "Right now."

Their eyes ickered—inhuman. The oor trembled as their powers surged.

*She called me Omisha. Why?*

I staggered back, palming the wall for support. My chest ached. My breath wouldn't come.

"Laurel would have told me," I whispered to myself. "She wouldn't have kept this from me."

I ran. From them. From that. From everything.

I had barely made it out of the gates and Cain appeared before me. I could not escape him.

"So now the truth is out," he said, approaching slowly.

"I refuse this lie," I screamed. "I'm not her!"

He stepped closer.

"For how long can you keep pretending?" His breath brushed my cheek. "Omisha."

"My name is Anastasia!" I shrieked, clutching my burning wrist.

"You can't fool me," he growled, voice an echo from the depth of hell. "You'll su er for your betrayal. You'll burn under the weight of your actions...and drown in your screams."

He changed before my eyes. His hair grew longer, strands falling over a face that was no longer human. His right eye glowed with blue re, the left turned fully black. His ears stretched, sharp and unnatural.

The left half of his face peeled away—bone, blue and gleaming. Part of his neck changed in the same way and his right arm twisted into a skeletal weapon.

His bones and their color were not normal. They were thick, speared, terrifying.

A single, massive black wing tore from his back, alight with a ame made of seven colors. An eternal ame.

I crawled away from him. "Don't—"

"I'll take everything from you," Cain snarled.

I cried out as searing pain tore through my wrist. The shape of his wing etched into my skin.

"Just like you took everything from me." His eyes burned with hatred. "How much do you owe me, Omisha?"

The air lled with bone-chilling howls. My eyes switched.

Every little hair on my body rose when I sensed their presence. Anima. Thousands of them. They clawed their way toward me, reaching out.

"This is just the beginning, Omisha."

My wrist burned, and the world turned dark.

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I woke up gasping, drenched in sweat. My body trembled in pain.

*A nightmare?*

I stumbled out of bed and ran out of his room, crashing into everything, desperate to get away from the memory—from him.

Fire clawed in my chest. I ended up in front of her portrait again.

Her eyes opened and locked with mine. She was laughing at my misery.

Pain slipped past my lips in the form of a crushed whimper.

I didn't think it while when my wandering eyes landed on the stoker near the replace. I smashed the portrait with it twice screaming out my anguish.

It shattered and scattered around me on the oor. I kept smashing the pieces like a madwoman.

"Go away," I sobbed, falling on the broken shards. "Just go away."

I pounded my sts on the chunks. "Just go. GO."

Cain grabbed my bloody hands rmly. "Anastasia!"

"NO!" I thrashed wildly. "It's not true. I'm not her. I can never be her. I'm not—"

I clawed at him. "I didn't kill anyone. I can't kill anyone," I grabbed his shirt. "It's a sick joke. I hate it, Cain. I hate it."

Cain pulled me into his arms as I tried to slam my sts into the glass again.

I pounded his chest over and over, until my strength gave out. I fell limp against his chest and cried loudly.

"I am not her... I am not... I'm not—"

I buried my face in his chest as I broke down completely.

The void inside me roared.

*Where did I stand now?*

I was punched into the abyss of my identity.