Chapter 22

Life after that night changed forever.

I was drained—mentally, physically. My body screamed for rest.

But I couldn't stop.

Work became my medicine and my studio my refuge.

I'd been living in the studio for three days, finding excuses not to go back. I chose not to return to my apartment.

Angie and Nat were still unaware of the entire Omisha matter. I wanted them to stay oblivious.

I needed space. To think.

Cain hadn't forced me back. Shae stayed close, probably reporting everything. But that was it.

I wished he'd leave me alone—for good.

"You look like a mess."

I looked toward the door. It was Hannah.

She removed her glasses. "Still angry?"

I was too tired. "What brings you here?"

"A lot of things." She glanced around. "You're living your dream."

"At a price." I chuckled dryly. "You're not one to beat around the bush."

"I'm risking a lot by coming here today," Hannah said, locking the door. The blinds closed.

She flicked her wrist. Her hair turned platinum, her eyes glowed icy blue.

Same as Logan. Same as Omisha.

"I'm a Blue Blood." She sat opposite me. "I've been working for Cain for a millennium. I'm indebted to him. I warned Cain about Harold's plans. They tried to kill me after I exposed Omisha."

A pause.

"Unfortunately, it couldn't change anything," she said softly.

"Are you here to defend him?" I asked coldly.

“No.” Hannah met my gaze. “I’m here for you—and Laurel.”

She smiled at my confusion.

“Her real name was Lyra. She was Omisha’s best friend. She lived a thousand years, Ana. Enchantresses are immortal.”

“But—”

“Cain said she was aging,” Hannah cut in calmly. “Her magic was fading. That only happens if she traded it…for something forbidden.”

I froze.

“Something meant more to her than her life,” she said softly. “For which she fabricated her death and vanished without a trace.”

I rubbed my hands restlessly.

“You’re not accountable for Omisha’s doings.” Hannah looked at me when she said this. “Laurel felt the same. That’s why she hid you.”

“Are you sure it’s not the opposite?” I asked bitterly. “You said she was Omisha’s best friend.”

Hannah shook her head. “She never supported Omisha’s beliefs. Omisha was blinded by her father, Sorush.”

Her voice darkened.

“Sorush—the first bearer of Azrael’s blood. His words were absolute.”

I listened, silent.

“He created enmity with the Underworld.”

I frowned. “So, Blue Bloods were not created to kill Cain?”

“No,” Hannah pressed. “We were arbitrators between death and the afterlife, to apprehend the corrupted souls—Anima—from crossing into the human world. Sorush twisted that.”

She sighed deeply.

“He made it his mission to purge the world of every forbidden creation—anything defying divine law.”

“I’m not Omisha,” I whispered hoarsely. “I could never do what she did.”

“I can’t do much for you, Ana,” she said, squeezing my hand. “But if you know you’re not Omisha, you also know who to trust.”

She stood, shifting back to her human disguise.

“Watch out for Harold. If you see Xoran, run. Call Cain immediately.”

She hesitated. “It may sound harsh, but Cain is honest about his intentions.”

She knew something.

“Hannah?” I followed her.

“Laurel wasn’t just protecting you from Cain.” She paused. “Your parents—what were their names?”

“Aisling and Cyrus,” I answered.

The fire. Did she know more? Laurel’s story never sat right with me.

The door opened. Logan stood on the other side.

A Blue Blood.

“Take care, Ana,” Hannah whispered.

I noticed how Logan was watching her. “Yes?” I tried breaking his attention.

Logan held out an exotic blue flower. “Ecress. It symbolizes eternal bond in our world. It only grows in Istrigus. I used to bring these—”

I stepped back as he reached for me.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said quickly, eyeing Shae as she leapt onto the counter. “I was only protecting you.”

“From what?” My tone was cold.

He reached for me. I jerked away, glaring.

“Is Logan even your real name?” I snapped.

“It’s Larc.” His eyes glowed. “Do I need to remind you?”

“That woman, Sophia—is she your accomplice?” I answered his question with my own.

“We’re not your enemies,” he said sternly. “We have reunited after a millennium.”

I kept stepping back as he moved toward me.

“It was unbearable.” His gaze roamed my face. “Being away from you, Omisha—”

“I’m not Omisha!” I screamed.

The flower dropped when I slapped his hand away.

“You’re my Omisha.” Logan grabbed my arms. “Your reincarnation was prophesied a thousand years ago.”

He invaded my space, ignoring my distress.

“You will remember everything.” He cupped my face, forcing my eyes to his. “I’ll make you recall, Omisha.”

“Logan, let go!” I screamed.

I jumped away as he released me. I folded my arms tightly across my chest.

“You don’t have to be afraid. I love you, Omisha. And you love me.”

I pressed myself against the counter as he reached for me again.

“Fine.” He stepped back. “As much as I want you to come back with me, I won’t go against Sorush’s decree. But you’ll be back—very soon.”

“Just leave!” I shrieked. “Leave me alone!”

“I can’t do that,” Logan refused. “I can’t leave you alone with Cain.”

“I can take care of myself,” I snapped. “I don’t need your help!”

“Omi—”

“Get out,” I shouted, pointing to the door. “Get out or I will call the cops.”

“You will call me, Omisha.” His eyes blazed. “When the time comes…then you will know who your heart truly wants.”

I clutched my ears.

“I’ll do it in your stead this time.” His voice dropped. “I will kill Cain and you will help me.”

He vanished in blue flames.

I grabbed my hair and combed my fingers through it while looking around the studio.

They kept deciding. They kept throwing accusations. They were taking me for a pushover and it was pissing me off.

“I see you met your lover.”

I spun around.

Cain stood there, plucking the flower from the floor between two fingers.

“Did the holy reunion leave you speechless?” he sneered.

“Do you enjoy demeaning me?” I snatched the flower and threw it away.

I didn’t flinch when Cain loomed over me.

He could infer what he liked.

I wasn’t Omisha—and I was going to prove it.

“I like the look in your eyes,” he said coldly. “But how much can you do on your own?”

I tilted my head back as his face hovered close.

“What is protecting you from demons? I turn my back on you now, and no one will save you. Not even your lover.”

“He is not—” I nearly yelled.

Damn him for making me lose control.

“I don’t need anyone.” I steadied my voice. “I’ve been on my own. Nothing will change that.”

“Then should I leave you alone?” Cain brushed my cheek with his knuckles.

Strange.

I hated Logan touching me. But Cain…

“Do you want me gone?” he whispered.

“Yes.” I didn’t hesitate. “Will you do it?”

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I blinked as Angie flicked her fingers in front of my face. She sat beside me, raising a brow.

Nat came with our coffee and sat between us.

“I still can’t believe Cain let you come back so easily.”

“He is plotting something,” Angie said, tapping her chin. “I’d bet my life on it. Right?” She looked at Shae. “Why would she be here?”

“Good afternoon, ladies.”

We spun around in shock.

Nat shot us a glare as we jumped to the opposite couch—leaving Xic to sit beside her.

“Your excitement overwhelms me, Natalie,” he snickered.

“Don’t you have manners?” Nat shoved him when he leaned toward her. “You can’t just pop in our space!”

“I missed you,” Xic said, looking unbothered. “Come on, I even stopped sleeping around because of you. I’m practically a saint now.”

Angie nudged my shoulder and wriggled her eyebrows at me. Something seemed to be developing between the two of them.

I stood up, in desperate need of some fresh air.

“*I’m coming with you*,” Shae said quickly when I made to leave.

“I’m just going downstairs.” I nodded toward the kitchen. “You know why the brothers keep showing up?”

“*No,*” Shae answered too fast.

Liar.

“Let me know if anything happens.” I went to my room for my phone and wallet.

I’d meant to just walk around the block, but I ended up at a swing in the park two blocks away—thanks to a craving for coffee winning over logic.

Cain hadn’t taken back his ring, so I could still wander freely in the dark.

“*Do you want to play?*” a voice whispered through the air.

I stood, dropping my cup when the air stirred with something foul.

“*Anastasia!*”

I clutched my ears as his laughter echoed all around.

Mist poured in, swallowing the world.

“*Come play with me.*”

The fog cleared.

I stood in the middle of an amusement park, stunned by the lit-up rides. Children ran around, laughing merrily, tugging their parents toward the rides.

“*Come on, Ana.*”

Two silhouettes appeared a few steps away from me.

“*Didn’t you want to ride the Ferris wheel?*” They held out their hands. “*What are you waiting for?*”

My feet moved forward.

“Mom, Dad.”

I was aching for them. I hadn’t seen them in so long, and there they were! Tears welled up, and for the first time in days, months, years, I felt at peace. Happy. Safe.

I reached out to them, as they reached out for me.

Our fingertips were almost touching.

That is when I noticed. Their hands were skeletal, their eyes hollow.

Realization kicked in.

They are dead. This isn’t real.

The illusion shattered.

The shadows dissolved.

The laughter faded, leaving only the music behind.

“You broke out of my phantasmagoria?”

He stood on top of the Ferris wheel. Dressed like a man. But those glowing red eyes with yellow slits betrayed him.

“Name’s Xoran.” He vanished—and reappeared before me.

“Welcome to my world, Anastasia.” He spread his arms wide. “What’s wrong, dear? Didn’t I just grant your wish?”

I looked for a way out, for something I recognized, but the playground I had been in moments before had vanished.

“What to do, dear Ana?” he mocked. “Once you’re in, you are trapped. Many ways in—none out.”

The music grew louder, stabbing my ears.

I touched them—only to see blood on my fingertips.

“Make it stop!” I begged, agony shredding through me.

He laughed harder. “No one is coming to save you, dear Ana…”

“Cain!” I pressed his ring. “CAIN!”

My scream was muffled.

“He is gone,” Cain whispered, lowering his hand. “I’m here.”

“Y-you came!” I stammered.

I collapsed into him.

He caught me, and for a moment I felt safe in his arms. Relief flooded me. Then, in a blink, we were outside my apartment.

Cain dropped me to my feet roughly.

“Could you not act out if you don’t want me involved?” He grabbed my arms, checking the wounds.

His words cut like knives. So much for the comfort I felt in that brief moment. Cain didn’t care about my safety, just the safety of his wing.

“It won’t happen again.” I slammed the door in his face.

Why would I call his name?