

Chapter 24

Angie and Nat held me down when I woke up screaming. I thrashed in panic until Angie hugged me, stroking my hair in silence.

"Ana?" Nat spoke cautiously as I eyed my bandaged arms, especially the left one. "We told them—" I hated needles, and I had one stuck in my arm when I couldn't even look at them.

My fury spiked when Cain entered after his brothers and the doctor. I leapt from the bed and swung the IV stand at his head.

Bastard dodged effortlessly.

"You!" I cried, tears streaming. "All because of you!"

The doctor gently tried to restrain me. "Ms. Grace—"

"Get this needle out." I screamed, wailing as they tried to inject me. "Get out."

Angie and Nat rushed to soothe me. I sobbed on Angie's shoulder when she wrapped her arms around me.

"You're here to help, not aggravate her," the voice was calm but commanding.

I exhaled in relief as the needle was removed.

"I'd like everyone to leave," he said. "Aeron? Xic? Show these pretty ladies around the mansion."

Despite their protests, Angie and Nat followed the brothers, who left silently but clearly angry.

"The nurse isn't needed either," the man added.

The medical team left.

"You too," he said to Cain.

Cain left the room without saying anything.

"I am a cat," Shae said smugly as he faced her.

"I can't beat that," he chuckled, then turned to me. "I'm Einar AngelSin. Pleased to make you."

"He's Lady Clarissa's husband and one of the greatest Warlocks in our world," Shae informed me.

"You are kind, Shae," Einar said with a smile.

He was tall, lean, and dressed in black. Ash-blond hair, piercing green eyes, sharp features. Handsome, but reminded me of a snake.

"You just thought of a snake, didn't you?" Einar grinned, dragging a chair beside me. "Let me show you something."

He rolled up his sleeve to reveal green scales on his inner arm.

"My birthmark," he continued. "All warlocks have one. We're part demon. In my case, my mother was an Enchantress, so I'm particularly powerful."

"My head's going to burst." I rubbed my temples. "I want to sleep."

"You should," Einar agreed. "You won't stop swinging IVs at Cain otherwise."

I scowled at the jab. He laughed.

"Give me your left hand."

His face darkened as he took it, a green glow engulfing my wrist.

"Focus on rest," he said. "You wouldn't let us heal your injuries."

"I need a good reminder," I whispered.

He didn't respond. "My friends?"

"Aeron and Xic will escort them home," he replied. "I apologize for my wife. She was tricked by Harold."

"She would have behaved the same way," I muttered.

"Get some rest," Einar said, rising.

"Did you know Laurel?" I asked.

"She was my mother's favorite apprentice," he said. "I will be in deep waters if Clarissa hears this."

I smiled faintly. "Thank you...for the needle."

"You're welcome, kid." He rubbed my hair. "I'm older than I look," Einar teased. "Sleep now."

He left the room like a normal man.

"He looks sly but he's not bad," Shae murmured, curling beside me. "He helped me become a cat."

I closed my eyes.

"You need to stay strong, Ana," I whispered to myself. "The real battle has begun."

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—refuge.

I was startled when Shae leapt on my drawings. I knew what she was thinking.

It was Sophia's order.

"I can't mix personal feelings," I said, leaning back on the couch. "You knew their identity, didn't you?"

"I was ordered not to interfere," Shae replied.

I held back a sob. "Are you staying here again?"

"I need to finish the dresses," I repeated.

I'd been living in the studio for three days, making 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 icked her wrist. Her hair turned platinum, her eyes glowed icy blue.

"I'm a Blue Blood." She sat opposite me. "I've been working for Cain for a millennium. I'm indebted to him."

I stared at her. Shae watched her too, calm but wary.

"You two know each other?" I asked.

"I've seen her in Acreoterra," Shae said. "But we never talked."

"That's true," Hannah smiled. "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. "That I need to condone her sins and compensate with my life?"

"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. Lyra rivaled Einar in power."

"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."

She scooed, bitterness lacing her voice. "Then what about us? Weren't we made the same way?"

"I'm not Omisha," I whispered hoarsely. "I could never do what she did."

Hannah came beside me. "Is there a way to break the curse?"

"No one knows the truth of the three forbidden curses," she said grimly. "We've searched for years in vain."

Hope crumbled inside me.

"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, Red Jackals, and Ice Crows. If you see Xoran and Catsya, 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 door opened. Logan stood on the other side.

"Take care, Ana," Hannah whispered, leaving before he saw her.

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

Logan held out an exotic blue flower. "Eress. 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 again. 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 didn't mean to scare you. I promise—I won't do this again."

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 door 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 won't be coerced into anything."

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?"

...

I blinked as Angie icked 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 as we watched them and mouthed 'conspiring' again.

Nat stomped to the kitchen. Xic followed.

As soon as they were out of sight, Angie remembered some errand. She was gone before I could process it.

I wasn't going to stay and third-wheel—given that something indeed was cooking between the two.

"I'm coming with you," Shae said quickly when I stood.

"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'm heading out for a bit," I called on my way out.

"What?" Nat yelled.

"But—"

"Let her be." Xic pulled her back. "Have a nice walk, Ana."

His enthusiasm was suspicious.

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?"

My fingers froze mid-text as 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."

They are dead. This isn't real.

I dug my nails into the wound on my left arm.

Pain exploded as blood oozed out—but I didn't stop until 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.

I had seen those eyes before.

"Name's Xoran." He vanished—and reappeared before me.

"Welcome to my world, Anastasia." He spread his arms wide. "What's wrong, dear?"

He tilted his head. "Didn't I just grant your wish?"

I screamed as the music stabbed through my ears.

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

"Wonderful, isn't it?" he laughed. "I can twist your innocent desires into nightmares."

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

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

He laughed harder. "No one is coming to save you, dear Ana..."

"Cain!" I pressed his ring. "CAINI!"

My scream was muffled.

"He is gone," Cain whispered, lowering his hand. "I'm here."

"You—" I stammered. "Came!"

I collapsed into him.

He caught 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.

"Do you hate me that much?" I blurted. "It won't happen again."

I slammed the door in his face, then leaned against it.

Why would I call his name?