

Chapter 29

I looked outside at the setting sun, its warmth wrapping around us like embers settling into gentle tranquility. We were at Xic's hotel, sitting in one of the restaurants on the fifth floor.

Our table, nestled beside a grand frameless window, offered a view of the city that was worth every penny. Cherry on the top—it was empty.

A rare luxury. Shae wore a baby blue dress I'd made for her.

I'd designed a few, just to see her look like a normal teenager instead of someone born of war. She didn't protest—just tried them on silently.

But I could tell she liked them. She even twirled once when she thought I wasn't watching.

She could switch from daggers to dresses, what was the harm then? She deserved normalcy.

Human or not, she deserved to feel pretty. I smiled, watching her enjoy her meal.

She was skeptical at first, but now her eyes lit with every bite. We were celebrating—my first order.

Relief had washed over me when Sophia's assistant asked for the dress to be dispatched through the service. I didn't want to see Sophia... or Logan.

Encounters with him were inevitable, but I was grateful for the temporary reprieve. The remaining payment came through right after the dispatch, and here we were—splurging.

It would've been different with Angie and Nat. But tonight wasn't only about celebrations.

It was my apology to Shae—for drugging her milk, for leaving her alone that night. Shae hadn't said anything, but I knew she was upset.

I was reckless, acting under my emotions. It could have put us at risk.

I wanted to say sorry. Out loud.

But I couldn't. That would open doors I wasn't ready to walk through.

I was still reeling from that insane midnight escapade.

"I heard we had two beautiful guests," Xic approached, devilishly handsome as always.

"Enjoying privacy? I ordered not to take any guests."

"You shouldn't have," I said, reaching for the bill.

Without lifting a finger, Xic slid it toward him. The inhuman ease startled me.

"It's not every day a man gets to woo a strong-headed woman," he said. He winked, then waved the waiter away.

"No desserts?"

"We are full," I replied, standing.

Shae followed suit.

Xic walked us to the elevators. We rode one to the ground floor.

"That was unnecessary," I said, watching the number tick downward.

"You are too uptight, Anastasia," Xic chuckled.

"Learn to take it easy."

I just shook my head.

"I'm a true gentleman at heart," he added lightly.

"That's why Nat is always ready to blow her fuse," I retorted.

"*Touche!*" Xic clutched his chest dramatically.

I couldn't tell if he found it funny or if he was hiding something. If the latter, he was damn good at it.

The elevator pinged open. Xic and Shae stepped out.

I didn't.

"Ah!" Xic turned, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"Forgot to mention—Cain is here for you."

I wanted to rip the grin off his face.

Clearing my throat, I stepped out.

"Job's done, brother," Xic chuckled.

"I'll take Shae."

"What?" I blurted, cringing instantly.

"I mean—I—we have to—"

"You can go, Shae," Cain said coolly.

She left without a word.

"Come," he said, walking toward the exit.

I stood there, mute, burning with embarrassment.

*Why was my heart beating like a lunatic?*

It wasn't the first time I'd heard his voice. But something about it tonight felt... heavier.

"Anastasia?" Cain's voice was steely, cutting through the haze.

Head bowed to hide my flush, I hurried past him.

His car was already in the driveway. To my utter shock, he opened the passenger's door for me.

*What's gotten into him? Why was he being so chivalrous?*

I went to him like a log, watching him warily as I sat. He was too calm.

Too polite. It felt like a glitch in the universe.

"You are slower than usual," Cain scooped, shutting the door before getting in.

He drove out of the hotel with unrealistic smoothness. His scent hit me like a truck—warm, heady, and dominantly safe.

He was too close. I started fidgeting: rubbing my neck, tugging my dress, shifting in my seat, twiddling my fingers.

I was a mess.

"Cain?" I croaked, my voice weak, breath shaky.

He glanced at me briefly.

"Can I roll down the window?"

The mechanical whir broke the tense silence. I leaned my head against the door, letting the night air cool my nerves.

His scent lingered but didn't succumb.

"We need to talk," he said, his voice calm but unyielding.

My heart jumped when he stopped the car.

"This isn't the way to my apartment," I said, glancing around the dark road.

"You are not going back." His tone brooked no argument. "Let me banish, Ana. And look at me properly."

"I am looking at you," I mumbled.

Miraculously, he held his tongue.

"Why can't I go back?"

"You know why, Ana." His voice softened enough to make it worse.

And my nickname rolling off his tongue... it made me clench my thighs.

"You won't be lucky every time. Xoran and Harold manipulate emotions. They'll go after—"

"Keep Angie and Nat out of this, please."

"Come back to me." It was a command. "I cannot protect you from afar. Because of this tether between us—" He tapped my left wrist. "You aren't caged, Ana. I am not forcing you. But you know better than to be stubborn."

"What if they still get hurt?" I asked, pulling away. "They're bound to be targets."

"They won't," he assured. "Xic and Aeron will protect them. You have my word."

I couldn't look him in the eye. My hands trembled.

"Ana?"

"Okay," I said quietly. "Because I don't know where to look."

Cain smirked, victorious.

"Keep your word. And let me be," I muttered, looking out the window.

"Sure," he said, starting the car. "I was expecting a rebel."

Silence fell.

"When you encountered Xoran," Cain said suddenly, "did anything strike you as strange?"

I tried to recall.

"There were... gigantic jackals. He looked human and he was wearing a red suit. But there was something odd about his face." I frowned.

I gestured with my hand. "The left side of his face. There was a skin-deep vertical scar. His face looked fake. Like a mask."

"There was music," I added, shivering. "Strange music... and mist, before I was trapped."

"If you encounter something similar—or feel a sudden drop in temperature," Cain glanced at me. "Call me right away."

"I always do," I whispered.

Even I didn't understand why.

Cain held my gaze for a second before looking back at the road.

A surprisingly human moment.

"Catsya is more lethal than Xoran," he said. "I can't deal with them yet, so watch your back in my absence."

"Why?" I asked.

"They have masked their aura."

I frowned.

"Nothing for you to worry about," he added quickly.

When we arrived at his estate, Cain parked in the driveway and turned to me.

"Your luggage is here," he informed me. "If anything's missing, tell Sibyl."

I nodded and followed him inside.

Silent steps. Stolen glances.

Just before we entered the living hall, Cain suddenly grabbed my arm and shoved me behind him.

Confused, I peeked out—only to hear a venom-laced voice shriek.

Serra.

"Harold was not lying," she yelled. "What is this, Cain?"

Her glare could cut steel.

"Lower your voice," Cain snapped.

"Why is she next to you?" Serra screeched.

"Don't provoke me. Leave quietly," Cain threatened.

"You can't do this again." She grabbed his lapels. "You can't let her come between us!"

Cain shoved her away. Hard.

"Leave. Or I will banish you to hell."

"I'm not going anywhere," Serra refused.

Cain turned to me. "Go to your room, Anastasia."

I bolted for the stairs.

They erupted behind me.

Serra screaming, Cain ice cold.

I didn't want to hear any of it.

But my feet faltered when I saw her kiss him.

He didn't kiss her.

But he didn't push her away either.

"You are mine, *Dalazar*," she declared, kissing him again.

"Need to tell Angie and Nat," I whispered, running upstairs.

I had no right to witness their intimacy. Still, something sharp twisted inside me—like a blade catching a nerve.

Once inside my room, I shut the door, locked it, and slid to the floor, heart pounding.

*It was just a dream.*