

Chapter 35

Aessegar, the capital of Istrigus, was breathtaking—crystalline blue skies above, lush green life sprawling below.

I was staying at *Termarsh Fort*, Sorush's residence nestled high on *Mountain Nor*.

Its onyx garden perched on the cliff's edge was the crown jewel of the place.

Below to the east stood *Obsidian Castle*, where the high officials resided.

Beneath it, three descending tiers housed the other Blue Bloods.

The rest of *Istrigus* was a panorama of emerald mountains, rolling hills, glistening lakes, and scattered forests.

Logan had shown me around, but the routes blurred in my mind.

Everything here pulsed with a radiant blue glow—the lifestream of *Istrigus*, I'd been told.

It wasn't just energy; it was life itself.

Their machines, devices, and tools all ran on it.

Advanced, yet restrained.

Unlike humans, they didn't overuse what they couldn't control.

"You seem to like this garden," Logan said, approaching with a maid who placed the tea on the table before slipping away.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Logan was dressed in his usual Istrigus attire.

"Good," I said, my eyes drifting back to the view.

"Did you speak with Sorush?" he asked.

When I stayed silent, he heaved a sigh.

"How long will you stay in denial?"

"When can I go back?" I turned to him.

"I never told my friends anything. They must be worried sick. I need to return, Logan. I can't abandon everything."

He pressed a finger to my lips, silencing me.

"The tea will get cold," he said, pulling out my chair and guiding me to the table.

"Let's talk later, okay?"

I accepted the cup but noticed he didn't pour one for himself.

"You are not having any?" I asked.

"I had two during the meeting. Any more and I won't sleep tonight," he chuckled.

"Larc!"

Sophia arrived with Aelwin and Viessa.

I knew her true name now—Sax.

I got to know about her identity when Sorush disclosed to me that Omisha was his daughter.

I was his daughter.

Sax held the second-highest rank after Logan.

Aelwin and Viessa were her equals in power.

I could hardly believe she was the same woman who had visited my studio.

Friendly, sweet.

Now, every time we crossed paths, I felt her disdain.

Sax wasn't the only one unhappy with my arrival.

"Sorush is asking for you," she told Logan.

"Now?" he confirmed.

When she nodded, he frowned.

"Why?"

I busied myself with the cup.

Their tense glances made it clear—whatever it was, they didn't want to say it in front of me.

"We're leaving for Ecoiothea," Aelwin informed him.

"The vicars were attacked by demons last night."

That made my heart jolt.

Demons?

Cai—

A stabbing pain pierced my head.

I closed my eyes as it overwhelmed everything.

"How?" Logan demanded, rising.

"Those lowlifes can't set foot in our realm."

His rage was startling.

Around me, he always played calm.

Was this the real Logan?

"What happened?" he asked.

"Someone opened the *Temisgate*," Viessa answered.

"No guards were stationed when it was forced open."

Their eyes flickered to me.

"We leave in an hour," Sax said.

"What about Anastasia?" Logan asked.

"She'll be alone."

"Sorush placed a dozen guards around the fort for her safety," she said, her voice cutting.

"We'll meet at the gates."

"Damn," Logan muttered after they left.

"You should rest. It's getting dark," he said.

"Have a safe trip," I murmured, standing.

"You didn't finish your tea," he pointed out.

I looked at the half-full cup.

"Maybe later," I replied.

Logan offered a tight smile.

"Logan? My hand—"

He released me immediately, mumbling an apology.

"Bye," I said and walked away.

The moment I was alone, my head began to throb.

I needed to lie down before the pain worsened.

But sleep wouldn't come.

Only restlessness.

I sat by the window, watching the silver moon glow in the sky.

The breeze brushed against my skin, cool and soft.

It was peaceful...but it wasn't home.

How long had I been here?

The sun and moon passed in a blur. Days melted into one another.

I couldn't remember yesterday. I barely recognized yesterday from today.

Had it rained yesterday? Or was that the day before?

I couldn't tell. I wasn't sure if I had eaten breakfast or if that had happened last week.

Everything in my mind was hazy and heavy.

Memories were fading.

Thoughts of him faded.

No matter how hard I tried to recall him, something blocked the memories—ripping them from my soul.

It hurt...but I couldn't scream.

Whenever his name whispered through the corridors of my mind, pain struck like lightning and wiped it clean.

Fear flickered—then vanished.

I felt out of place—then nothing.

Something sinister hovered at the edge of my awareness, but it disappeared the moment I reached for it.

Only one thought remained.

I would get rid of him soon.

A knock broke through the haze.

Sorush entered, followed by a maid pushing a trolley of tea and refreshments.

At this hour?

"I hope I'm not intruding," Sorush said gently. "You missed dinner, so I came to check on you. Are you alright, my child?"

"I was tired," I replied. "Logan isn't back yet?"

I sat on the couch opposite him. The maid served tea.

The smell alone made my stomach churn, but I couldn't refuse.

"He will return tonight," Sorush said. "Are you still upset about our conversation?"

I said nothing.

"My intentions were never to hurt you," he sighed. "Don't feel pressured. The past won't become the present."

He stood and came closer, placing a hand on my head.

Not as a leader.

As a father.

A grieving father.

"You're born healthy," he whispered. "That's all that matters to me—your happiness. Rest be damned."

I wiped my cheek quickly, surprised to find it wet.

Why was I crying again?

"I won't lie for your peace," I said, my voice steady. "I don't want any part in this war."

The aroma of the freshly brewed tea grated my nerves.

I rubbed my left wrist.

"I want this gone."

"Let's have tea first," Sorush said, handing me a cup.

I wanted to throw it away.

The orange liquid shimmered inside the porcelain. The aroma made me nauseous. Sick.

But I held it.

"Your predicament is understandable, child," Sorush said, sipping his tea. "But I'm here for you."

"Sachem!"

Someone knocked at the door.

"Enter," he commanded.

"A thousand pardons." The guard bowed. "The holy priest seeks you."

"Wait for me outside," he ordered.

"I'm sorry about that," he said once the guard left.

I walked with him to the door.

"Join me for dinner tomorrow. There is something important I'd like to discuss."

I nodded.

"See you then, my child."

I was poking my food most of the time, I had no appetite.

I just wanted to sleep. But I came in Sorush's respect.

"Is the food not to your liking?" Sorush asked, eyeing my untouched plate in concern. "I asked the chef to make your favorites."

"These aren't my favorites," I wanted to say. "They were hers."

But I simply smiled.

"I'm just feeling a little under the weather," I said. "Everything is delicious. Thank you."

His smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"You wanted to talk?"

"Only if you feel at ease," Sorush replied.

"I am," I said evenly.

"It's about the curse," Sorush began. "Are you aware of the role my daughter played in binding that evil?"

I gripped my fork tight.

"I am well aware," I replied calmly.

The guard announced the arrival of Larc and Sax.

They flanked Sorush like statues—rigid and unreadable. Hands behind their backs. Expressionless. Like true soldiers.

"Cain seeks absolutism," Sorush said. "Domination over every being. His power stems from fear. He wishes to unravel the natural order."

He clasped his hands.

"He would have succeeded if Omisha hadn't severed her wing and bound it to her soul."

"My soul," I corrected.

His composure stuttered for a moment.

"Yes," he agreed crisply. "He's powerful but incomplete. He's waiting to be whole again."

Another pause.

"He kept you captive. Killed your only family. He won't stop, Anastasia. He never forgets. He remembers betrayal. Always."

A chill ran through me.

"He wants to spill your blood. And he will," he whispered darkly.

My heartbeat thundered in my ears.

"You love your friends, right?" he asked softly. "Do you want them to meet the same fate as Laurel? As Hannah?"

"No," I said—louder than I'd spoken since coming here.

"Then choose," Sorush said calmly. "You don't need to fear. We know how to break the curse."

The fork slipped from my hand and clattered against the plate.

"Yes," Logan said. "We can separate the wing from your soul."

"What will you do with it?" I asked. "The wing."

"We'll use it to rid the world of every evil and forbidden creature," Sorush answered. "It holds an eternal flame, the symbol of divine blessing and utmost power."

"And Cain?" My throat constricted at his name.

"It is the result of forbidden curses. He doesn't deserve to hold onto something so pure," Sorush said bitterly. "His wing will become his demise."

I clenched my fists under the table.

"He was never meant to exist," Sorush muttered darkly. "He'll be unmade the same way he was created."

The decision settled on my tongue like ash.

"...Okay," I said. "I trust you."

The smile felt foreign on my lips.

Sorush rose and embraced me.

I didn't move.

A strange chill wrapped around my spine—as if my soul recoiled.

"I knew you'd choose the right," Sorush said, holding my shoulders. "Leave everything to us."

"I'll return to my room," I said, pulling away. "My head hurts."

"I'll send you tea," Logan offered. "It'll help."

I nodded and left.

I came back into the room and sat on the bed.

I took off my heels and sighed loudly while falling back.

"You are doing the right thing," I muttered, staring at the ceiling. "You did great."

I looked at the door when it knocked.

"I'm coming in," Logan announced.

I sat up before he could enter.

He raised two cups as he came to me. "Room service, my lady."

I giggled at his bow and took one cup.

"You have a beautiful laugh, my lady," he said, extending a finger over.

"Eccress, right?" I asked, accepting it.

"Yes," Logan smiled and sat next to me.

I observed it closely.

"I'm glad to see you back," I said after setting the finger aside. "This place feels less foreign with you."

"Are you saying you missed me?" Logan asked, amused.

I shrugged as I circled the rim of the cup.

I didn't want to drink the tea. I didn't want to lie.

But I didn't want to think anymore either.

If peace meant forgetting, maybe forgetting was mercy.

"You will kill me," Logan said, leaning his head on my shoulder.

I couldn't react. My heart didn't beat faster. My breaths didn't quicken.

His scent and warmth didn't affect me.

"I've yearned to hear this." His breath on my bare shoulder made me squirm in discomfort.

He looked up. "You look heavenly in this gown."

I turned my face away from his approaching one.

"I'm upset," I said, looking out the window.

A blue butterfly fluttered by.

A memory flashed before my eyes.

I blinked out of the stupor when Logan turned my face to him by pinching my chin.

"Why?" he asked. "What did I do?"

"You didn't tell your men about me?" I asked angrily. "I went to your residence. I thought I would feel less lonely if I spent some time there. But they didn't allow me to enter."

I jerked out of his hold and stood.

Logan grabbed my hand.

"I'm so sorry," he said, tugging me closer. "You can come to my place whenever you want."

"After all that humiliation? Never." I scooted, pulling away from him and turning the other way. "I won't become a laughingstock."

"Who dared mock you?" he said, turning me by holding my shoulders. "Let me make it up to you. I'll give you a tour of my place right now."

His arm slipped down my arms and he clasped my hands.

I smiled, making him grin.

"Lead the way," I said, getting out of his hold.

Logan took me to the *Obsidian Castle*.

I looked at the sky-high gates when they opened and revealed the humongous stone building.

"How many people live here?" I asked, looking around the exotic gardens.

"Just me, Sax, Aelwin, and Viessa," Logan answered as he steered me toward his mansion.

We crossed another set of doors and came across another garden. It was in the center of four tall towers. It divided the interior into four huge residential parts. Each had a separate entrance.

"Wow," I marveled over the extravagant interior and structure. "This is your home?"

Logan nodded, watching me in amusement.

He unlocked the door and held it open for me.

"After you," he said, extending one arm.

I smiled at his gentility and walked inside.

"Beautiful," I murmured.

Logan hugged me from behind. I went still in his arms.

"Less than you," he whispered in my ear. "I can't tell you how happy I am right now. This place felt incomplete until now."

I calmed myself before gently removing his arms and faced him with a smile.

"You promised a full tour," I reminded him. "Don't distract me with *this* and *that*."

Logan chuckled and walked me around the entire place.

"This is my study," he said, opening the doors and leading me inside.

"This place is too big for a single person," I commented as I walked around the different shelves adorning his walls. "It must get pretty boring, no?"

"Why don't you keep me company?" Logan invited openly. "How does the idea of moving here permanently sound to you?"

I laughed—a sound I didn't recognize as mine. I smiled because it made things easier.

I continued exploring different shelves. That was until I reached an inbuilt glass case.

"What's this?" I asked, observing the sword inside. Its hilt was unique and beautiful. "You collect antiques too?"

Logan came to me.

"Why are there two holders?"

"These were twin dragons. I lost one a while back," Logan said, taking the sword out from the glass case. "Sorush gave these to me when I became his second in command."

"They must mean a lot to you," I smiled at him. "How did you lose the other?"

"We went hunting last year." He took the sword to his study table and put it in the bottom drawer.

I listened silently.

"I lost it then," he said, returning to me. "Let's go."

"Can we stay a little longer?" I asked innocently. "I like your study. I want to explore your book collection."

I held his hand and blinked my lashes.

"Please?"

"Fine," Logan caved in.

"Thank you," I said, kissing his cheek and hugging him. "I can't tell you how grateful I am to have you."

I pulled back before he could return the hug.

Logan just nodded as he touched his cheek.

"Are you okay?" I asked, tilting my head.

"Uh—yeah!" he said, rubbing his neck nervously. "Can I get you something?"

My smile turned into a full grin. I clasped my hands behind my back and nodded eagerly.

They believed I had surrendered. Maybe I had.

But somewhere, in the space between pain and forgetting, something still burned.

"A glass of water will do."