

Chapter 36

They came for me at midnight—silent, cloaked, and carrying a white gown heavy with golden jewels. They wanted to strip me bare and dress me like a sacrifice.

I refused. But they didn't force me. Not yet.

Instead, they allowed me a moment of privacy—a mercy more terrifying than violence. I followed their lead in silence as they got me ready.

Sax was the head of my escort to the prayer dome. The hallways were silent, dark.

The air didn't whisper. Even the shadows, usually playful under their blue holy glow, felt corpse-like tonight.

The sky hung still—unnaturally so, as if holding its breath. I couldn't hide my shivers as we left the Obsidian Castle for the prayer dome resting atop the northern mountains.

The carriages moved quietly along the slopes, the only sound in the dead of night—the crunch of leaves and rocks under the wheels. The giant doors opened and we crossed the foyer to the main dome.

A glass structure shone under the dark sky with torchlights, candles, and massive chandeliers. I wasn't expecting the mass gathering.

Everyone wore the same blue cloaks over their traditional clothes. Sax left when Sorush approached me with the priests.

He held my shoulders and gave them a firm squeeze before guiding me inside the glass dome. There was an altar decorated with gold embellishments, candles, and flowers.

A giant statue loomed over the altar, cloaked and faceless, wielding a scythe in both hands like judgment incarnate. The flames flickered as if in submission.

The altar reminded me of that dungeon. Every glance, every shadow, scraped against my nerves like knives.

"It's Azrael," Sorush said when he saw me staring at the statue. "Are you ready?"

I only nodded.

The priests went to their positions around the altar as Sorush led me forward. My eyes couldn't stop moving between them.

Everything was giving me chills. I sat on the altar with the help of Sorush.

I didn't want to be here. I wanted to scream.

I was scared. But my lips refused to open.

"These are witches and warlocks of the highest ranks," Sorush said.

*Wait—witches? Not priests?*

"They will break the curse," he said. He helped me lie down and palmed my head. "I'm here."

*I'm here.*

"I'll protect you, my child."

*I'll protect you.*

Logan came. I forced a smile his way.

I had to. There was no other way.

He grabbed my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. They stepped back and those other people, the witches and warlocks, started the ritual.

Their chants echoed in the air, colliding with the glass wall and reverberating inside my body. All *Blue Bloods* repeated after them in sync.

They raised their hands as if praying, then bowed before the statue and stood up. They continued the pattern.

I inhaled through my nose as I calmed my raging heart. *I've got this.*

I tasted venom in my mouth as I looked at Sorush and Logan. It began with that cup of coffee.

*Flashback*

I sat still for who knows how long after Sorush left. The cup sat untouched on the table as I went over our conversation.

I felt better after talking to him, but somewhere—something felt horribly wrong. I reached for my tea unwillingly, only to spill it on the floor.

I cursed, grabbing the napkins as I tried to wipe its traces off the carpet. I was grateful for the cup not breaking and attracting attention.

Once done with drying the now orange stain, I stood to discard the used napkin in the bin. I kicked the cup on the saucer and sat back on the sofa.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

The maid entered at my permission. She was here to clear the table.

I noticed how she eyed my empty cup and exhaled audibly in relief. I moved my leg purposely to hide the stain on the carpet with my dress.

Luckily, she didn't notice and left after cleaning up. I waited for a minute before tiptoeing to the door.

"Did she drink it?" Sorush's voice was low and urgent.

*Sorush?*

"Yes," the maid answered.

"Double the dose of kazaar," he said.

The word echoed like a bullet in my skull.

"Shorten the gap and serve the tea to her four times instead of three. Don't make a mistake, do you hear me?" he continued.

"Yes, Slichem," she replied.

"The effect should not break until the ceremony. Add it to her meal if necessary," he said.

I slowly stepped away from the door. *What are they adding to the tea?*

The answer came within a few minutes, when my head suffered a splitting pain. I was drenched in sweat, as if I had been drowned in water for hours.

I cupped my mouth and teetered to the bathroom. My legs barely supported my weight.

I fell to the cold floor under the cold shower. My body burned.

The heat coursing through my veins was unbearable. Only I knew how I was locking in my screams.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I burned from the inside. After an eternity, the pain dulled.

I slumped beneath the still-pounding water. My eyes fixed on an invisible dot as the fog lifted from my mind, slowly.

The void dissolved, and my brain started functioning. Message from Hannah.

Logan came. Left the store with Shae.

Headache. Skull-splitting pain. I looked around frantically.

*Then...what happened?*

The pain in my head worsened the harder I tried to remember. Then...all came crashing down.

"Hannah's dead. Cain was there. I was there. Logan was there."

Coffee...it started when I drank it. I shrank into myself as I looked around fearfully.

Eyes...everywhere. They were everywhere...watching.

Waiting. I was alone. Scared.

"I need to get out of here."

*End of Flashback*

The memory scorched like acid in my mind as the ritual dragged on. Whatever they made me drink turned my mind into glass. I was aware—but not in control.

I spoke only when they wanted, and said only what they allowed. A marionette on strings.

I was scared shitless. But I couldn't let fear cloud my judgment.

I did what they expected—sat still, stayed quiet. It wasn't a plan. It wasn't a deance.

Just...a thread to hold on. I started working my escape under their noses.

I used them to gain knowledge of their land, to work my way around it. My words and questions were carved with vigilance.

One slip and they'd know I was acting. Things could spiral the wrong way. I couldn't afford to take chances until I was out of their clutches.

I couldn't fight them with steel; I'd outwit them with patience. I wanted Cain's ring.

My only hope. My salvation.

I bit my trembling lip. Those eyes...that gaze...that moment...it was branded in my soul.

Betrayal.

He thought it was another betrayal.

*Just once...look into my eyes and see me. Not her.*

My grip tightened on the sword hidden under my dress. It was another horrible revelation. The one I discovered in his study.

I went there with a purpose—to retrieve my ring and find the location of *Temisgate*. It was the only way out of *Istrigus*.

That was until I saw that sword. The same sword Cain was holding that night at *Rose Raven*. The one smeared with Laurel's blood.

The one whose jewel was missing from the hill. The jewel I saw in Hannah's blood.

*It belonged to Logan.*

He killed them, not Cain. Another piece of the puzzle fell into place.

Keeping my composure as that murderer stood near—breathing lies onto my skin—was the hardest test of my patience. I'd avenge Laurel. I'd stab him with the same sword.

They're the real enemies. This wasn't about retribution. They wanted control.

I didn't leave the dining hall that night. I eavesdropped on their master plan from the shadows.

Sorush was pure evil. If I was dying, I would take at least one of them with me.

I shoved back the witch when she approached me with a gold dagger. She was about to slit my left wrist.

Like hell I'd let anyone touch it. Everyone stopped chanting when she crashed into the table holding offerings.

I jumped on the altar, leapt at Sorush. His eyes widened—just for a second—before my blade sank into his chest.

"Murderer!" I screamed, pulling the blade out of his chest and pushing him back when he tried to hold me.

Next was Logan. I slashed at his chest when he tried to hold me.

His breast pocket tore—Cain's ring fell out, clinking against the floor. I dove for it, fingers trembling as they closed around the metal warmth.

Mine. It was still mine. My intuition paid off. He held it close, the reason I couldn't find it in his study.

"You left a memo at *Rose Raven*," I spat, raising his sword.

My voice broke. Not from fear—but from the memory of Laurel's eyes, wide and terrified, in that final moment.

"Bastard!"

"Seize her," Sorush yelled. "Don't let her escape."

"Don't come close!"

My left wrist pulsed—then burned. A faint glow rose, shaping the outline of a wing. *His wing.*

Light erupted—blinding, beautiful, divine. *The Eternal Flame—awakened.*

I stood unharmed, protected by an invisible shield, as its pulse tore through the *Blue Bloods*—hurling them like dolls in the storm.

*His wing...protected me? A path opened and I ran.*

I kept running.

"Please—" I rubbed the ring furiously as I ran deeper on the mountain. "Come—"

My only hope. My only anchor.

*He was—*

The path vanished into a jagged cliff. Death lay in wait down the precipice with its jaws wide open.

I raised the sword in defense when I heard fast-approaching footsteps. Logan and Aelwin were the first to appear, followed by hundreds of *Blue Bloods*.

"Don't move!" Logan yelled in warning. "It doesn't have to be this way."

"Because it has to be your way!" I screamed back. "You drugged me so you could control me."

I scorned them. "Look at you, bringing armed forces against a human."

"You were not ready to leave his side," Logan snapped. "I had to bring you back, Omi—"

"I'm not Omisha!" I shrieked. "I'm not a conniving bitch. I don't kill anyone for my greed."

"Larc!" Sorush barked, cutting through the noise.

He came with Sax. His chest bore no marks of my attack. Logan's too.

*Blue bloody reapers.*

"That blade is not enough to kill me, child."

"It hurt you at least," I sneered.

"It doesn't matter if you're Omisha or not," Sorush's voice held malevolence. "You carry his wing. Rest is irrelevant."

This was his naked truth.

"That's why you pulverized your daughter without remorse," I scoffed.

He was extremely voracious.

"My daughter did the righteous thing," Sorush remarked coldly. "That evil holds no place in the world."

"You were created the same way," I said.

"We're blessed by Azrael's blood," Sorush spat. "Cain—he's corrupt. He stole it. He's not the rightful bearer of such a boon."

His smile was wicked.

"We're taking it back—by blood if we must."

"You're insane," I muttered in disbelief.

"I don't have time to entertain your lunacy," Sorush said as he looked at Sax. "Bring her alive."

They stopped when I tripped over the edge.

I smirked. "Let me show you what madness really looks like."

"Anastasia!" Logan yelled.

He stopped when I pressed the blade harder against my flesh.

"I meant it. No one is touching his wing," I whispered.

A sharp sting on my skin followed the warm trickle of my blood.

Sorush's cold façade cracked.

"Stop her!" he yelled in frustration.

My determination didn't waver as I hung between life and death. The choice was clear.

Without regrets.

"I'm the keeper of his power," I took another step back. "I'll return it to its rightful owner."

I smiled through the tears.

"If not him, I'll take it to the next life," I whispered. "Until we meet again."

*Just one time...*

Sorush lunged forward.

*I choose death over betraying him.*

The sky cracked open.

Lightning flashed—no, not lightning. A rift. A tear in the very fabric of night.

Something roared through it.

A blast of black shot down like a meteor crashing from heaven, burning the air with a crackling shriek. The ground trembled beneath us.

Many fell, including Logan.

Someone palmed my head and gripped my hand around the hill.

"You called—I came."

My heartbeat rang in my ears as I looked to my left through blurred vision.

"Cain!"

His name left my lips at last.

No longer cloaked in a mortal form—he was terrifying, divine. The electric blue eyes blazed like eclipses.

Black combat gear clung to him like shadow-forged armor. The cape—pinned to his left shoulder—swirled like the wings of death.

Cain touched the wound on my neck. He didn't look in my eyes. Not even once.

"How dare you set foot on our land!" Sorush roared.

"Just like you infiltrated mine through your daughter," Cain mocked, "be glad I didn't slit your throat in your sleep."

"It was you!" Logan was enraged. "You infiltrated *Temisgate* and killed the vicars."

His anger rose at Cain's smirk.

"I believe this belongs to you!" Cain threw both swords at his feet. "I knew you were up to no good."

His eyes held revulsion.

"But maiming your so-called daughter mentally!" Cain sneered at Sorush. "That's another level of rock bottom."

"You came to your demise, *Dalazar Daemnone*," Sorush laughed.

"You stole my possession." Cain glanced at me sideways. "How could you expect me to just sit and watch?"

"Your arrogance is folly," Sorush spat. "This centuries-old conflict will end tonight."

Cain held me protectively as the *Blue Bloods* rounded us.

"My, oh my!" he chuckled darkly. "*How scary.*"

He was greatly outnumbered, yet he laughed.

"Cain," I rested my hand on his chest as I looked around fearfully. "I'm sorry."

"For?" he asked in dark amusement.

I pouted slightly.

"Still underestimating me, love?" he asked softly.

I closed my eyes when he wiped the tear that slipped from my eye. His glove felt cool against my skin, bringing calm to my chaos.

"It's too early to mourn," he whispered.

"It's not funny," I mumbled.

"It will be," Cain said, patting my cheek gently. "Stay here, no matter what."

Ten gigantic varmints appeared when he stepped away from me.

They formed a protective loop around me.

"Be careful," I yelled after him.

Cain just chuckled in response.

They struck each other without warning, like lightning striking the earth.

Hundreds of *Blue Bloods* charged at Cain, above and below.

I was wrong.

Their numbers were nothing.

Cain didn't even flinch as he sent them flying in different directions after beating them to a pulp.

Logan and Sax charged forward with Aelwin and Viessa.

Their scythes clashed with his sword. The impact was nothing less than a thunderclap.

Cain's movements were lithe and fast.

He hurled Sax and Viessa aside as he blocked a simultaneous attack from Aelwin and Logan.

"I can feel the sting," Cain taunted Logan.

He blocked his scythe with just two fingers.

They pushed against each other and spun on their heels before engaging their weapons in another macabre dance.

"I will bring her back," Logan snarled.

"Good luck," Cain said.

Cain leapt into the air and kicked Logan in the face.

He locked Logan's head in his knee and pivoted him hard before throwing him toward Sorush.

"Kill her," Sorush barked. "Kill the girl."

His subordinates came at me with aerial attacks.

Their spears evaporated the varmints into smoke.

I stood still as they aimed hundreds of lances at me.

Sorush, Logan, and the other *Blue Bloods* became an impenetrable wall between us.

"Sorush!" Cain yelled, glancing left and right. "Coward!"

"You will die," Sorush sneered. "I'll rip you piece by piece."

The spears came down like heavy downpours.

The only sensation I felt crawling over my body—

*...the impending doom.*