

Chapter 5 5

Zoe's apartment in Queens was the size of Analia's old shoe closet. It smelled of cat litter and incense.

Analia slept on the pull-out couch. The springs dug into her back, but for the first time in years, she didn't wake up with a clenched jaw.

She woke up to the sound of sirens, not the eerie silence of the Penthouse.

"Coffee," Zoe groaned, shuffling into the livingroom in oversized pajamas. She handed Analia a mug that said Male Tears. "It's instant. Sorry."

"It's perfect," Analia said, taking a sip. It tasted like burnt hazelnuts and freedom.

They set up the 'studio.' It was literally Zoe's walk-in closet, lined with egg-crate mattress toppers and heavy blankets. Analia set up her microphone a Neumann U87 that she had smuggled out in her suitcase wrapped in a silk scarf. It was the only thing of real value she had taken, her Excalibur. She could have sold it to pay for a hotel, but without it, she was just Analia Graves, the discarded wife. With it, she was someone else. ①

She booted up her laptop. The email account 'starfall_vo @gmail.com' had 4,000 unread messages.

She ignored the fan mail. She ignored the old offers. She found the open casting call for The Pantheon Saga.

Character: Queen Aethelgard.

Description: A warrior queen who has lost everything but her will to fight. Voice must convey royalty, trauma, and lethal power.

Analia put on her headphones. The world fell away.

She closed her eyes. She thought about the car crash. She thought about the blank check. She thought about the ultrasound on the floor.

She opened her mouth.

The voice that came out wasn't Analia the trophy wife. It was deep, resonant, textured with grit and sorrow.

"You think you can break me by taking my crown?" she whispered into the mic, the audio peaking perfectly in the green zone. "I did not inherit this kingdom I built it from the bones of men like you."

Zoe, standing in the doorway, dropped her toast. "Holy shit, Ana."

Analia recorded three takes. No warm-up. No editing. Raw.

She attached the file. Subject: Audition - Queen Aethelgard - Starfall . No resume. No headshot. Just the file.

She hit send.

Across the city, in the gleaming offices of Apex Media.

Gaylon Webb, the legendary director, was rubbing his temples. He was listening to Angelena Stuart's audition tape for the tenth time.

It was... fine. It was technically correct. Her diction was perfect. But it was hollow. It sounded like a rich girl pretending to be sad.

"It's flat," Gaylon groaned. "It's plastic."

"But Mr. Wilson is pushing hard for her," his casting assistant, Mike, said nervously. "And the studio wants the star power."

"I don't care about star power if the performance is dead!" Gaylon slammed his hand on the desk. "Check the inbox again. There has to be someone else."

"We just got a submission" Mike said, refreshing the page. "Anonymous. Handle is... Starfall ."

"Starfall ?" Gaylon perked up. "The urban legend? The one who did the narration for The Last Titan five years ago and then vanished?"

"Probably a fake," Mike shrugged "But here."

He clicked play.

Analia's voice filled the room.

Gaylon stopped breathing. The hair on his arms stood up. It wasn't just a voice; it was an atmosphere. It carried the weight of a thousand wars. It was broken and unbreakable all at once.

The clip ended.

Gaylon stared at the speaker. "Play it again."

"Sir?"

"Play it again!" Gaylon shouted, grinning like a maniac. "That's her. That's my Queen."

"But we don't know who she is," Mike said.

"I don't care if she's a convicted felon," Gaylon said, grabbing his phone. "Email her. Tell her I want to meet her. Today. In person."

Analia's phone pinged

She read the email from Gaylon Webb. A slow, predatory smile spread across her face.

"They want a meeting," she told Zoe.

"Yes!" Zoe high-fived her. "But wait... you're broke. How are you getting there? And what are you wearing? You look like a homeless gap model."

Analia looked down at her sweatpants. "I need cash."

She went to her jewelry pouch. She pulled out a pair of diamond stud earrings. A birthday gift from Clive's mother, given with the comment, 'Try not to lose these, dear.'

"I'm going to the pawn shop on 3rd," Analia said.

"That place is sketchy," Zoe warned.

"I'm sketchy today," Analia replied.

At the pawn shop, the guy behind the glass loupe raised an eyebrow. "These are real. High quality. Stolen?"

"Divorce settlement," Analia said flatly.

He did the math on his calculator. "I'll give you \$18,000. Cash."

It was a fraction of their worth—the gems were flawless and easily worth fifty—but it was enough to restart a life.

As she walked out, counting the bills, a woman in a Chanel suit bumped into her.

It was Carisa Wilson. Clive's sister.

Of all the people in New York.

Carisa stopped, her eyes widening as she took in the pawn shop sign, then Analia's messy bun, then the cash in her hand.

"Oh my god," Carisa laughed, loud and cruel. "Analia? Are you pawning your jewelry? Has it really come to this?"

She pulled out her phone ready to snap a picture. "Clive said you were cutting off the leech, but I didn't think you'd be destitute this fast. This is priceless."

Analia didn't hide. She stepped into Carisa's personal space.

"Take the picture, Carisa," Analia said. "Post it. Tell everyone the Wilsons let their family starve. See what that does to your stock price."

Carisa hesitated, the phone hovering. The Wilsons cared about image above all else. A destitute daughter-in-law was bad PR.

"You're pathetic," Carisa sneered, lowering the phone. "Angelena is going to take your place, you know. She's already picking out new curtains for the Penthouse."

"She can have the curtains," Analia said, clutching the cash. "And she can have your brother. They deserve each other."

She walked away, her heart hammering but her head high. She hailed a cab with her own money.