

Chapter 16

I rehearsed what I was going to say when I saw the king and queen, but it didn't matter. We pulled up to the building where I would meet them and I was stunned to see a small cabin. Where was the grand palace I expected? This wasn't regal or sophisticated at all. It certainly didn't belong to the woman who slayed magazine covers in her ballgowns and full makeup.

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"This is it?" I asked, not even moving my eyes to Hades.

"Yes, this is their vacation cabin. You didn't think we were going all the way down to Colorado, did you?"

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"I didn't really think about it," I confessed.

When we climbed out of the car my cute little flats were immediately drenched in greasy mud. I let out a hiss of frustration, but understood why Hades had decided to wear something so casual. This place wasn't meant for formal wear.

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I studied the structure as we approached it. The cabin was low to the ground, looking like something out of a Swiss mountain range. The closer we got the more I realized that, though it was small and underwhelming, it had fine finishes and small, artistic touches. It wouldn't have costed a fortune like a marble-floored ballroom would've but it still wouldn't be cheap.

We climbed the stairs to the front door without saying a word to each other.

"Hey Noah," Hades said, acknowledging a young man who was leaning against the porch.

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He was so still and so unassuming that I had hardly noticed him at all. But the second I saw him I knew who he was. Ajax's right hand man and childhood best friend and ended up being almost as famous and as sought after as the prince himself. They were inseparable. Each photo of Ajax that had circulated the news papers and tabloids in his younger years often captured Noah as well, always by his side.

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Hades walked into the cabin like he owned the place, standing in the entrance way with a timid smile on his lips.

"Uncle Hades!" a child squealed, racing towards us. It seemed our timing was perfect.

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But, while Hades got down on one knee and opened his arms for the young girl, I was staring at her mother. Straight black hair that poured down her back and sharp eyes that were so focused they were almost cat like. She was thin and rather short with her distinctly Asian features, but there was something fierce and unrelenting about her. Even while wearing jeans and a plaid shirt she was nothing short of powerful.

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"Welcome Hades," Queen Keiko greeted, opening her arms.

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And between her knowing his nickname, his place in the world, and the beaming smile on her lips, I was left speechless when he straightened up and hugged her. He was a killer, a cold blooded murderer and this was how she accepted him into her home?

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Hades didn't seem at all surprised or uncomfortable though. "It's been too long," he murmured, then glanced up at the young girl who was staring up at him with wide eyes. "The last time I was here Clementine was much shorter and not nearly as strong."

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"I am very strong, Uncle," Clementine affirmed. "Stronger than you."

"Just as a princess should be," he agreed while running her hair.

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"You must be Charlotte," Keiko murmured. Her smile seemed genuine enough, but her eyes roved over my form, making me uneasy. "Hades has told me all about you."

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I spent the majority of the drive over here rehearsing what I would say her and her husband. I thought about how I would carefully trap Hades in his own words and prove his guilt. It would have been graceful, but damning, smart and undeniable.

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But, with the shocks I had received, my plan fell into nothing.

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"Did he tell you that he murdered my best friend?" I demanded.

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The words tumbled out of my mouth without much grace, landing heavily in the room. Keiko took a step back, her lips parting in shock. Hades jerked to stare at me, something close to betrayal floating on his features. And I just stayed still, waiting for the drama to ensue.

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But Keiko was too much of a queen to let that happen. She pressed her lips together tightly and nodded, her eyebrows gradually lowering to their normal position. Then, when she had collected herself, she shot a bright smile at Hades. "It seems we have a lot to catch up on, doesn't it?" Then over her shoulder as a figure came out of a nearby office, "Ajax, would you like to show Charlotte around the cabin and the grounds while I talk with Hades?"

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And just like that my teenaged dream came true and the heart throb prince appeared with his legendary auburn hair and cocky smile. He was just as handsome a few years later. But this could not have been worse timing.

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As if he could sense my thoughts Hades stepped beside me.

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"Of course I can show her around. What a lovely dress, Charlotte," he murmured, moving into the entrance space with that same smile and steady gaze that me and my friends had giggled over years ago.

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"Thank you," I whispered, feeling my cheeks flame despite the fact that his mate was only a few feet away from me. It was only when Hades let out a low rumble that I remembered my original purpose. "But-"

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"Come on beautiful," Ajax encouraged with a subtle wink, "I'll give you a private tour."

đ²⁶

I should've been stronger. I should've looked at my long time crush and told him that this was not the time for mindless flirting. But when he extended his arm towards me I felt like I had no choice but to take it. He was King so how was I supposed to deny his wishes? Queen Keiko knew the truth and I had to trust her to do the right thing now. With my arm looped through his, I could only glance behind me as Hades, Keiko, and Clementine watched us move back outside.

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We started outside and I was introduced to Noah who was all frowns and stern looks. And, when I disentangled myself to shake Noah's hand Ajax shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans and no longer had such a bright smile. When we started moving around the cabin his smile didn't return and he didn't compliment me or touch me again. He just told me what I was seeing, why they had chosen to build where and what they did.

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I had to be fair, if a royal wanted to get away this was the way to do it. Awful and limited road access, secluded from both humans and packs, but still homey and cozy. From what I could gather this was certainly not their full time house. They had several outposts so they could check up on various packs, but this was only for them. Their little getaway from the rest of the world. The perfect place to raise that cute little girl too. She reminded me of the little girl I used to babysit.

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We must've been outside for a full half an hour before Ajax's demeanor changed once again. With his head cocked to one side he gave me a charming smile that would've made me swoon five years ago. Now, it just made me anxious.

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I had a mate, he knew that. And his mate was a queen and a ruthless one from what I had heard. As handsome as he was he would never affect me the way Hades did. And I'm sure that Keiko would rip my heart straight out of my chest if I ever considered looking at her man twice.

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"So you are mated to the infamous Hades," he said.

"I guess," I replied, watching him out of the corner of my eye.

"You don't sound too excited about that," he pressed, his brow furrowed.

"Would you be?" I asked, forgetting that I was talking to a royal, to a man who could banish me from everything I knew with the snap of his fingers. I just wanted someone to understand how I felt, to know what I was going through.

"Some women would love to be mated to that man. There's a lot of power that comes with that kind of strength, that kind of authority."

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"You have power and strength," I protested, hardly believing the words that were coming out of my own mouth. He was the king for God's sake!

"I suppose I do," he murmured, like he had forgotten.

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Then, he stepped towards me and I became acutely aware of the fact that it was just he and I outside. Alone. His hand brushed my brown hair backwards, behind my shoulder. Slowly, he placed his cupped palm around the side of my neck, feeling the smooth skin there. I couldn't help but notice how beautiful his eyes were.

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"No mark," he breathed. "Charlotte, are you really taken?"

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"Yes, she is," Hades boomed from behind me.

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~~~Question of the Day~~~

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What is your favorite book from your youth?

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Because of the whole situation going on right now I've had more time to read, like most people. I usually try to read new books that are hot, try to see what people are currently into and hope that it can improve my writing or that I just have a damn good read. With everyone shopping online wait times for books are high and since I just moved I got to go through all of my books. I really love a book called Angel Burn and am currently reading Starcrossed with is also an old favorite!