## **Chapter 20**

I avoided Hades as much as I could the next few days. I would listen to him move around the house, always trying to be where he wasn't. If I saw his car pull out of the driveway I would move into the common areas, but if I knew he was in the house I would remain in my room. And on the odd times that we caught each other in the hallway I would squeeze myself against the wall, trying to keep as much space between us as possible. He never questioned it and never tried to seek me out.

My flowers were my only real joy. Every day when it was safe I would venture out and check on my various pots throughout the day. It was slow progress and I couldn't help but wish they would grow faster, but I was always delighted to see new sprouts and it helped me get some sun. With the weather turning warmer if I kept this up my summer freckles might start reappearing. Caleb had always told me I looked cute with them, though I thought they made me look childish.

One day I was checking on my pots of my princess balcony, right o the ballroom, when I decided to take some time to just be in the sun. Being in my room all day or for the majority of it was sapping my productive energy. I was getting lazier and lazier by the minute and missing more and more things from back home. The only thing I could think of to fix it was vitamin D and breathing in air that wasn't stale. I leaned against the railing and shut my eyes.

I missed Caleb a lot. But the shock and denial had passed. I knew that he was gone. If I ever went back to my packlands he wouldn't be there to greet me. His eyes wouldn't light up when he saw me and I couldn't run into his arms. By now he must've been buried and his parents would be starting to try and act like they were coping.

Still, my family was there. It was the only home I had ever known. It wasn't the largest pack, we all knew each other, and I was missing the friendly faces. Hell, I was even missing the not so friendly ones. And my heart ached for Tabitha and her impressive attitude packed in such a little body. I wanted to bake cookies with her again or just take her for a walk to the ice cream shop. I missed having quiet conversations about nothing with my mom and watching sports I didn't care about with my father. Then, I had wanted so much more, but it turns out the simple moments stuck with me the most.

I was so lost in thought, so lost in my wanting, that I didn't hear him come into the ballroom.

But I felt him.

I shi ed my body, moving o the railing and away from the sun and facing him, readying the mightiest glare I could muster when I felt like I could cry.

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No matter how broken I was feeling I was determined to not give him an inch. Defending him from the queen had changed nothing.

But Hades wasn't coming for me. In fact, I don't even think he saw me. His hands were shoved into his pockets of his dress pants and the few buttons at the top of his shirt were undone. A tie was resting on his shoulders, wrinkled from where the knot had been. But he just went straight to a piano, looking like nothing else mattered.

He sat down at the bench and took a deep breath, his eyes on the keys. And once his fingers found a comfortable place to settle those amber eyes shut and he began to play. It was fast and surprisingly light. The sound didn't much the serious man that I spent so much time avoiding. It almost sounded familiar as he played. And the way he moved was like he knew the piano better than he knew himself.

I just watched, stricken. I had never been musically talented. Hell, I was so bad with music I couldn't find a beat in a song and didn't know the dierence between melody and beat. But watching him just feel what he was playing, just knowing in his head and his heart how fast to go and which keys to press was so beautiful it was almost hypnotizing.

But the upbeat song ended rather shortly. And his eyes opened. The darkness that had surrounded him when he entered the room returned. I held my breath, but they didn't search for me.

With the silence filling the space, his shoulders slumped like he was about to crumble under invisible pressure. The corners of his mouth were turned down, his lips pressed into a hard line.

His fingers found new keys. This time, it wasn't happy and beautiful. It was something slow and painful. Heaviness settled into the room. It was too much for him to handle. He could only play for a few seconds before he slammed the cover over the keys and propped his elbows up, letting his head fall into his hands.

The quietness startled me back into realizing my position. I was trapped on the balcony until he decided to leave. Plus, if he snapped out of his mood he would be able to sense me and then I would be a sitting duck out in the open for him. Or, I could take my chances now and make a run for it before he was able to recover.

I tiptoed in the room, only feeling half guilty for using whatever emotional trauma he was facing as a cover for my escape. I just wanted to get back to the safety of my room before he even noticed I was here, that I had ever ventured out of the safety of my room.

"You don't have to act like a frightened rabbit around me," Hades said,

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forcing me to pause my creeping.

I wanted to be combative, but the right words didn't find their way to my tongue in time. I just stared at him.

"I would never hurt you, Charlotte," he continued. "I know what you say last week frightened you. And I know that I have given you a thousand reasons to be scared of me, but I would never lay a hand on you. This is your home now and I am your mate, do as you please."

"You kill indiscriminately," I retorted, finding the words that eluded me. And being alone and scared for so long had swirled together to form an ugly rage deep in my chest. "I know that you have killed women, men, even minors. What's to say that I won't be next? You could just snap one day and I could be six feet under."

"You are my mate. And you're... good God, you're so good and so wholesome. When I'm near you I can feel it coming o you. It feels like you're sunshine, Char." The corners of his mouth turned upwards, like just the thought was chasing away the bad feelings. "And it's not like I snap, it-"

"You know what you feel like?" I growled, then answered before he could. "You feel like power. You feel like this unholy mess of power and bloodlust. Every time I'm in a room with I feel sick. I feel fucking sick, Hades. And every time I look at you I think of my best friend that you murdered. You killed the only man I'll ever love."

At that, Hades got to his feet. The movements were sudden and sharp, but his facial expression returned to what it had been before. Hard lips and sad eyes. He met my gaze evenly, like he was daring me to stare at the pain I had just caused him.

"I would really prefer it if you would call me Sebastian," he murmured, his voice still silky and smooth.

"You're the devil," I spat.

Hades looked like he was about to say something. And I wanted him to. I wanted him to scream at me so I could scream back. I wanted him to defend himself so that I could accuse him over and over again. Deadly words had been piling on my chest since our last confrontation and I needed to let them out before they consumed me.

But he just scraped a hand over his face and began walking out of the ballroom.

"Come with me," he called over his shoulder.

And since I still wanted a fight I did as he asked, thinking I could jab at him until he broke. He could pretend to be all cool and collected. I had seen the real him. I knew that demons were twisting just below the surface. I knew that I had lost to him last time, but I would be smarter now, not give him a chance to fight back.

Ethel caught us in the hallway, her curly hair and vibrant smile so familiar already. "Hey, I was just starting to make lunch, what are you two crav-...Oh no." Our foul mood must've been a punch in the gut as her features pinched together.

"Don't worry, Ethel, I'll come help you in a minute," Hades grumbled.

Ethel just joined our little game of follow-satan, sensing an explosion was about to happen.

But Hades just led me to the garage.

"What is the point of this?" I demanded, scanning the space. It all looked the

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same. Same motorcycles, same car, same SUV. Nothing here had anything to	
do with the words we had just fired at each other.	â
"I think we need some time apart," he stated, his expression neutral. "Pick a car and go wherever you want. When you're ready, come back. I'll be here." I a way it was a gi , but it came out of his mouth like an order.	n a <sup>8</sup>
"You're letting me go?" I asked, my voice suddenly so and uncertain. This was some kind of cruel trick. It had to be.	a
"You were never mine to keep. You aren't a bird and this isn't a cage. You were always free to go. Now I wantyou to go."	<b>a</b> 7
"Hades," Ethel whispered, her voice low but distraught.	ິສ
I didn't wait another second. I grabbed a set of keys o the hooks, picking the SUV. Just as I began moving towards it I heard Ethel speak again. "What are you doing? What if she doesn't come back?"	ß
"Then she wasn't strong enough to be with me in the first place."	493 0
~~~Question of the Day~~~	
What is your comfort food?	158 0
Unfortunately all of my comfort food is fatty. I love Mac n' Cheese if I'm craving something savory. If sweet is the way I want to go then definitely ice cream, especially cookie dough!	b,