



114 Return

Eve 1

I could not close my eyes, not to speak of sleeping. The sounds vibrated in my head, roars and snarls that refused to go away no matter how hard I tried. I turned over in bed to stare at the empty space beside me. I reached out to Hades' side of the bed; it was cold, as it had been for the entire week since Hades left. A week since he refused to return.

My heart sped up again as the memory of that day played on my mind. The way he had been the last time I saw him. Bile rose in my throat at the acrid scent of the rotten black blood that had oozed from his arm as he bit down. His eyes, those red-black orbs, had been locked on mine, even through the chaos. They hadn't been his eyes, not the Hades I knew. Yet, even in their feral depths, there had been something desperate, something pleading that sent a shiver down my spine.

I closed my eyes tightly, trying to block out the image, but it was no use. The memory was etched too deeply, clawing at me like the talons he had barely restrained. It wasn't just the



monstrous transformation that haunted me—it was the pain that radiated from him, the torment in his voice when he roared my name like it was the only thing tethering him to sanity.

I turned over in bed again, the sheets twisting around my legs, a physical representation of the chaos in my mind. The room was suffocatingly silent, and yet my thoughts were deafening. He wasn't here. A week had passed, and he hadn't come back. I didn't understand why it bothered me so much, why it felt like his absence seemed to tug painfully on my heart.

For all the times we had bickered, for all the sharp words and colder silences between us, his absence felt like a jagged hole in my chest. I hated admitting it—hated the vulnerability that came with the thought—but a part of me twisted painfully at the empty space beside me. He unnerved me, yes, but he also anchored me in ways I couldn't explain. It was strange, and he was stranger than I thought.

"You don't know what you are doing to me," I recalled his ominous words. It hadn't been flirtatious or mocking. His voice had rung with sincerity, and for the first time, I wondered how I could be responsible for such a monstrous



transformation. The black veins, the sinister gaze, the talons—all left me questioning if I was indeed cursed.

Maybe I had been too optimistic about the prophecy being a sham because someone in a memory—disguised as a dream—told me so. Maybe I was cursed. Maybe my title, *the cursed twin*, held weight. I couldn't think of any other reason why he would have said those words to me. My heart jumped into a gallop in my chest.

I sat up in bed, the darkness of the room suddenly more suffocating than it had been just a moment ago. Had I infected him with a curse? Did he realize how I had done it? By now, did he realize I was not the blessed twin but the opposite? These thoughts made it impossible to sleep.

"Is it because I am cursed?" I had asked him.

The silence and his absence were nerve-racking because, in the quiet, there were too many answers, and all of them terrified me. My words hung in my memory, echoing in the darkened room like a haunting refrain. Is it because I am cursed?

I couldn't forget the way he looked at me after I

said it—confusion, yes, but also something deeper, something that cut to the marrow of my insecurities. Maybe he was piecing it together even then. Maybe that's why he left. Maybe I was the reason for his suffering. 1

A shiver ran through me as I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, my bare feet pressing into the cold wooden floor. I couldn't stay still anymore, couldn't lie there with the weight of my thoughts pressing down on me. The quiet was too loud, the shadows too suffocating. 1

I paced the length of the room, arms wrapped around myself as if that would stop the trembling. What if I'm the reason he hasn't come back? The thought slammed into me like a fist to the chest, leaving me breathless. What if my curse isn't just ruining me, but him too?

My mind churned, replaying every interaction we'd had, every fight, every moment of tension. The way he looked at me with that strange mix of exasperation and... something else. The way he protected me, even when he had no reason to. The way he fought himself that day, holding back a monstrous force that wanted nothing more than to destroy and consume.

And then there was the way he said my name.



The growl of it, rough and raw, as if it was the last shred of humanity he could cling to. I shook my head, trying to dispel the heat that flushed my face. Now wasn't the time to dwell on the complexities of Hades. I had to focus.

If he doesn't come back... The thought trailed off unfinished, too heavy to carry. My chest tightened, and for a moment, I felt like I couldn't breathe. I pressed a hand to my heart, as if I could still the frantic rhythm pounding against my ribs.

"No," I whispered to the empty room. "He'll come back. He has to."

But what if he didn't? What if he was already too far gone? Or worse, what if he stayed away because of me? The prophecy loomed large in my mind, a dark cloud that refused to dissipate. I had always tried to brush it off, to push it to the back of my thoughts, but now it felt inescapable.

Was it possible that I was the cursed twin after all? That my presence in Hades' life, in anyone's life, was nothing more than a slow poison? I wanted to believe I wasn't, but the doubt was corrosive, eating away at every logical thought. 1

My pacing slowed, and I found myself standing

by the window, staring out at the moonlit landscape. The night was calm, a stark contrast to the storm raging inside me. The silver glow of the moon reminded me of him—of the way his eyes could flash with fury, or with something gentler, something that I didn't dare name.

I leaned my forehead against the cool glass, closing my eyes. "Hades," I murmured, his name a prayer, a plea. "Please come back."

But the room offered no answers, only the echo of my voice in the darkness. And I was left alone with the weight of my fears and the hollow ache of his absence.

Hades

I opened the door to the bedroom, every muscle aching, the remnants of spasms still twisting under my skin like restless snakes. The contamination had receded for now, thanks to Kael and his damn syringe, but it left me hollowed out, exhausted, and on edge. I shouldn't have been here—not yet—but something had drawn me back. An obligation, perhaps. Or a weakness.

Mate.

The thought slithered through my mind, unwelcome and infuriating. It was a lie, a cruel twist of fate meant to bind me to something I didn't need. I clenched my jaw, suppressing the surge of irritation that threatened to bubble over. I wasn't a fool. I knew better than to indulge in such notions.

The door creaked softly, revealing the dimly lit room. My eyes scanned the space, noting every detail with the cold precision I relied on. The tangled sheets, the faint scent of her lingering in the air, and then... her. Standing by the window, staring out at the moonlit sky like some forlorn ghost.

Her silhouette was small, her arms wrapped around herself as if she could shield against the chill. Pathetic, really. She had no idea the kind of dangers circling her, the kind of dangers I brought into her life. I should have stayed away. It would've been cleaner, easier. For both of us.

Her voice broke the silence, soft and fragile, barely more than a whisper.

"Hades," she murmured, her breath fogging the glass. "Please come back."

The sound of my name on her lips sent a ripple



through me, sharp and biting. I ignored it, or at least, I tried to. I reminded myself that this was meaningless. Whatever she thought she wanted from me, whatever connection she believed existed, was a figment of her imagination.

I moved forward, silent as death, my bare feet gliding over the cold marble floor. She didn't hear me approach—of course she didn't. She never paid enough attention, never understood the weight of her vulnerability. It was foolish. Dangerous.

I reached her without a sound, my gaze fixed on the tension in her shoulders, the way she hugged herself as though she might disappear if she let go. I stopped just short of touching her, the beast inside me stirring at the proximity. It wasn't hunger. Not entirely.

"Is begging beneath you now?" I said, my voice cold and detached, cutting through the quiet like a blade.

She flinched, her body stiffening as she turned to face me. Her wide eyes met mine, shimmering with unshed tears, and for a moment, I felt something sharp twist in my chest. I buried it immediately, masking it with the indifference I wore like armor.

In the moonlight, I studied her face. Kael hadn't lied. Her eyes were bloodshot, shadowed by dark rims. Her skin barely had a flush of color, pale as the moonlight itself. She hadn't slept since I'd been gone.

"Hades," she breathed, her voice trembling. She blinked, as though trying to convince herself that I was real.

I crossed my arms over my chest, keeping my expression unreadable. "You're up late."

Her lips parted, but no sound came out. She looked at me like she was searching for something—an explanation, an apology, a reason. I gave her nothing.

Then she surprised me. She slammed against me, wrapping her arms around me for the second time. Before, I could compute what was going on, she slackened against me, suddenly limp. She fell back but I caught her. For a moment, there was something akin to panic that tore through me before I noticed her even breathing. She had finally fallen asleep. 2

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Hades 1

"I am not doing any training with you until you eat something," she said with her arms folded, her brows drawn in a frown.

"It does not matter," I ground out, looming over. "I am in perfect condition."

She looked me up and down. "You look malnourished," she countered.

I almost reeled back at her comment. My ears were ringing. "Malnourished?" I echoed in disbelief.

"You don't fill in your workout clothes like you used to," she remarked.

If not for my shock at the observation she had made about my body, I would have smirked at the fact that she just let it slip that she noticed my body. But she was not wrong. The Flux had that effect on my body, especially considering that it had come earlier than anticipated this time and that my appetite had disappeared days before its arrival. The Flux always left me weaker than usual, stripping away muscle mass and



energy, though I'd never admit that out loud. 2

"You're imagining things," I finally muttered, crossing my arms to block her view of my chest.

She raised a brow, unimpressed by my attempt to dismiss her. "Imagining? Hades, I've been sparring with you for enough time. I know what you're capable of. And I know when something's off. You're not hiding it from me. And I don't even want to pry into what you are hiding. Like I said before, I will not do that. What I will not do is let you train me when you look seconds away from collapsing. Just eat something."

I clenched my jaw, the ringing in my ears intensifying. It wasn't just her words; it was the audacity. The nerve. The care. She didn't realize that every question, every accusation, was grating at me in a way it should not have, especially with the upcoming result of the Lunar Sync Index test. If the world was still spinning in the right direction, the LSI test should come out negative, but I know what I fucking heard and...felt. 1

"This isn't your concern," I said, my voice low, laced with a warning. It would be better if she backed down and let us fall into the routine that we followed before and pretended like nothing

had happened or—changed. But here she was acting like a worried, angry mother hen, and in a sick, almost endearing way, I was a stubborn chick. 2

She stepped closer, her face tilted up toward mine, a determined spark in her gaze. "It is my concern when you're pushing yourself into the ground. You're no good to anyone like this. Especially not to yourself."

I inhaled sharply, my control fraying. "I said it doesn't matter. Now drop it."

"No." Her tone was stable, and for a moment, I hated her for it. Hated that she could stand there, arms folded, unrelenting in her determination to challenge me, even when I towered over her, even when she knew how dangerous I could be. Even when she had been face to face with the corruption that tore through me and possessed me, she had neither run nor screamed. She stood toe to toe with it, ordering me to fight it. Why?

And if she was capable of being so hardheaded in that situation, how could I make her see reason now?

"You don't get to tell me what to do," I growled. 1

"And you don't get to self-destruct while I stand by and watch," she fired back. "Eat something, Hades. Or there's no training."

I stared at her, the weight of her words, her stubbornness, pressing against the ache in my chest. She wasn't backing down, and part of me—damn it—part of me respected that.

"Fine," I bit out, stepping back, though it felt like a concession of power. "But don't expect me to finish it." 1

Her lips quirked into a small, victorious smile, and I swore it was the most infuriatingly satisfying thing I'd seen all day. 2

"Good. I'll bring something that even you can't complain about," she said, already out the door.

As she walked away, I rubbed a hand over my face. This wasn't about the food. This wasn't about the training. She was testing me, pushing against walls I'd built long before she came into my life.

And the worst part? She was winning.

I stared at her, her gaze laser-focused as I reluctantly ate. She had not been lying when she



said she would bring something that I would not complain about. The food was annoyingly simple—a grilled steak paired with roasted sweet potatoes and steamed broccoli. No sauces, no excessive seasoning, just plain, functional fuel for my body. A glass of water sat beside it—no frills or indulgence.

It wasn't anything I'd normally crave, but it was exactly what I needed. Begrudgingly, I picked up a fork and took a bite. And like I expected, it tasted like sawdust. The Flux had a way of stripping everything of flavor, leaving even the most well-prepared meals tasting bland and unappetizing. The Flux dulled more than just my senses—it drained my will, my focus, my strength. But I forced myself to chew, the weight of her gaze on me like an anchor.

Across from me, she sat with her arms still crossed, her expression unreadable. She wasn't going to look away. She wasn't going to let this go.

"It's terrible," I muttered after swallowing, stabbing the broccoli with my fork like it had personally offended me.

"You're just saying that because you don't want to admit you're actually eating," she said, her



voice calm, almost soothing like she was talking to a child.

I narrowed my eyes at her, but she didn't flinch.

"You don't need to watch me like a hawk. I'm eating, aren't I?"

"I'm watching to make sure you finish," she shot back. "You've gotten good at pretending you're fine, but I've learned to spot the cracks, Hades. And skipping meals isn't going to help whatever it is you're dealing with."

I stiffened at her words, a bitter laugh bubbling in my chest. "You think food is going to fix this? That it'll fix me?" She was so naive. The Flux was not some fever. No, my father was far more cruel. 7

She leaned forward slightly, her voice softening. "No, I don't. But it's a start. And until you can face whatever's breaking you apart, I'm going to make sure you don't fall apart completely. Even if that means sitting here while you eat every last bite of this boring meal."

Her honesty cut through the haze of my frustration. I didn't know whether to be furious at her persistence or grateful for her stubborn care. Maybe both.



I picked up the glass of water, downing it in one long sip before setting it down with more force than necessary. "Fine," I said, grabbing another piece of steak. "But don't think this means you've won."

Her lips quirked into the faintest smirk. "We'll see." Despite the triumph in her eyes, the shadows never faded. If I looked malnourished, she looked dead.

And as I continued to eat under her gaze, I couldn't shake the strange, infuriating feeling that this was less about her winning and more about her refusing to let me lose.

She cares...for me. 3

I took one more bite, and bile quickly rose in my throat. I dropped the fork with a heavy clank and gagged. She sprang to her feet, and she was by my side. She rubbed slow circles on my back as I clutched my chest, an ache spreading.

"You are okay."

"Yeah, right."

She poured some more water from the jug for me to drink. This time, she did not give me the cup. She put it to my lips herself.



I opened my mouth just enough to take a sip, the cool water soothing my throat and calming the bile threatening to rise again.

"See? Not so hard," she said softly, her voice a mix of relief and triumph.

I scowled, but the fire behind it was dim. "I could've done it myself."

"Sure you could've," she replied, not bothering to hide the sarcasm. She set the glass down on the table but stayed close, her hand lingering on my shoulder. "You're stubborn, Hades, but so am I."

"No kidding," I muttered, leaning back against the chair and dragging a hand over my face. The ache in my chest persisted, but it wasn't just physical. Her touch, gentle yet firm, lingered like a brand. It felt too close, too much. Why did it feel so right?

She stepped back slightly but didn't sit down. "You've been pushing too hard. Even someone like you has limits. Now eat the rest."

I scowled. "Not happening."

"Hades..." she grumbled.


We stared each other down like that for what felt like an hour, but I was not budging. I crossed my



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arms over my chest and leveled her with a hard look. "What are you going to do now, Red?" I raised a brow. "Feed me?"

She let out an exasperated sigh, and to my shock, she grabbed the fork, picked up a piece of steak, and brought it to my mouth. "Choo, choo, here comes the train. Open up," she said, her mouth curling into a mocking smirk. 

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