

## 76 Acceptance

Eve~ 1

As I stepped into the hidden room, a strange mixture of awe and trepidation settled over me. The smell of paint and charcoal hung thick in the air, intermingled with something raw and earthy, almost like damp stone. It was the unmistakable scent of a space frequently used, though the silence here felt heavy and watchful, as if the walls themselves held secrets.

My fingers trembled slightly as I reached out, trailing them along the edge of a wooden table laden with brushes, jars of pigment, and sketchbooks, each object arranged with meticulous care. Easels stood around the room, all shrouded in dustless tarps, their forms shadowed and solemn like silent guardians. There was no dust anywhere—on the floor, not even on the shelves filled with art supplies. Someone—Hades, I guessed—visited this space often enough to keep it pristine, untouched by neglect.

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Every instinct urged me to turn back, to leave before I uncovered something I wasn't meant to see. But a deeper pull—a relentless curiosity—kept me rooted in place, almost daring me to peel back the layers of mystery that cloaked this room.

Gingerly, I approached one of the covered easels, my heartbeat loud in my ears. My hand hovered over the tarp, hesitating for a brief moment. I came closer to revealing what it hid, but I realized what I was about to do. I had no right.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose, an electric prickling sensation that sparked every nerve into alertness. My heart gave a jarring sputter, its rhythm stuttering in a warning I'd ignored too long. Too late, I realized I wasn't alone.

A soft, almost inaudible breath whispered from somewhere behind me, and before I could turn, a shadow moved with blinding speed, closing the distance in a heartbeat. Silver eyes flashed in the dim light—cold, unblinking, inhuman.

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I stumbled back, breath hitching as I met that relentless gaze, feeling its intensity like a weight against my chest. There was no warmth in those eyes, only a glint of something ancient and unfathomable, like a being that had existed long before this place, this world, perhaps even before light itself.

Hades.

Suddenly, I felt his large hands around my throat just before I was slammed into the wall with a painful thud. Pain coursed like a current through my still-recuperating body. My breath fractured as I caught some of my bearings and looked up.

Hades' piercing silver gaze matched the pale moonlight as he stared down at me, his brows drawn into a deep scowl. "Who gave you the right?" he drawled, his voice as smooth and dangerous as a dagger wrapped in silk, each word sharpened with barely restrained fury.

My back throbbed against the cold stone wall, the impact leaving a dull ache that pulsed through my body. I tried to steady my breathing, but the closeness of his face, the sheer force of his gaze, froze every thought and movement. 2

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"I—I was just..." My voice faltered, swallowed up by the oppressive silence that settled between us. I couldn't seem to string the words together, couldn't form an excuse that would appease him. Not with his hands still around my throat, his grip tight enough to hold me in place yet light enough to leave no marks. A controlled strength that made me realize just how easy it would be for him to snap his fingers and end me, and just as easily choose not to.

"You were just...?" he echoed, voice dropping to a dangerous murmur as he leaned in closer. His breath, warm and faintly scented with something darkly sweet, ghosted over my skin, sending shivers down my spine. "What were you hoping to find here?"

The weight of his gaze bore down on me, silver eyes unyielding, piercing through every flimsy defense I might have conjured. I could see it in his expression—he knew I had no answers. He'd caught me trespassing, prying into a part of his life he'd clearly kept hidden. Protected.

His grip loosened fractionally, and I managed a shaky breath, my heart pounding as I met his gaze, somehow finding my voice amidst the chaos inside me. "I—I didn't mean to intrude," I managed, my voice barely above a whisper. "I was

His lips curved into a cold smile, though there was no humor in it, only a flicker of something dark and ancient. "Exploring?" he repeated, as if tasting the word. "Exploring what, exactly?" Then his hold grew tight once again, his fangs glinting in the little illumination. A lump of dread formed in my throat. "Lying to me is about the most dimwitted thing you could do," he continued, his voice low. "You were spying."

The accusation stung, and I felt a surge of defiance rise within me, something that, even in my vulnerable position, I couldn't quite quell. "I am not a spy, Hades," I tried to say. But his dark chuckle cut me off. "What weight do the words of a mutt hold?" My heart stopped, his words finding their mark as I felt a different type of pain tear through me. He had never called me that before, even when everyone else had. Just then, the realization dawned on me. This was not Hades' room. It was a shrine for Danielle. The painting of the sea was by her. I could feel her love for Hades through every brushstroke. She had loved him as he did her. This was a memento for her, and I had intruded.

I had no right indeed. I was the one at fault.

"I am sorry," I murmured softly. "It won't ever happen again." I promised.

For a fleeting moment, something shifted in his expression, a crack in the armor. But it was gone as quickly as it came, replaced by a hardened glint in his eyes as he leaned back, releasing me from his grasp.

"Consider yourself warned," he said, his voice chillingly calm, a sharp edge to every word. "The next time you dare cross a line, I will not hesitate to put you right back in your place." 1

He took a step back, and in that brief reprieve, I could breathe again, the weight of his presence slowly lifting. But his words lingered, an echo of menace that rooted itself deep within me. I had been right. This was what he truly felt. This was what he felt for the daughter of Darius. The man who had taken Danielle away from him.

After his warning and his harsh words, he made his way to the bathroom. I sat on the edge of the bed we shared, my back turned to him, the weight of guilt pressing down with relentless force. His words—mutt, intruder—replayed in my mind, each syllable a reminder of the line I'd crossed and the resentment I'd stirred.

I heard the door of the bathroom open and instinctively braced myself. I could feel the mattress shift slightly with his movements, a

The silence in the room was thick, broken only by his slow, steady breathing. It should have been comforting, that steady rhythm, but tonight, it only amplified my shame. I'd invaded something sacred, a place he kept hidden and untouched, a shrine to Danielle and a love that I'd never be able to understand. That realization hollowed me out, leaving only a gnawing ache where my curiosity had once driven me.

I shifted slightly, glancing at him out of the corner of my eye. He lay facing away from me, his posture rigid and unyielding. I could feel his coldness, an invisible barrier that made the small space between us feel like an endless chasm. I wanted to say something, to apologize again, but every word felt inadequate, hollow, incapable of bridging the gap I'd created.

Tonight, I could not allow my nightmares to disturb him. Not wanting to disturb him further, I quietly gathered a blanket and moved to the small settee by the window. The cushions were stiff, barely comfortable, but that felt right tonight—a self-imposed discomfort I couldn't shake. I settled in, my back pressed against the armrest, knees drawn up, feeling the cold air seeping through the cracks in the window.

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I dug for my sketchpad from the drawer, its pages already marked with memories I'd tried to trap on paper, fragments of the past I couldn't let go of. Tonight, I needed its blank pages more than ever. Letting out a slow breath, I picked up the pencil and began to write, letting the pain, confusion, and guilt bleed onto the page, spilling out all the feelings I didn't dare speak aloud.

The ink flowed steadily, and with each line, the heavy weight pressing on my chest lightened just a little. I poured out everything I felt—the regret of intruding on a room that was a tribute to her, the sting of his words, the realization of how small and unworthy I felt in comparison to her memory. Perhaps, if I could release enough of this darkness, the nightmares would be gentler, leaving me undisturbed. 1

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