

77 Jules

Hades~ 1

I stood over her, watching as she squirmed and mumbled incoherently in her sleep, her brows drawn in a disturbed expression. I lit a cigarette and took a long drag. The soft glow cast faint, wavering shadows over her face as I stood by the window, watching her. She was curled up on the small settee, looking far too fragile, clutching that damn sketchpad like it was her lifeline. Her lips moved, words slipping out in fragments, tangled in whatever dreams or nightmares haunted her. The restless rise and fall of her chest, the small tremors of her body—it all betrayed a vulnerability she tried so hard to hide.

I took another drag, letting the smoke swirl and dissipate around me, filling the silence with a faint, smoky haze. In the quiet of the room, with her soft breathing and occasional murmurs, I felt that old ache—that bitter, relentless memory of what I'd lost, of what she had stumbled into tonight without permission. She'd ripped open a wound I'd spent years burying, one that had scarred over but never fully healed. I touched

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My gaze drifted to her sketchpad lying open on her lap, faint lines sketched across the page, barely visible in the dim light. A part of me wanted to look closer, to see what she'd drawn or written in those frenzied strokes. But I stayed back, letting the cigarette burn low between my fingers, its embers flaring with each quiet drag.

I told myself it was simple anger that had pushed me to grab her, to press her against that wall and show her the boundaries she'd so carelessly crossed. But watching her now, curled up like this, I felt something else—an uncomfortable, nagging sensation that tugged at the edges of my fury. It was a familiarity, a twisted reflection of my own pain, mirrored in the way she held herself, in the raw guilt and shame that had bled from her voice.

The cigarette was down to its last bit, the ember glowing dangerously close to my fingers. I ground it out with a swift motion, eyes never leaving her as I took a step closer, drawn by something I didn't fully understand or want to acknowledge. She was suffering—or so I theorized. But I believed she had been for a long time. There were too many signs. Yet, it could all be a part she played to serve a purpose for Silverpine. It was still a possibility. The truth was yet to be known.

My carefully laid plans had been disrupted by the occurrences surrounding her, and now I could say I knew nothing about her. No recorded phone calls, security cameras compromised, phone itself decimated. And for the first time since that fateful night five years ago, I wasn't sure what was going on.

She was an enigma in every sense of the word. I found myself asking again and again: who exactly was Ellen Valmont, and why was she nothing like I'd ever expected? Defiant, brave...kind. It made no sense.

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On top of that, she was wolfless. So many unanswered questions, theory upon theory. I fancied puzzles, but this was another thing entirely. By this time next year, Operation Eclipse would be completed. The aftermath would leave only Obsidian Pack standing while Silverpine would have to be erased. But that was only if the blessed twin awakened what I needed. Ellen had to be ready to be wielded like the weapon that she was.

But how could I handle a weapon that seemed to have a will of its own, a mind that questioned and rebelled rather than yielded? Ellen was meant to be a pawn, a tool I could shape to suit my plans for Silverpine and Obsidian. She was supposed to be predictable, straightforward, malleable. Yet here she was, defying everything I thought I understood about her, slipping through my grasp like smoke.

I recalled the resignation in her eyes when I held her to the wall. There had been no upturned nose, no frown, no icy glare. Only hurt and acceptance.

The memory twisted something in my chest that I pushed away. I sighed, the irritation settling in my chest as I bent down, slipping one arm beneath her knees and the other around her

Her scent was overwhelming up close—a soft, warm blend of honey and lavender that lingered in the air, wrapping itself around me like a subtle trap. It sank into my skin, clinging to me even as I crossed the room with her in my arms. I could feel it in my lungs, threading itself through my thoughts, as though it were somehow imprinted into her very essence. 1

Ellen's head nestled against my shoulder, her breath warm against my neck. I cursed inwardly, feeling my control slip with each step toward the bed. I'd faced armies and storms, worlds of chaos and conquest, but nothing had prepared me for the calm yet maddening weight of her in my arms. She was so small, so damn fragile. The sharp edge of my irritation softened, blunted by an ache I couldn't quite place.

I laid her down on the bed gently, careful not to wake her. She murmured something unintelligible, clutching at the blankets, her fingers curling around the fabric as if it were a lifeline. She looked almost peaceful, her features softened by the shadows that played across her face, her chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm that belied the storm brewing in her mind.

But as I pulled the blanket over her, a faint crease appeared between her brows, and her hand reached out, grasping at the empty air as if searching for something. I hesitated, my hand hovering over hers, torn between the urge to pull away and the need to reassure her—an impulse I couldn't quite understand. I was a traitor, it seemed, even more than Cain had been. It was a betrayal to Danielle's memory. It would all be worth it. It had to be.

The scent of her lingered, filling the quiet space between us. It was all-consuming, weaving into the cracks of my resolve, softening edges I'd honed over years of careful detachment. I closed my eyes, taking a steadying breath before straightening, forcing myself to step back, putting space between us.

I watched her for a moment longer, my gaze lingering on the lines of her face, the faint flicker of her eyelids as she drifted deeper into sleep. I wanted to blame her, to lay the fault squarely at her feet for stirring something in me I'd buried long ago. But in this moment, in the stillness of the room, I found myself unwilling to turn away.

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My fingers brushed against the earring once more, a habit born of regret and memory, before I turned, letting the shadows swallow me whole. Ellen would awaken in her own time, and when she did, she would be a weapon forged, honed, and wielded at my will. That was the plan—one I would see through to the end, regardless of the quiet ache settling deep within me.

Eve~

Weeks passed by in a blur as I recuperated steadily. Painting took most of my time, and journaling helped me resist screaming in the dead of night because of the nightmares. Some I believed were memories, others were just too outlandish to have ever happened.

Despite sleeping in the same room, the distance between me and Hades was as insurmountable as it should be. We barely spoke, and he spent most hours in his office. I hadn't seen Felicia, which was a relief, but it hurt not to see shy little Ellie.

One early morning, I was working on a piece, Hades already out of bed, when the door swung open. I turned to see someone who wasn't Mrs. Miller.

"Good morning, Your Highness," the girl, who couldn't have been more than five years older than me, greeted with a wide smile. She was ginger like Mrs. Miller, a smattering of freckles on her face.

Her cheerful greeting startled me from my morning haze, and I blinked at her, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear as I set down my brush. I wasn't used to seeing anyone here besides Mrs. Miller or the occasional guard, and this girl's warm smile seemed so out of place in the somber walls of Hades' estate.

"Good morning," I replied, a bit hesitant. I wasn't sure who she was or why she was here, but she seemed genuinely happy to see me. Her demeanor was refreshing—an open brightness that felt worlds apart from the cold formality I'd grown accustomed to in this place.

She stepped further into the room. "I'm Jules," she introduced herself. "I am Mrs. Miller's niece, and while she's out, I'll be replacing her." Her smile didn't falter, and I began to doubt if she knew what I was.

"Hello," I greeted, getting up. I walked up to her and stretched out a hand for a handshake.

She grabbed my hand without a moment of



She grabbed my hand without a moment of hesitation, and before I could react, she pulled me in for a hug, startling me out of my wits. "It's lovely meeting a werewolf in the flesh!" she exclaimed.

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