

86 Embrace It

Eve~ 1

The room was darker than usual, lit only by the pale glow of the moon filtering through the floor-to-ceiling windows. I'd been lying in bed for hours, staring at the ceiling and rehearsing the conversation I needed to have with Hades.

I heard him before I saw him—the low click of the door, the deliberate sound of his shoes on the polished floors. My body tensed instinctively. His gait was uneven, and there was an air of barely restrained energy radiating off him, like a storm barely contained.

When he stepped into the dim light, I saw it—the slight sway in his stance, the looseness in his movements. His dark hair was mussed, the crisp lines of his usual composure frayed at the edges. But it was his eyes that caught me. They glowed faintly, too bright, too feral.

He was tipsy. And agitated. If the sneer that took over his features when our eyes met was anything to go by. Not off to a good start it would seem.

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"You're awake," he drawled, his voice smoother than it had any right to be, laced with something sharper than usual.

"I wanted to talk," I said carefully, sitting up and pulling the blanket tighter around me.

"Of course, you did," he muttered, a cruel smile curving his lips as he crossed the room. He didn't bother looking at me, his focus entirely on the tie that he was loosening. I wanted to get up and help him but I thought better of it. I could worsen his sour mood. "What urgent matter could possibly be keeping you awake tonight, Red?"

I ignored the jab, forcing my voice to stay calm. "I've been thinking about my role here. About how helpless I've been—"

At that, he laughed, sharp and humorless. The sound cut through me like a blade, and I flinched before I could stop myself.

"This again? Helpless," He turned to face me, his eyes glittering with something dangerous. "That's rich, coming from the woman who's been coddled and protected her entire life. You're royalty, Ellen. Helpless is all you have ever been." His tone was laced with bitterness that caught me off guard.

The words stung, but I bit down on my hurt and frustration. "That's why I want to train. I need to learn how to defend myself. Kael—"

"Kael?" His expression darkened, the sharp edge of a sneer twisting his face. "Of course. Always Kael, isn't it? The noble Beta, ready to swoop in and save the fragile werewolf princess." 4

My jaw tightened. "That's not what this is about. I want to take responsibility for myself. For once." I was not backing down.

He laughed again, this time low and mocking.

"Responsibility? Don't kid yourself, Ellen. You're playing pretend, grasping at some childish fantasy of independence. You think having a gun or learning how to throw a punch will make you anything other than what you are?" The hate that dripped from his voice was startling. It reminded me of Felicia, of Kavriel.

His words felt like a slap, but I stood my ground.

"And what am I, Hades?"

He stared at me, his glowing eyes narrowing as something vicious curled at the edges of his mouth. For a heartbeat, I thought he wouldn't answer. Then, with deliberate cruelty, he said:

"A *weakness*," 4

The word hung in the air, heavy and cruel. My chest tightened, but I refused to look away. "You don't mean that," I said, though my voice wavered. But his eyes were as cold as ice.

"Don't I?" He took a step closer, his presence suffocating. "You're nothing more than a *whimpering* distraction. A fragile little thing who doesn't belong in my world, pretending you can handle the monsters lurking in the shadows." He said it like he was one of those monsters. 1

I swallowed hard, my pulse pounding in my ears. "You don't get to decide what I can or can't handle."

He smirked, a cold, hollow thing. "I already have."

The room felt smaller, the walls closing in around me as his words dug deeper. "You think you're the only one who feels trapped here?" My voice rose, the anger I'd been holding back finally spilling out. "I didn't choose this! I didn't ask for any of it, but I'm trying to adapt—to survive!"

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"Survive?" His voice turned colder, and he took another slow step forward. "You don't know the first thing about survival. You've been handed everything, Ellen. Even now, you're asking for Kael to fix you because you can't face the truth."

"And what truth is that?" I demanded, my voice trembling.

He leaned in, his breath warm against my ear. "You'll never be strong enough to stand on your own. Not here. Not without me." 3

The words hit like a physical blow, knocking the air from my lungs. My throat tightened, but I refused to let him see how much he'd hurt me.

"That's not true," I said, though my voice cracked.

Hades leaned back, his expression unreadable, but his eyes burned with something dark and self-loathing. "Keep telling yourself that, Red."

I stared at him, my chest heaving with the effort to hold back the tears threatening to spill. "Why are you doing this? Why are you trying so hard to tear me down?" Who hurt him? What could have made him like this?

"Because it's better you break now," he snapped, his voice laced with venom. "Better you realize you don't power here and sit down and take the

Something in me snapped. "Maybe the problem isn't me," I said, my voice shaking but defiant. "Maybe it's you." 2

His eyes narrowed, a flicker of something—pain, maybe—crossing his face before it hardened again. He turned away without another word, the tension in his shoulders visible even as he strode to the window and stared out into the night. The city lights shinning in the far distance.

The silence was deafening, the weight of everything unsaid suffocating.

"Good night, Hades," I whispered, my voice barely audible as I turned away, blinking back tears. I expected this but it hurt nonetheless. He had been warm yesterday, today he was cold.

I didn't wait for his response. I didn't need one. His silence spoke louder than any words ever could. Tomorrow I would go and meet Kael.