

## Chapter 66

Kaif

After dropping Jonah off with Marabella and the kids at Andrei's Pack, Dominic and I head to Katya's. Today, we are going to the Moon Goddess realm, something I am a little nervous about. Mainly for Kyan, who had to hand over control to me. We aren't sure how he will transition into the Moon Goddess realm, being of Hades' bloodline. In theory, I was created by the Moon Goddess, Celeste, so I should be able to pass through in my form, it just means that Kyan will have the back seat.

“Are you sure this will work?” Dominic asks me, and I am not a hundred percent positive. “Don't you voice that,” Kyan warns me, knowing his father will refuse us to try.

“In theory, I am Celeste's creation, just cursed by Hades,” I tell him, not willing to lie to him like Kyan wishes.

“I don't like this. It's making me nervous knowing I can't go with you. What if you get stuck between realms?” Dominic asks.

“Then I expect you to find us a way out,” I tell him.

“And if I can't?” Dominic asks, and I glance at him to see his knuckles turning white from the pressure of his grip on the steering wheel.

“Then I'll bring the Moon Goddess realm down if needed,” I tell him.

“You'll what?” he blurts in horror.

“It will be fine, stop being such a negative Nancy, Dominic,” I tell him.

“I am not being negative, my son will be trapped in your form, you get stuck he is stuck with you!” I sigh heavily, and Kyan yawns as if this conversation is already boring him.

As we pull up, I see that Eziah is already here with Temperance, and Dominic pulls up beside his car. Climbing out of the car, Kyan's skin makes me itch. Dominic takes his sweet ass time. “Old man move it, I got realms to hop,” I tell him.

“Don't you old man me when you're as old as fossilized dinosaur shit!” he snaps, shutting his door a little too hard.

I shake my head, and move toward the pack house, just as I am about to knock on, the door opens revealing Ezra. He steps aside and motions toward the living room. “They're in there,” he tells me, and I start taking off my shirt. I peer around into the living room to see Eziah trying to calm down Temperance, who looks like she is having a panic attack.

“You'll be right with her?” I ask Ezra and Dominic as I remove my pants, chucking them at Dominic.

“Kaif!” Kyan snarls in my head.

“I've listened to him whine the entire drive here, he can hold them unless you prefer driving home naked when we return” I tell him. Zoning back into my surroundings, Ezra is staring at Dominic with a sly smile on his lips, while Dominic looks like he is about to attempt to beat me with the clothes I tossed at him. Humans and their multiple layers. In my day, we walked around barefoot not with more layers than a damn onion.

“Back in your day, you wore a butt flap like a damn caveman,” Kyan retorts as I toss the banana hammocks Kyan likes to wear at Dominic.

“I take it back, I hope your ass gets stuck!” Dominic snaps, peeling Kyan underwear off his face with a shudder.

I shift, and Ezra peers up at me, and I crack my neck and shake out my fur before bending, deliberately slapping Dominic's face with my tail as I do so, only to be zapped. I jump, spinning and snarling at him.

“You're still my son,” he huffs. I try to wrap my mind around that clusterfuck of a mind bender. I go to argue before seeing Katya come over to me.

“You sure you wanna do this?” she asks, peering up at me, I nod, ducking my head to step into the living room. Temperance backs up, her knees knocking the couch before she topples back onto it.

“Kaif! Warning next time!” Eziah growls. I return the same growl back to him, ready to get this over with.

Katya steps closer to Dominic, and I see them exchange a few words regarding Temperance. However, the energy flowing through Temperance isn't much different from his, so I know he can handle her just fine. Eziah quickly pecks her cheek when Dominic sneaks up behind her. Eziah notices him but doesn't acknowledge his presence behind her when Dominic reaches and a hand brushing the back of her neck as he whispers, “Somnus.”

She passes out, and Eziah reaches for her, but it is Dominic who catches her. “She's fine, she is just sleeping,” Dominic assures him, though Eziah looks like he wants to snatch her from him.

Ezra grips Eziah's shoulder. “We'll keep her safe,” he assures his son, and Eziah finally tears his gaze away from Temperance, turning to face his mother. I watch as Kat's skin ripples, and Eziah's eyes glow, burning brightly as I feel their magic fill the room. Suddenly, Katya turns her gaze to me, offering me her hand.

“Ready?” she asks me, her voice melodic, and I nod, dropping my hand into hers when Eziah reaches for my other. Their magic is warm, not cold tendrils like mine. Their magic washes over me, while mine slivers, and

ebbs, pulsing, while theirs is more gentle. I blink, waiting for the shudder of the portal, only within that one second of blinking I open my eyes to a field. The soft gentle breeze brushes through my fur and I gasp, letting them go. I turn, looking at the magnificent crystalline castle, forests, and wildflowers surrounding the place; wolves and Lycans coexisting peacefully. Much different from what I am used to in Hades' realm.

“Kaif?” Katya asks, drawing my attention to her. I peer down at her and her son. “Are you alright?” she asks, watching me warily, as if she expects me to disappear or drop dead on her. Yet, it is the complete opposite, I actually feel at home here. Something I never felt in the underworld. I feel calm, like I am drugged on Valium or something.

“I feel fine,” I tell her, looking at my hands to make sure I am in one piece.

“Phew,” she says, breathing out a sigh of relief. “I was worried for a second. Seems your theory was right, being of Celeste's creation you can pass between both realms.”

“Well, come on,” Katya says, and I follow her and Eziah toward the castle. However the closer we get, the more physical the place becomes, it's not, in fact, crystalline but gold. The gigantic doors open as she climbs the steps as if the place is welcoming her home, everything here is so white and bright.

Katya leads us through the palace when Eziah stops by a set of stairs. “Ah, where are you going, the fountains are upstairs?” Eziah asks his mother. Katya pauses for a second.

“You'll see,” she says, waving at him to follow. He shoots me a glance as he does it. I shrug, this isn't no realm I'm used to, I do not have answers for him here.

We follow Katya to a spiral staircase that leads down. There are no rails, and I tread carefully as it is a sheer drop on either side, yet as I step down a step the step behind me disappears. *What in the world?* Eziah looks at

me, startled. Katya descends the steps, each one disappearing behind me as I follow Eziah and Katya.

“Keep up, the stairs dissolve,” Kat calls.

“I hadn't noticed,” I tell her.

“And if they do, where do they lead?” Eziah asks.

Kat shrugs. “No idea, I would rather not find out, but by all means feel free to explore and let me know.” My steps hasten at her words, and I practically trip over Eziah who shoots me a glare over his shoulder.

It feels like we have been descending forever. When we finally reach the bottom, I look up to only see the ceiling, as if we passed through the floor. I shake my head. Down here it is dark, torches line the walls and I can hear water in the distance washing against the stone floors. Kat leads us deeper when we come to some gold gates. Three gates that lead into different sections of this underground tunnel system.

“Past, Present, future,” Kat explains before pushing on one.

The gate gives way. She enters and then disappears. Eziah and I look at each other but quickly follow, only here I feel the portal, the shudder, and ripple before the pulling and pushing sensation. It's hot, extremely hot but lasts two seconds before we step into a room. Only it's not a room at all but a waterfall coming out of the stone walls filling a huge fountain base. The water glistens off the stone walls, sparkling under the dim lights. “Wow,” Eziah gasps as we step into the huge, cavernous room. That is when I spot him.

At first, he tenses, then spins around to see who intrudes in his space. The warning growl that leaves him echoes through the room deafeningly. When he spots me, it cuts off. The room falls silent as he staggers a step forward.

“Hello, brother!”

“Kaif?” he asks in shock. I tilt my head to the side, watching him and waiting for the reaction I know is about to come.

The next second, I am tackled into the fountain, I gasp choking on water only to punch him. He snarls, hitting me back while Katya shrieks.

“I see you’re still a little salty and haven't forgiven me!” I snarl, headbutting him.

“I'm gonna fucking kill you!” Bain snarls.

“Well, you better try harder than the first time!” I tell him.

“What the fuck!” Katya's voice booms loudly.

## Chapter 67

Eziah

The moment the two brothers lock eyes, they begin punching. Here I was thinking this would be an overdue reunion, something mushy, but their love language is clearly different from my family, they greet each other with fists and words of hate.. I thought my family had problems.

Kaif snarls as he is tackled into the fountain, waterfall, or whatever you call a place with water coming out of the walls from seemingly nowhere. Water splashes as Bain holds Kaif underwater when Kaif's hand flails in the air, grabbing Bain's ear, jerking him under with him.

“What the fuck!” my mother booms, and I glance at her.

“Should we perhaps intervene? Or maybe try to break it up?” I ask her. I can see her aura growing brighter, magnificently, when the water changes from placid to rippling then tumultuous waves. “At least referee, make sure it's a fair fight?” I suggest.

My mother's eyes glow brightly, the water parting and rising up the walls, leaving Kaif and Bain at the bottom, punching on. They've taken sibling rivalry to a new level, kind of reminds me of when I ripped off Marabella's barbie dolls heads when I was a kid. It was the only time I saw her get mad, and she beat my ass senseless, lesson learned, though.

Kaif, obtaining the upper hand, slams Bain into the rocky floor below. Bain's eyes widen when he sees the water from the fountain hovering like a cloud above them. The next moment, my mother drops the water with the power she is using, and like a tsunami, it crashes down on them violently; waterboarding them with waters past. Bain and Kaif cough and sputter, crawling out of the fountain like drowned rats. Bain crawls out,

only to come to a stop at my mother's feet. The huge Lycan looks up at her with a grimace. Kaif falls on his back near mine, breathing heavily, trying to catch his breath.

“Are you both nuts! This is not the time or place!” my mother snarls furiously before staring down at Bain. “And you should know better, you've been cast here for past mistakes! Have you learned nothing, Bain?” she growls. I glance at her when she kneels sifting her fingertips in the rippling water, calming it, and the water eventually falls still. I watch her, wondering what she is doing. She must sense my question because she looks at me over her shoulder.

“Water holds memory, and here it filters before returning and consuming. It's a mystical property, Eziah, one that connects past, present, and future. You see, existence is all figurative, all happening at once but also separately.”

Bane pushes himself up, his expression still defiant, yet tinged with curiosity. “That's all fine and dandy, Katya, but why the hell are you all here? What's the grand plan?” he growls, glaring at his brother.

I clear my throat. “We're here because we need answers. We're searching for clues about Temperance's bloodline and how it came to be,” I tell him.

Bane glances warily between us all. “You expect answers from that wretched place?” Bain mutters, his gaze fixed on the water. “Nothing good comes from dredging up the past,” he says.

Kaif remains silent, his arms crossed over his broad chest. I can tell he's wrestling with his own demons, ones he's not willing to share, same as his brother.

My mother seems to grow tired of their secrecy. “Very well, feel free to stay here, I suppose I'll see for myself,” she says determinedly. With a flourish of her hand, she steps toward the water's edge. As she touches the water, it reacts to her presence, creating a liquid portal of sorts.



I follow her lead, and as we both enter the Fountain of the Past, the world around us shifts and shimmers. A moment later, Kaif steps into the portal before he reaches out, grabbing Bain. “If I am going, you are too! I don't trust you not to lock me in this place!” he spits, and my mother shoots them both a glare. The water envelops us like a gentle cocoon, washing over us in gentle waves, and for a moment, I lose all sense of direction and time.

When the world stops spinning, we find ourselves in a place I can't recognize. The surroundings are foreign, and the air is heavy with an unfamiliar energy. I glance at Kaif and Bain, who seem much less disoriented than my mother and me.

“Where the heck are we?” I murmur, peering around, we are surrounded by forest, yet my entire bottom half is underwater, so I know we are merely navigating the fountain. Yet from my knees up, the world is as real as the one back home; the scenery, the noises, even the air is different here.

Kaif's eyes meet mine briefly, and I can see the resignation in them. “We recognize this place,” he says somberly.

My mother looks at him, her patience wearing thin. “Well, why are we here? I thought it would take us to Temperance's bloodline. From the paperwork, we've found her bloodline isn't heaps old,” she says.

Bane finally breaks his silence. “The Fountain won't make a mistake. If it brought us back to this time period, it must be linked to Temperance in some way.”

We all share a nervous look, understanding that this unexpected detour might hold the answers we seek, yet I'm not sure that I want them if her bloodline predates back to this time period. Bain takes the lead, pushing through the thick foliage that seems to grow wild, unlike anything I'd ever seen.

As we move through this mysterious place, the world shifts around us. It's as if we're watching scenes from the past, different moments overlapping and converging. The water serves as our guide, showing us fragmented glimpses of history.

I can see faces and events that I've never encountered before, stories of people and places I've never known. It's both fascinating and overwhelming, and I struggle to make sense of it all.

My mother's voice breaks through my thoughts. "Eziah, focus on what we came here for. We need to find the clues about Temperance's bloodline."

I nod, refocusing my attention on the task, not realizing I was becoming lost in a past that isn't mine. The water leads us through the ages, showing us snippets of the past that might hold the key to Temperance's lineage or maybe nothing at all, it's difficult to tell.

And then, as we watch through the ever-changing veil of the past, the water stops and seems to drain slightly, and we are left in some sort of village. A woman comes into view. She's breathtakingly beautiful, with long hair and striking blue eyes. She wears the attire of a bygone era, something akin to the Viking age.

"And there she is," Kaif murmurs, his voice filled with a mix of awe and reverence. "The woman who caused it all. Luna."

She would only be a teenager, maybe a young adult, it's hard to tell when another woman steps forward, gently fixing her hair with a flower headpiece.

"A month before our wedding," Kaif murmurs.

"That should have been me! But you sold me out!" Bain snarls, glaring at his brother.

"I did no such thing!" Kaif snarls.

“Yeah? Just like you didn't sell me out to Seline's people, and got my daughter killed! Had me killed!” Bain snarls.

“Oh for frig sake, Bain! I never sold you out, I tried to cover up for you! It's not my fault Celeste found you! I told you to return to the coven.”

“And watch you live happily ever after with my fiancé!”

“I wouldn't call it happily ever after, all I got was the after part, there was no happily in it. Count yourself lucky, I've spent centuries reincarnating into a bloodline of Hades,” Kaif snarls.

“Oh tragic. I spent centuries trapped here!” Bain snarls angrily.

“At least you had your mate!” Kaif retorts, causing Bain to scoff.

“Only because Celeste was a selfish bitch, and decided to hand her curse to my mate because she couldn't live with the shit she did!” Bain snarls.

“Enough! Your vendetta is not why we are here. Now shut it! Or I will lock you in a realm together for the next century. Your very own naughty corner until you kiss and make up!” my mother warns, and they fall quiet.

So Luna is what came between them, I should have known. What else would cause two brothers to hate each other, to break a sibling bond? That would be a love shared, a woman.

The next minute, all hell breaks loose when wolves flood the village, and it takes me a moment to recognize the woman as Celeste, she spins to face the forest, hundreds possibly thousands of wolves emerge from the tree lines. Celeste turns and looks at her daughter.

“Run!” she screams when I see two men with an uncanny resemblance rush from tents along with others, and I recognize their power instantly. Witches.

This was her coven. “This is not long after Celeste turned us,” Kaif murmurs. I've heard about the story of how it started, and I guess now I am seeing it with my own two eyes.

“Kaif, get Luna out of here! Bain!” Celeste screams, and I realize the two burly men are Bain and Kaif. Bain's hands glow as he stalks forward as the coven takes the form of a circle, preparing to battle the wolves emerging from the forest. My eyes go to Kaif, who grabs Luna, ushering her into one of the tents and disappears with her while a bloodbath ensues and her coven shifts into magnificent beasts of power.

Yet, I turn to my mother, “What's this got to do with Temperance?” I ask her as a battle rings out and war ensues.

My mother's hands glow and her eyes roll into the back of her head. “I have no idea,” she murmurs, and her aura burns brighter. Suddenly, our surroundings ripple, and we find ourselves watching Bain chase somebody through the forest, but it takes me a few moments to figure out what we are witnessing.

The next second, Bain reaches for them, managing to grab a handful of the boy's hair and the back of his coat. The man groans when Bain is suddenly tackled, this time by a young woman. We appear to be outside a kingdom wall, huge towering stone walls reach for the treetops. The young man skids to a stop, and I hear him yell out to the young woman.

“Stellara, hurry!” The woman looks up at him and I turn to look at Kaif who steps forward, peering at the woman's face. “I've seen her before,” the woman then spears Bain and he grabs the spear. The teenage girl looks familiar to me, but I can't place her. The young man, however, I've never seen before.

“Hades's daughter...” Kaif murmurs, looking at his brother.

“Why would she be here? Why were you chasing them?” Kaif turns, looking at his brother.

“Celeste, why else? She sent me after her,” Bain answers.

“Where's the brother?” Kaif asks him and Bain shrugs. Not knowing the answer.

“I was sent after her. Celeste never mentioned her having a brother,” Bain answers.

“And the man?” Kaif asks him.

“No clue, I never saw them again after that. You made sure of that!” Bain snarls.

“For fuck’s sake, how many times do I have to say it, I never sold you out to Celeste!” Kaif growls.

“Then how did she find me here?!” Bain asks, gesturing at the scene unfolding around us. The young man and the girl run off, leaving Bain bleeding out. Incredibly, Bain pulls the spear out with a snarl and staggers to his feet. The man and woman disappear, yet Bain is still bleeding terribly, and he staggers to the castle, using it to hold himself up.

The fountain of past makes us watch the memories play out as he staggers, only to hear a voice holler in the distance. Bain looks around before he starts running, eventually he finds a hole in the wall where a part of the wall is broken, he scrambles over it and disappears into the thick vine gardens.

“And that's how I met Seline.”

## Chapter 68

“Who would have thought that that day forever altered the course of my existence,” Bain says, as we watch as he is forced to shift back.

“So this was after you became a Lycan? But before you met Seline?” I ask, and Bain nods.

“Yes,” he confirms, “I was there when the world first witnessed the birth of the Lycans, creatures who now walk the line between man and beast.”

“Before these events, I was but a mortal man, a warlock, but I was human,” Bain reveals, “living a life that knew neither the blessings nor the curses of immortality. Little did I know that my path would cross with that of Seline, a woman of grace and compassion, a Queen of a human kingdom, she gave me my humanity back.”

I watch the memory play out to see Bain clamber over the broken wall, falling among the rose bushes. He stares at the sky, looking as though he knows he is going to die. Night passes in this vision of memory, and the following morning I see Seline. A woman I've heard plenty about but never seen wanders into her garden, she is smelling roses when she gets the fright of her life when she finds the man naked laying in her garden.

“One day,” Bain continues, “As Seline strolled through her resplendent garden, her world collided with mine. I, a wounded and naked stranger, clambered over the stone fence, a trespasser in a kingdom of privilege. I thought she would scream and order her guards to kill me. Instead, she chucked her cloak over me and called for her guards to help haul me into the dungeons; they wanted to kill me, but she wouldn't allow it.”

His words hang in the air, heavy with anticipation as the memory unfolds. The unlikely bond that formed between a human queen and a savage Lycan.

“She came down every night, she would feed me and read to me. She didn't fear me, though she should have. Were I not injured I probably would have killed her, the first few days I wanted to, but the poison on the spear kept me from shifting,” Bain explains.

“Eventually, her scent became familiar, she was no longer something I identified as threat nor prey,” Bain continues.

“Seline's life and mine became intertwined in ways neither of us could have foreseen. She extended her compassion to me, her kindness, and showed me humanity was possible for a creature who'd forgotten the meaning of the word.”

“But I also knew I couldn't stay, that I had to go back to my coven,” Bain tells us. The memories unravel, time moving forward, and Bain travels for days back to his coven.

“And this is where my brother's betrayal comes into play,” Bain sneers, glaring at Kaif, who rolls his eyes.

“I thought you were dead! That is what Celeste told me,” Kaif explains, and I look at him.

“Yet when I returned, you still didn't stand down,” Bain growls.

“I loved her! And she loved me!” Kaif tells him. “You were never going to marry her, I wouldn't have allowed it!”

“Celeste and I had a deal!” Bain snarls. My mother, growing impatient, clicks her tongue. “Continue please, I don't want to spend years here, if we're here it matters in some way, so what happened next?” she demands.

“I married Luna, and Bain ran off back to Seline of course,” Kaif says.

“Then you ratted me out!” Bain growls.

“I did no such thing! I was too occupied trying to stop Hades' from getting Luna!” Kaif snarls.

“Celeste went looking for you, it was probably her!” Kaif retorts. Bain's brows furrow and he looks at Kaif.

“What do you mean?”

“Celeste, she went looking for you. You were supposed to find someone for her, and now after seeing all this I am guessing it was Stellara, Hades's daughter.”

“She did. I gave her the information she wanted, and she left, then later that night I killed a guard accidentally. Seline covered it up, but they still found out, they were tipped off.”

“They killed me,” Bain reveals, “not long after learning of Seline's pregnancy. And thus, my life as a Lycan came to an end, leaving Seline to raise our child. Our beautiful daughter, Koraline.”

“Wait, go back... Celeste found you, and she was looking for Stellara?” my mother asks Bain who nods.

“Did she say why?” Bain scoffs. “No, of course not! Everything was secret with that woman. She uses and abuses and tosses you aside when she is done with you!”

“What do you mean?” I ask him.

“The day I was killed, I was strung up, much like Koraline. They burned me to death, but I remember seeing her in the crowd. She could have saved me, but she didn't. She could have stopped them, she had the power too, instead, she turned her back on me.”

“And you thought it was me? Yet, you saw her!” Kaif shakes his head.

“Why wouldn't I? You needed me out of the way! Why would she let me die? Her second in command? Unless she found another to replace me!” Bain spits.

“No, Celeste never told me this! Had I known, I would have come for you! You're my brother.”



“I was your brother when you stole my fiancé!” Bain replies.

“Again, I loved her. You didn't!” Kaif tells him.

“So you're angry at him because he married a woman you didn't love?” I ask, incredulous at the stupidity.

“Yes. But there is more to it, whoever married and mated her obtained God - given power. Power that should have been mine,” Bain explains.

“So Celeste killed you, but why would she bring Seline and Koraline back then?”

“Because Seline found humanity where others didn't. But Celeste was angry at me. She banished me to the fountain of the past. It took me a while to realize why she was so mad,” Bain admits.

“You broke the coven circle. We were weaker because you left,” Kaif answers, and I glance at him.

“And that warranted death?!” my mother asks Kaif.

“Everything warranted death to Celeste; no one crossed her. She was a Demi Goddess, power in the hands of someone with human emotion is dangerous. Humans act on emotion. Someone with power like she had running on emotion is dangerous. But I would spend my days watching the fountains, watching Seline and Koraline, so when Koraline was captured I begged Celeste to save her. Celeste sent the Lycans for her, but they were too late,” Bain explains.

“However, as I watched from the fountains, Celeste got the idea of having Seline take her place. She saved Seline but doomed her to eternity here. Of course, I was glad to have her back, but Koraline, when she came here, she was forever stuck in her wolf form. Celeste couldn't live with her sins, so she handed them down. I should have known better than to ask for her help, it was never for me. She helped herself, while condemning my mate and daughter.”

“What did you exchange for their lives?” Kaif asks, making me look between the two brothers.

“My freedom. I agreed to spend eternity here, never to leave. Initially, she condemned me to a century, but then she realized no one else would agree to it. I asked for a favor, she used my family against me to agree, knowing I would do anything for them and that Seline would do anything for Koraline. Celeste just found her way out. You should know what a selfish woman that bitch was,” Bain answers, looking at Kaif who nods slowly.

“Yes, I saw it plenty of times. Especially after she realized Hades was married. She went to the underworld and found his first wife. She instantly packed the village up, knowing taking Luna would hurt Hades' She hung back and rejected him.”

“Which angered Hades,” my mother states, nodding as she follows along.

“Correct,” Kaif states. “But what angered him most was that she took Luna from him, his daughter.”

“Then Hades sent the wolves to attack, he was trying to kill the coven to get her back,” says Bain.

“So she created Lycans by accident to ward off the wolves?” I ask, and everyone nods.

“Still doesn't explain how this has anything to do with Temperance,” I say, growing impatient, and they all agree.

“We're missing something, something vital...” my mother says, watching the memories of the past flick by.

She shakes her head. “Is there any way to see how she found Stellara?”

“I already told you,” Bain states.

My mother shakes her head. “Yes, but Kaif said...” My mother looks at Kaif. Kaif sighs heavily and exchanges glances with Bain.

“I didn't know who she was until Hades trapped me in the underworld,” he explains. Bain watches his brother for a second.

“The girl... you said she was Hades's daughter?”

Kaif nods. “Yes, and Celeste sacrificed her to create the daggers.” Kaif explains.

“Foolish woman,” Bain mutters, shaking his head.

“So can we see that here? Celeste's memories? We've seen yours, Kaif's every past, the one you two hold. What of Stellara and Celeste, though?”

“We can try, but I don't see how that will help with his mate,” Bain explains. He lifts his hands, and the water vibrates before we find ourselves moving at speeds that have the water tunneling and rising. Yet nothing happens. He looks confused for a second.

“Now that is odd. What are you hiding Celeste?” Bain murmurs as the water goes from crystal clear to a murky black, yet our surroundings are back to the fountain.

“What happened?!” my mother demands.

“We were locked out for trying to enter Celeste's memories directly,” Bain explains.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“It means Celeste is hiding something, something she didn't want any future goddess to know.”

“Maybe there is another way?” I suggest looking at Kaif. He glances down at me.

“Lucas. If Celeste has a fountain of the past, wouldn't Hades have the same or something similar?” I ask him, and he tilts his head before looking at Bain.

“The Mnemosyne,” they both say simultaneously.

“The what?”

“It's a memory pool,” says Kaif.

## Chapter 69

Rose

I squirm in my chair, a dance of discomfort and awkwardness as I brush Casey's freshly-washed hair. I can feel his eyes watching us. Every atom of the space between Casen and me is charged with tension, almost as if we are both silently screaming our unsaid words and unresolved emotions. That same tension hangs in the air, forming an invisible barrier - words I need to say, but I am imprisoned by shame. I know I should, yet I am afraid of his reply.

After everything, the secrets I harbored, the truths I buried deep, were exhumed by the unyielding force of destiny. He saved us, Casey and me, despite the unbridgeable gap of my rejection. And now, the chains of guilt pull heavily.

“All done,” I whisper to Casey, who hops up. After the funeral, Casen helped me fix the doors and locks, yet now I find myself locked in this house with him, all drama momentarily settled as we wait for a call from Eziah or Aunty Kat. Now I find myself unsettled within myself, it's easy to be around him when we have a million distractions and now I dread putting Casey to bed. That means I will be by myself with Casen until he falls asleep or I do. Casen's phone rings as I get up to put Casey to bed. He moves toward the front door, slipping outside to take the call.

“I want to sleep in my room,” Casey says as I lead her to mine. I peer down at her.

“I prefer you to sleep with me.”

“But my teddies are in my room,” Casey tells me.

“Well, I’ll grab my pillow and sleep in your room,” I tell her moving toward my room.

She grabs my hand. “My bed is too squishy,” she tells me, and I look at her. Rejection washes over me, Casey looks down almost guiltily like she is holding back from saying what she wants to say.

“What is it Casey?”

“I want to sleep on my own,” she says. I open my mouth to question why but then close it, and nod giving her a smile that feels painful. A million questions run through my head, like is she mad that Vince isn't here? He was the only father she knew after all, I suppose it would be normal for her to blame me. Or maybe it’s learning Casen is her father? So many questions all ending in my failure.

“You move around too much, you keep waking me,” she whispers so softly I almost miss it. “Well, I guess I can sleep on the...”

“Rose!” Casen jolts my attention away, and I find him leaning against the hallway wall. He shakes his head and for a second my brows furrow, wondering what he wants when he moves toward us.

“Come on, princess. Let's tuck you in,” he tells Casey, picking her up and tossing her over his shoulder. He marches off while she giggles. I follow watching as he tucks her into bed and turns her lamp off.

He moves toward the door and pauses beside me. “Your nightmares scare her,” he whispers before walking out the door. My lips part, I don't remember nightmares... I don't dream. Yet as I look at Casey tucked in bed, I see her eyes peering back at me as she tucks her teddy closer.

“Night mom,” she whispers.

“Night,” I tell her, shutting her door slightly but leaving the hallway light on. Now the awkward part of ignoring the mate I rejected and don't know how to be with.

Moving to the kitchen, I start washing up from dinner. Tension coils within me, pulled so taut that it sends shivers down my spine. I'm used to walking on eggshells, yet this is different. It's like I am walking on my own, unaccustomed to the silence of my mind, but it's not peaceful. I always dreamed of the day I'd be free of Vince. Had this idea in my head of it just being me and Casey, peaceful. Yet why do I feel even more terrified now?

My hands, immersed in the soapy water, move robotically, scrubbing off the remnants of dinner from the plates. The bubbles fizz around my fingers. Every clank of the dishes is a jarring reminder of the echoing stillness - a silence I thought I'd welcome but now find menacing.

Vince's voice, though physically absent, is haunting.

I used to think silence would be my sanctuary, that liberation from Vince's shadow would be a rebirth of the woman lost to his torment. But as I rinse the soap from a plate, a chilling revelation drips over me; freedom isn't the serene landscape I'd imagined.

His cruel laughter, his voice, a sinister whisper, words spoken to harm still replay. Each word, though an echo of the past, has a heartbeat, pulsing, alive and formidable. Reminding me I will never be free of him.

I glance at my reflection in the window above the sink, the moonlight illuminating the face of a woman unfamiliar to me. Is this the freedom I longed for? My cheeks, stained with tears, paint a portrait not of being free and at peace, but of a soul unshackled yet imprisoned by invisible chains.

"The war isn't over, Rose," I murmur to the shadowed reflection. The battleground has shifted, from the physical confines of Vince's sinister grip to the echoing chambers of a mind conditioned to live in the constant tremor of fear. I set the plate on the rack and grab another from the bottom of the sink.

When you've been with someone for so long, it's almost like they become a habit, another personality trait you take on. Every breath I take is a knife in my lungs. Memories of being with someone like Vince for so long seep through my veins like poison. The person I used to be? A wisp of smoke... She is dead and there is no going back to her. My body quivers at the mere thought.

I'm so used to being silent, so used to living in fight or flight, it's almost as if I am expecting him to come back at any second, to tell me this is all a dream. Casen never returned, or maybe he's finally done it, he's hurt me so badly, this is some altered state of mind, some imaginary world I've conjured because the physical one is too painful.

Pressure builds inside my chest as panic rises up, stealing my breath. I contemplate if I had left her with him. Taking a deep breath, I steady myself as that same mantra replays on repeat in my head like a broken record.

My hands in the sink reach for something I can feel, the plate. Something I can hear, the TV we borrowed from Dad since Vince broke mine. Something I can taste, my own blood as I bite my tongue. It's ridiculous the lengths I must go through to ensure I am not dead. Something I can smell. The dish in my hand shakes the porcelain rattling against the side of the sink as I sniff the air. Some part of my brain instantly goes to Vince's breath coated with the sickening scent of bourbon. Yet as I breathe in, I find another scent.



## Chapter 70

“Rose?” comes Casen's voice, making me jump. He flicks the kettle on and grabs a cup. “Hot chocolate?” he asks, and I stare at the man. This man is my mate, someone who watched me pass through every awkward stage of my childhood, yet now is a stranger. However, seeing him brings me back to reality, his scent, the smell I detected earlier, fills the room, and I nod.

“I can sleep on the couch,” Casen tells me, turning to make the hot chocolate.

“No, it's fine. You're my mate,” I tell him, my brows furrowing in confusion as I speak the words out loud. He is my mate, the mate I rejected. I continue washing the dishes, my mind wandering aimlessly through a mess of my thoughts, each thought turning darker, then questioning Casen's intentions, even though I know they aren't sinister. He saved me, marked me. 'I can sleep on the couch...' his last words rattle through my mind.

But some nagging part tells me the only reason he did is because of Casey because if he truly wanted me, he would have come back, right? But I did reject him, yet he's here now?

“Casen, I'm sorry.” The words, though whispered, puncture the silence like the first drops of rain against the stillness of a quiet night. “I should have told you the truth when I found out I was pregnant. But I see now, how wrong I was. I'm so sorry for not telling you.”

His face is a canvas of stern lines. His eyes darken, and I see Zyan flicker within him. “Why didn't you?”

“Pardon?” I ask.

“Why didn't you tell me I was a father?” he repeats slowly, and I can feel the edges of his anger that he is trying to contain. “You can't tell me you didn't have one opportunity in four years to reply to me, to call me. Fuck, Rose, you could have let your parents tell me!” Casen says retrieving the milk and slamming the fridge shut. I swallow down the bile that rises in my throat.

*He's not Vince.* I try to remind myself. Yet his anger burns just as harshly as Vince's did. “We didn't think Vince would hurt us either,” Poppy my wolf reminds me. Her words send fear jolting up my spine. And I realize his anger just like Vince's entices the same reaction, I fight back the urge to scratch.

That sort of fear is more than your heart racing, more than emotion, it's physical too. That sort of fear gets under your skin, makes it crawl, makes it burn, invisible fingers, grazing and prodding, raising the hair on every inch of your body. That itch screams, 'it'll hurt', screams pain, alarm bells ring loudly in your body saying brace yourself. Screams silence, 'don't react, don't provoke'.

For a split second, I forget how to breathe, and I forget everything but that spine tingling feeling, that itch that no matter how much you scratch won't leave. It's all consuming, just like the rage he feels. I'm no longer a person, no longer a life valued, no longer anything but an outlet for his anger, his inability to control emotion, his blindness to the fact I feel, hurt and bleed. To him, I am no longer flesh and bone, the fabric of my existence reduced to padded fabric for his fists, a punching bag.

“Rose, snap out of it!” Poppy urges, her voice cracking through the shell of my panic. I blink to find Casen is still demanding an answer. One I haven't given.

“Rose?” Casen says his hands grabbing my face, and at first, that is all I see, hands coming at my face. I feel the blow before it happens, my entire body braces for it, endures it. Only I feel warmth of a gentle touch, not

the burning sting of his palm, my ears don't ring, and the only darkness that envelops me is from my eyes closing, waiting for the pain, bracing for it, only it doesn't come.

“Rose?” Casen speaks softly, and I take a breath, I didn't realize I was holding. As if I could save it in case it's my last. “Come back to me, Rose,” Casen whispers.

My eyes burn and fill as I try to hold the tears at bay, don't let him see, you'll be ridiculed for them. A lump forms in my throat so large it threatens to choke me. Like swallowing the hands I am so used to feeling around my neck. “I'm right here, Rose. Shh, breathe.”

I don't want to breathe, I know that next breath will come with a choked whimper, a stuttering of how badly that fear grips me.

“Fear is one of two things,” I whisper.

“Rose?” he murmurs the question as if lost to the words meaning, yet I know it as if it's ingrained in my DNA, as if it is a pulsating trait, a living breathing piece of me.

“You said why,” I tell him, opening my eyes to find his face filled with concern. Except he looks at me with eyes that won't haunt every inch of my waking mind like Vince's do.

“Fear is one of two things. It either activates you, or it paralyzes you. Never both. My fear doesn't fight, Casen, it freezes, it submits and endures, just so it will be over,” I choke out the words.

“Rose? I didn't mean.”

I shake my head. “No, you want to know why? I thought I was safe, I thought he was you. I was wrong. And then he had Casey. So small, so fragile, so easily broken, he had her in his hands and it was too late. He knew he had me, he just had to keep her close. Keep me close, and I let him.”

“No, Rose, this isn't...”

“Isn't it? You're right, Casen, I did have opportunities I could have called, I could have done something, but then it paralyzes you, the mere thought of if I am caught, or if help doesn't arrive in time, what then? I leave her in the hands of a man that so easily can break me, what chance does she stand?” I ask him.

He stares at me, words failing him.

“That is why I didn't call, that is why I didn't speak up. That sort of fear doesn't just come and then leave, it is buried deep within your skin, into your very being until it's all you know. It becomes part of you, trains you,” his brows furrow trying to understand. But no one will, I see it all the time, domestic violence is rarely pointed at the one harming, it's pointed at the victim. Just like rape victims, why didn't they fight or run? It's the same for domestic violence, why didn't she leave?

That sort of fear locks every muscle, every sense down, it's paralyzing, then afterward you don't get rest from it, it nags at you, the what if's. What could I have done differently? Why didn't I? That sort of fear doesn't give you a choice, it paralyzes, it steals your voice. You watch, praying it will just be over. And the worst part is, you know everyone will doubt you because how could she just do nothing?

Why didn't she run, fight back? And even if you try to explain it, they don't get how your body could fail you, betray you just to save you. And to say that to someone, to explain it, they will never understand until they've been in a situation where fear is paralyzing. Fear of your baby choking makes you react, yet fear for your own life? That is something else entirely.