

## Chapter 71

“It’s okay,” he murmurs, each word a lifeline. “You don’t need to apologize, I shouldn’t have judged,” he replies, hanging his head and stepping back from.

“I’m sorry,” he says and my brows knit. Vince would say that, say sorry. Then he would then ensure I knew it was my fault. That I made his blood boil, I shouldn’t have said what I said, I should have reacted differently. If only I didn’t provoke him by existing.

Casen turns back to finish making the hot chocolate, and once again I fall silent. Did I say too much? Does he understand or not? Will he call me a liar, or question further? My mind races, conjuring up every possible scenario, yet the outcome of each is bleak.

Yet, the threat of his potential rejection clings to the edges of my relief, maybe this is my punishment, perhaps he’ll wait for me to get comfortable in his presence and then rip the rug out from under me. Vince used to do that, give me this false sense of safety, lure me in with promises, promises he always broke. Yet for a moment, I would hold on to that brief reprieve of his torment with hope, cling to it like it was a lifeline to the mate I wished he would be.

I bite my lip, the physical pressure a weak defense against the surge of emotions. “Thank you for saving me. I know you did it because of Casey, and I understa—”

“No!” he interrupts, the firmness of his tone slicing through my assumptions. “I may have been rejected, Rose, but that rejection didn’t stop my love for you.” The intensity of his words pierce through my heart,

creating a new kind of pain. I stare at him in disbelief, unable to comprehend how he can love me still after what I did to him.

I know I shouldn't be questioning his intentions, yet I can't stop myself from asking, "Why?" It makes no sense, he could have moved on, taken a chosen mate, but he came back. Why?

"Because you're my mate. I love you! I don't want anyone but you. Why else?" he asks with a shrug. He finishes making the hot chocolate and leans against the counter while I finish washing the dishes. Him watching me is awkward as I finish cleaning.

Casen sighs heavily, making me glance at him. "What?" I ask and he shakes his head.

"Nothing," he says, his voice low and thick with emotion.

I know him well enough to sense that something is bothering him, but I also know better than to push buttons, so I don't push for an answer. I reach for my cup and blow on the steaming liquid.

"Are you going to keep making this awkward and treating me like a stranger?" he asks. I turn to face him, my eyes searching, studying every feature of his face, tracing the lines etched around his mouth and eyes. "It's just... I've been trying to remind myself that you're not the same Rose as before, that I need to be patient with you. But being around each other like this is extremely hard when you do everything to avoid me. Using Casey as a damn shield while all I can think about is touching you."

I feel a rush of guilt wash over me at his words. Of course he would be scared, after everything we've been through – my betrayal included – how could things ever just go back to normal? How can I make up for what I did? How could I forget what Vince did?

"No," I say firmly. "What do you want from me? Do you expect me to just forget about everything that happened? To pretend that it never happened at all?"

He presses his lips into a thin line as he looks away. “Of course not,” he said quietly. “But you don't need to treat me like I'm some stranger that is here to hurt you. I am not Vince!”

He sits down his cup and reaches for mine, taking it from my hands.

I flinch, afraid of what he's about to do when he takes my hand into his. Pulling me closer as his scent wraps around me, his body is firm and familiar beneath my touch and I feel my heart start to beat faster. I should pull away, but I don't. Instead, I look up at my mate.

“You never need to fear my anger, I would kill myself before ever hurting you,” he promises. “Love shouldn't hurt. Losing love hurts, but to love someone isn't to endure them. Love is being willing to sacrifice everything so you can continue to love them...” I swallow, hearing the truth behind his words.

“I didn't come back because I was afraid doing so would hurt you. Not because I didn't want to, but because I couldn't bear the thought of if you didn't love me back. I love you, Rose, that hasn't changed. It never lessened, even after all this time, it only grew stronger. I didn't need a bond to love you. Loving you is second nature to me, as easy as breathing, for my breath wouldn't be worth taking if it wasn't for you,” he murmurs.

His thumbs brush gently across my face, his hands warm, and I lean into his touch. He won't hurt me despite me hurting him. “I love you too. And I'm sorry—” His lips find mine, cutting off what I am going to say. Despite the growl of possession, his lips are gentle and warm, stealing the air from my lungs for a different reason, not out of fear, but out of relief.

The hands resting against his chest unfist, flattening across the plains of his hard chest, no longer bracing for but embracing his touch, and my body relaxes. I kiss him back, knowing he meant every word he spoke, knowing my safe place was always with him. “Mine,” I murmur against his lips.

“Always! Always yours,” Casen whispers as my hands trail higher to his shoulders, my hands gripping, not shaking, my body yearning, not paralyzing under his touch. My heart swells, not bleeding as I kiss him back, wanting to feel his love, knowing it won't hurt.

Casen stumbles forward as if I am the air he breathes, and I bump into the counter, my hands move frantically, wanting to feel skin as I claw at his shirt.

My fingers graze beneath his shirt and sparks dance across my fingertips, something I never felt with Vince. Touching him made my skin crawl, the sparks died the moment I woke up, yet touching Casen is like having a live wire beneath my skin, electrifying, the sparks coming alive.

A whimper escapes me as desperation and longing take over when he suddenly grabs my hips, placing me on the counter. Yet, his lip barely leaves mine as he removes his shirt, knowing how desperately I need to touch him.

## Chapter 72

Rose

I watch with bated breath as Casen's hard, muscular chest is revealed, my eyes trailing down his abs and stopping at the waistband of his jeans. I bite my lip in anticipation as he steps closer to me, pressing himself against me.

I run my hand down his chiseled chest, feeling each muscle as if memorizing them. He leans in to kiss me again, and I can feel his heat radiating. As our lips part, he trails kisses down my neck, hitting just the right spot that makes me quiver.

With a moan escaping my lips, I wrap my legs around Casen's waist, pulling him into me tightly so there's no space left between us.

“Is this what you want?” he whispers huskily into my ear before trailing kisses down my neck. His fingers find their way under the hem of my shirt, tracing circles on bare skin until it rides up, exposing more of myself to him. Without hesitation, he tugs off my cami.

I'm left in nothing but my lace bra. His eyes drift across my body, and I feel his desire radiating. Gently, he unhooks the clasp, releasing my breasts, then presses his lips against them, sending a shiver down to the lower parts of me. “Yes,” I whisper, although the sound comes out more of a desperate moan.

“Not here. Casey might wake,” I murmur as his lips wrap around my nipple, his teeth grazing the hardened bud teasingly.

My hands run through his hair, pulling him closer to me as I moan in response. Casen slides his hand beneath me without skipping a beat to cup

my ass. He lifts me up once again and carries us both towards the bedroom.

As soon as we reach our room, my clothes come off hastily as he strips me bare - leaving nothing between us but raw desire. His touch sends shivers down every inch of my body. My back hits the soft mattress as Casen's body covers mine, making my heart race with anticipation.

I'm completely exposed to him, my breathing shallow as I wait for what will come next. His lips find their way down my body, trailing everywhere but the spots that ache most when his fingers graze across them, and finally, he reaches between my legs. He moves slowly but purposefully, taking his time teasingly kissing every inch along his path, leaving my skin searing with heat.

Casen settles between my legs, his hot breath sweeping across my folds while his tongue trails a path along my inner thigh, his fingers digging into my flesh as he spreads my legs wide, giving him better access. My breath hitches in anticipation as I savor the way his soft touches make me feel.

I look down at the man between my thighs, his eyes glow black, and he smiles deviously, knowing he's teasing me. He slides his fingers inside me, gently stroking my walls as I moan out in bliss. His thumb circles around my clit, sending waves of pleasure throughout my body. His tongue follows suit - sending an even stronger surge throughout every nerve ending at once, causing a soft cry to escape me as his fingers continue to stroke my walls.

I want to reach out and touch him, but his eyes flash black, and I toss my head back in response to the pleasure he is giving - desperate for more. He smiles knowingly against the tender skin between my legs, as if he already knows exactly how to drive me wild.

His hot breath passes across my folds, sending shivers of pleasure coursing through me. As he slides his tongue against me, I gasp at the

sensation it brings - the heat and pleasure radiating from my core. My hands fist his hair as I tilt my hips, pushing further into him and urging him on.

He moves slowly, teasing me with each stroke as I continue to moan, wanting nothing more than for him to continue and never stop.

His tongue swirls in circles, pressing firmly and all I can do is lay there — feeling every wave of pleasure coursing through my body.

After what feels like an eternity, the intensity builds until it is almost too much to take, and with one final stroke, Casen sends shock waves throughout every inch of me as I cry out in ecstasy—writhing beneath him as a surge of warmth sweeps over every nerve ending. Gradually, it subsides, leaving only the intense desire. Casen slides his body up mine, our skin grazing each other lightly before his lips meet mine once again.

I run my hands over his chest, feeling every muscle twitch beneath my fingers. My nails dig into his skin, and he groans in pleasure. I tug at the waistband of his jeans, and he takes the hint, sliding off the bed and pulling them down to reveal his hard cock. He moves to climb back on the bed, but I sit up, grabbing the shaft in my hand and slowly wrap my lips around him, lapping at him with my tongue.

I stroke him up and down in time with my mouth. His fingers thread through my hair, cupping the back of my head as my movements increase, encouraging me to take him deeper. Suddenly, he pulls out of me, gripping my shoulders roughly, giving me time to move away. But all I want is more of him.

Whimpering slightly at the loss, his lips reclaim mine as he shoves me back on the bed and moves between my legs again, and I wrap my arms around his neck, my teeth biting down on his bottom lip. Casen groans, his eyes flashing wickedly. His lips brush against me, sending goosebumps down my skin as he bites me back.

“Mine,” he murmurs, and I nod while his lips and teeth nip at my neck. I toss my head back in response to his teeth grazing his mark on my neck. He sucks on the spot at the same time, guides himself inside me slowly but firmly.

I gasp, arching my back and urging him to push further within me as I feel myself stretching to accommodate his size.

He kisses me gently, sliding in and out so slowly that all I can do is savor the feeling of his body against mine. My moans are cut off by Casen’s lips pressing against mine deeply.

I close my eyes, letting myself slip into a blur where nothing but Casen’s touch is real. Casen picks up speed, and I whimper—begging for release hungrily. Each thrust sends wave after wave of pleasure coursing through me until it's overwhelming, and a cry of pleasure escapes my lips in response.

I've never felt more alive. Each jarring thrust intensifies our kiss, and within moments, we're both gasping for air from the build-up of pleasure swirling inside us. His thrusts become quicker and harder as we moan together until we reach sweet release together, just as my canines slip out. The next second, my teeth are buried deep in his flesh as I mark him. At the same time, Casen groans and stills, coating my insides with warmth as he finds his release.

“Now you're mine,” I breathe, pulling my teeth from his neck and trying to catch my breath.

“I've always been yours,” he whispers. He rolls, pulling me on top of him, and I shiver as my temperature plummets and the adrenaline leaves my system. Casen pulls the blanket over me despite his temperature running hot from exertion.



After everything that has happened in the last few days, I wish that nothing would ever change, so I can always feel like this—safe in Casen's arms, where I should have been all along.

## Chapter 73

### Temperance

I am awoken by gentle hands. I don't remember falling asleep. However, I do remember coming here and Eziah was getting ready to go to the Moon Goddess realm. I have no idea how much time has passed, but looking out the window, it looks like barely any passed at all.

Eziah lets out a deep breath when Dominic, Kyan's father, speaks from beside me. "I told you she was fine with me," he states, setting down the newspaper he was reading. I try to figure out what is going on and what I have missed when I feel Shadow and Nova stir within me.

"He did not have to knock us out," Shadow huffs, annoyed. Nova yawns loudly in my head.

"Well, I am not complaining about the extra sleep," she mutters. I've noticed since last night something within them both has changed, the dynamics of dominance between them has changed, and neither of them are fighting for control anymore. Instead, they're both present and content remaining in the same space.

"Until she pisses me off," Shadow mutters at my thoughts. However, Eziah pulls me from my head. "Temperance?" My attention snaps to him clutching my face in his hands.

"Did you find anything?" I ask him. Is that even the right question, I am not even sure what it is he is looking for exactly, just that he has been hellbent on finding Satish. I've also heard a few mentions of some fountains, none of it makes sense to me, and I can't fathom trying to understand it either. I am just content following him around, I know I am safe wherever he is.

“Not exactly,” Eziah mutters.

“By all means share, I've been waiting...” Dominic glances at his wrist watch. “Approximately seven minutes, the wait has been torture,” he says with a smile.

“Seven minutes?” I ask and Dominic chuckles.

“Time is nonexistent in the realms, everything happening simultaneously, it's humans that measure time. But time is infinite,” he tells me, and I raise an eyebrow at him.

“Then why do we age?” I ask him. He opens his mouth to answer then pauses. “Our vessels age, the soul travels on, departs and returns,” he says like that is supposed to make sense to me in any kind of way.

“So, what did you find?” Dominic questions, and we all look at Eziah, Kyan, and Katya.

“We found more questions than answers. And learned Kaif and Bain have more issues than any sibling rivalry I've come across,” Eziah chuckles.

“Oh, gossip. Is it juicy? I bet it is!” Mateo asks from the recliner across the other side of the room. He leans forward eagerly and we all look at Kyan who is buttoning up his shirt unaware everyone is staring at him until the silence becomes deafening, making him lift his head.

He peers around at everyone. “What?” he asks.

“Kaif and Bain?” Dominic asks him.

“A misunderstanding,” Kyan states like that is all the answer he needs to give.

“That's all we get?” Mateo asks as Katya runs her fingers through his hair as she leans against the armchair he is sitting on.

“Bain believed it was Kaif that sold Bain out to Celeste when he returned to Seline. But it was just Celeste, it seems she is more complicated than I thought,” Katya states.

“Kaif sold out his own brother?” Ezra asks, curiously.

“No, Bain believed Kaif did. Celeste just tracked him down, she is a Goddess, and nothing remains hidden to a Goddess, especially when they are both tethered to her,” Kyan states. Mateo scrunches his face up, then scratches his chin.

“Wait...”

We all look at Mateo.

“Bain is Koraline's father, right?” he asks looking up at Katya. She nods and everyone looks at him while I am wondering who this Koraline is. “So... Kaif is mated to his niece?” Mateo questions, and I pull a face. I thought he was mated to Marabella? I don't remember seeing another woman.

“He is talking about Marabella's wolf, I think,” Nova answers my confusion.

“Ew, no...!” Kyan states, outraged at the accusation.

“I'm not judging, if you guys want to keep it in the family, that's your business. I'm just grateful my grandkids didn't come out with webbed toes and an extra head,” Mateo says, and Katya nudges him, shooting him a glare. “What? They're brothers!” Mateo says, and Ezra sighs heavily, shaking his head at his mate.

“Why is everyone looking at me like that? I just said what you were all thinking!” Mateo says, and I glance up at Eziah.

“Yeah, I was thinking that myself,” Eziah whispers under his breath, and Kyan spins to glare at him.

“I am not inbred!” Kyan growls viciously, making me jump.

“Well, not you, but Kaif,” Mateo blurts and Kyan snarls, baring his teeth. “I am not having this argument! Kaif you better explain this, or... or ... You better explain this!” Kyan growls when Dominic leans closer to whisper.

“I promise, he is not usually this cranky. He just hasn't had his coffee quota. Just a little caffstration, no need to fear dear,” he says, patting my knee.

Kyan suddenly growls and his aura ripples out, and I look at him to see his eyes now onyx as Kaif comes forward. “Let me guess you are the one that upset him,” Kaif says, glaring at Mateo.

“I asked a legitimate question about whether we need to be on the lookout for webbed toes in future grandkids,” Mateo tells him.

“Excuse me?” Kaif snarls.

“With you being mated to your niece and all. As I said to Kyan, I am not judging.”

“Judging? So your judgment about my mate is not judging? You do realize I have to live in his head, he is hard enough to live with at the moment with Marabella putting him in the doghouse after this entire Nympho business! Let alone taunting him when he hasn't hit his caffeine quota. He is extra brewdy this morning,” Kaif states, and Dominic snickers beside me.

“See caffstration.” Dominic chuckles, and Kaif glares at him.

“Shut it old man, it isn't funny!”

Dominic snickers again, unperturbed by his son's Lycan's rage.

“So back to the webbed toes?” Mateo asks rubbing his hands together eagerly like this is the best gossip. Ezra hangs his head beside Katya and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Hey, don't get stroppy at me, do you know how boring it is being a house husband? I get excited over a new dish cloth, for Goddess's sake! No offense, love,” Mateo winks at Kat.

“Yeah, the way to that man's heart is buying a new vacuum cleaner,” Ezra laughs when Eziah speaks up.

“You haven't gone back to work?” Eziah asks him. His father shrugs. But Ezra answers.

“Your father doesn't like attending the public stuff, too many stares,” Ezra tells him, and I feel Eziah's guilt when I see Mateo nudge Ezra like he wished Ezra didn't tell him that.

“So the gossip? I need some juicy tidbits for the next sip 'n' sis meeting!” Mateo states.

“Isn't that some desperate housewife thing?” Kaif asks while I stare at everyone confused. Mateo looks at him, offended.

“I'll have you know they make the best pot brownies I've ever tasted! The gossip's good too, the secrets these women keep, you'd be astounded!” he chuckles before turning in his seat to wink at Dominic. “Heard some interesting ones about you.... Daddy Dom....” Mateo chuckles.

“A man has needs,” Dominic answers, uncaring for whatever rumors are being spread.

“Oh, I've heard about yours, you get around. Quite the ladies man! Practically a red light at that club of yours,” Mateo snickers, and Eziah chuckles.

“I knew it!” Eziah laughs. I look at him wondering what everyone is talking about. “I'll explain later,” Eziah tells me.

“Just not while I am around. I do not need that image in my head!” Kaif growls at Eziah.

“So give me the goods for sip'n' sis,” Mateo demands.

“Well you'll be disappointed, Mateo. The truth of our brotherhood is more ethereal and ancient than mere blood ties.”

Katya listens intently and Eziah sits beside me.

“When Celeste was cursed for creating us and trapped between realms, she struggled to anchor herself to the earth realm. Every time she transitioned, the very essence of her being was at risk. Her human form and her being immensely powerful due to her Demi-Goddess nature, was at risk because at first when she left this world, her body would be left behind.” He pauses for a second letting us catch up to where he is going with this.

“So she had guardians watch over her. However, Celeste was also extremely paranoid. She knew that kind of loyalty and trust was impossible to keep, so she wanted to create guardians to watch over her body. However, that requires a tether and being a Demi-Goddess her power threatened to overpower and destroy any Lycan she tethered to.” Kaif looks around at Mateo, who raises his eyebrows like he wasn't expecting a magic lesson.

“To counteract this, she needed anchors—beings of immense strength and loyalty. Both Bain and I were chosen for this purpose. But to ensure her own preservation and maintain her tether to the earth realm, she used a spell, one that would bind both Bain and me to her very essence.”

Kaif's eyes shimmer like his mind has transported him to another time and place. “The spell she cast divided her divine life force into two, mirroring each half, and imbued each of us with it. This didn't just tether us to her, but also to one another. We became reflections of the same divine force, two halves of a greater whole. In the eyes of the world, and for all practical purposes, we became 'brothers,' but not in the human sense of the word.”

“In being granted this mirrored force, we became Celeste's guardians and, at first, took turns watching over her. Since she could not take Luna, we would also watch over her daughter when she would be forced to the

Moon Goddess realm. Our bond is not one of shared parentage but shared purpose and intertwined destinies, we share identical power, Celeste's power, it's also how she was able to make me a Demi-God when we created the daggers. Only a God could yield them. Celeste didn't just bind us to her, she gave us a part of her power, so when Bain left to go back to Seline, she saw it as a betrayal to the coven, his leaving meant she wouldn't have access to her full power,” Kaif explains.

Kaif concludes, “So while it may seem from the outside that our connection would make Kora my niece, the reality is far more complex. Our bond is celestial, not familial,” Kaif explains. “So feel free to share that at sip 'n' sis!” Kaif snaps at Mateo, who looks disappointed it wasn't the hot gossip he was hoping for.



## Chapter 74

### Temperance

As the car speeds along, I notice Eziah's fingers drumming anxiously on the steering wheel.

“Are you alright? You seem lost,” I remark.

His brows furrow, deep in thought. “Is it because of what your father Ezra said about your father not liking to leave home?” I ask him, and he glances at me.

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Yes. Every time I see him all I can think about is what I did to him,” Eziah tells me.

“Your father loves you,” I remind him. That much I do know. I know a father's love. Mine was short-lived, so it hurts to see his father trying to connect with him and him too ashamed of himself to try to mend their relationship.

“I know he does, I just struggle knowing I caused it,” Eziah tells me.

“When I was first placed in that cage in the basement, I watched my father decompose, yet I still screamed for him, believing he would come for me. He always comes for me, I used to dream of him saving me until the stench of his decomposing body would wake me, and I'd realize no one was. I tell him before turning my attention and looking out the window.

“You don't realize how lucky you are to still have your father, and a good one,” I whisper. He doesn't say anything, but I can feel his guilt through our freshly established bond, making me feel worse for upsetting him more.

“So how did it happen?” I ask him, peering at him, wondering if he'll tell me more than the dribs and drabs I've received.

He swallows, and his hands tighten around the steering wheel. “When I was trying to find you in the Moon Goddess realm through the Fountain of Life, my mother discovered me. She banished me back home in a fury, yelling about how I could alter fate, disrupt the balance.”

I'm taken aback. “You were looking for me? Why?” I ask.

He takes a deep breath. “I was having these dreams. Dreams where I could hear you but saw nothing. I could feel you, Temperance, feel what they did to you,” he murmurs.

A shiver runs down my spine as memories flood back. I remember those times I'd cry out in my sleep, trying to reach out to someone, anyone, begging Nova to let me out of the dark, but she never did.

“But the worst of it,” he continues, “that week my mother had been teaching me how to manipulate light. I... I set my father on fire accidentally when I lost my temper. We used to have this mirror on the wall, the sun was coming in through the glass windows by the front door.”

“I lost my temper, and my other father tried to break me and my mother up. I didn't realize I was using magic until she shrieked and Maddox came forward and grabbed me. I hit him, and Maddox nearly knocked my ass out when he punched me for hurting Mom. Then Dad ran out, and I was so angry they wouldn't help me find you, that I wanted to hurt Maddox.”

I know Eziah is dangerous, but I've never experienced it directed at me, let alone his magic. It's hard to picture this man sitting beside me hurting a loved one. Eziah rounds the bend and I see the city come into view, the lights are spectacular, and I find myself staring at them in awe when he continues.

“I got up, and my father raced out, trying to break me and Maddox up. I swung at Maddox but he blocked me, but when I did, I didn't realize that

I latched onto the light coming through the windows, it hit the mirror, as my father moved to get in between us and he caught on fire. My mother was a frantic mess of panic, my father put him out while I stood there horrified. And when I tried to heal him, he refused, and refused my mother who begged him to let her, not wanting my mother to endure his agony.”

Tears sting my eyes, realizing the gravity of it all. And I feel guilty knowing Mateo was hurt because Eziah was looking for me.

“I was reckless, desperate to find you. I should have listened to my mother but I hadn't slept in days, I was too scared to sleep because I knew if I did, I would dream of you.”

“I don't get how you could know of me before meeting me?” I admit, it sounds odd.

“I can't explain it either. It just happened one night and then became a reoccurring thing and I knew you were my mate. I knew you were in pain because I felt it. I...” He doesn't finish.

We sit in silence for a moment, the weight of our pasts pressing down on us. Before we can talk more the huge black manor comes into view as we pass through the huge iron gates. I'm awestruck by the view of the tall buildings and beautifully manicured grounds and gardens, but the manor itself is haunting. Its windows are large, sleek, and black, “no colors, no colors, no colors.” Nova rambles on.

It feels surreal being here. I'm not in the tattered remains of my old world. I'm in a place so far removed from reality, it might as well be another planet. This place is eerie. Here, the living walk among the dead.

As Eziah pulls up, I stare out at the huge place. This place gives me the creeps, but I know Eziah has a reason to be here, but it makes me uncomfortable even with Eziah at my side as he opens my door. He leads me to the front door, unlocking it with a spare set of keys that Marabella gave him. The moment I step inside, a cold shiver shoots up my spine,

soft murmurs tickle my ears, voices from long gone Octavians. I smell the age of this building, over a century old, and the history that is cloying in the air around us. I smell a hundred different scents, some of them are new, some of them not so much. Some, I recognize as the stench of death, and some were those I had smelled before.

Moving through the foyer, I know Eziah can sense my unease because he keeps glancing at me when I come to a stop at the staircase. I stop staring at the bottom where a boy stands, staring at me intently.

The boy looks to be around three to five years old, with the blackest hair which is long and shaggy, halfway down his back. Only now he looks different, his fingertips are bloody, his eyes are a deep green. His clothes look like something out of an old movie, wearing a faded, white button up shirt with a tear in it, and he is sopping wet. The boy is barefoot, and he doesn't shift his gaze from me as he drips his ghostly water drops on the stairs.

I step back, bumping into Eziah. "What's wrong?" Eziah whispers behind me.

"That boy... he led me into that room," I whisper, my voice trembling.

Eziah glances around, his brows knitting confused. "What boy? I don't see anyone."

Before I can respond, Kyan emerges from the living room. Our eyes meet before his eyes dart to the staircase where the boy stands. To my shock, Kyan sees him. Without missing a beat, his hand twitches as if motioning to the boy subtly and the boy rushes to him, fingers intertwining with his, only now the boy changes, he is no longer drenched, and his clothes smoothed out. His hair pulled back neatly at his nape and his fingertips are no longer bloody. Kyan acts as if everything's normal, further perplexing me.

"Eziah," Kyan says, "Kaif wants to visit the underworld tomorrow."

Eziah groans. “Well, I will need to see if my mother can watch Temperance unless your father will be home?”

“Don't worry. Rose is coming to the city tomorrow for kindergarten orientation. Jonah is attending too, so Temperance can—”

“Join them?” Eziah completes his sentence but looks at me. I chew my lip nervously. Knowing I can't hide behind Eziah forever, I force a smile on my face.

“I'll be safe with your sister,” I tell him.

Eziah looks back at Kyan, yet my eyes go back to the boy at his side. “We'll meet you for dinner, I want to shower and change,” Eziah tells Kyan.

“Be quick then, Marabella is cooking, I hope you have a strong stomach,” Kyan tells him and my brows furrow. Eziah snickers and leads me to the stairs. As I ascend the stairs, Eziah tells me Marabella can burn water.

Yet, as I reach the top of the stairs, I glance over my shoulder to find Kyan kneeling in front of the boy talking to him. Whatever he says must upset the boy because he hits him, yet his hands go through Kyan and the boy runs off through the wall and Kyan hangs his head looking just as upset.

## Chapter 75

### Marabella

The distant murmur of Lucas's voice tugs me from my dreams. For a moment, I'm disoriented, the weight of Kyan's body, his leg thrown carelessly over mine, grounding me to reality. The comforting sensation of his warmth fades as worry about Lucas claws at my insides when I hear his voice down the hall. He's been acting strangely and I've been on edge, so for a second I believe I am imagining it. Yet when I hear the whispers again, my heart beats faster, and I know it must be him.

I gently shake Kyan, needing him to wake. He grumbles trying to pull me back, his grip possessive. "What?" he mumbles, the sleep evident in his voice.

"Lucas is talking to someone!" I whisper, urgency lacing my words.

Understanding instantly floods Kyan's eyes which open alert. Without another word he sits up, the concern evident in him. Next to me, Jonah stirs, his sleep-filled eyes blinking up at us. "Go back to sleep, Jonah," Kyan commands, his tone brooking no argument.

Kyan and I rush to Lucas's room. Empty. Despair floods me, but it's Kyan's growl of fury that truly alarms me. "Kaif! I swear if your son gets mine killed..." he threatens, his voice low and menacing. His rage is palpable, and for a moment, I am frozen in fear wondering if Thomas is a danger to Lucas. Thomas was the son of Kaif on his second reincarnation. He believed he broke the curse and left his four-year-old son with his mother. That story haunts me because I know the guilt that Kaif lives with. He returned to find him drowned in the bath, his nails having ripped from their nail beds as he struggled against his mother, clutching the bath's edge. Kaif realized then the curse wasn't broken, merely delayed, he

waited for her to birth another son and killed her the moment the child was born.

Suddenly realization dawns on me—this isn't like Lucas at all. He's never been the type to go wandering off in the middle of the night. A cold shiver runs down my spine. As if summoned, Kaif shoves forward overtaking Kyan's body, but I can feel Kyan's presence, Kaif having not blocked him out. His anguish is apparent in his eyes but before I can speak, he vanishes.

My instincts scream at me, urging me further down the hall. With each step, my fear intensifies until I reach the pantry. There, in front of me is the swirling darkness of the portal to Hades's realm—an eerie purple glow illuminating Lucas and Kaif. Panic overtakes me and I rush forward, pulling my son close. “What are you doing?!” I whisper, my voice desperate and choked with emotion.

He avoids my gaze and I shake him gently. “Please, Lucas. Tell me why you keep going there?! It isn't safe!”

As if in a trance, Kaif extends his hand, fingertips brushing the empty air near the portal. Kaif is staring vacantly at the corner of the pantry where the portal is open, he holds his hand out, and I gasp as his hand closes around air. “You can feel him?” I ask, my voice shaky but full of hope.

He shakes his head, his eyes lost. “No, but he says he can almost feel me.” The pain and concern in his voice is palpable.

Suddenly, Lucas pulls away and runs off. Before I can follow, Kaif's voice stops me. “Go get him back to bed. I'll handle Thomas.” His words confuse me, and I turn back to him, about to ask what he means, but the fierce determination in his eyes stops me.

I look at the empty space where his hand is. “What do you mean?” I stutter, alarmed at these words coming from the mouth of my little boy.

“Kyan is right, it's too dangerous for Thomas to be taking him places. I won't risk my living son. I've lost too many as it is,” Kaif says.

“You mean, you're going to...” I don't finish because Kaif's eyes change, darkening; his aura is fierce, daring me to finish what I am going to say and for a second as fear grips me and I take a step back from him.

“I'll go put Lucas to bed,” I murmur, turning to leave the kitchen searching for Lucas when Kaif grabs my shoulder. Suddenly, tingles rush up my shoulder as he spins me around and grabs the nape of my neck and kisses me.

His emotions shift, becoming tender, pulling me close. His lips find mine, the kiss filled with raw emotion. “Not in front of him,” he murmurs, the words echoing in my mind.

Tears blur my vision. “You don't have to do this. We can find another way,” I plead.

“There is no other way,” he responds, a finality to his voice that breaks my heart. He then nudges me toward the door, and I rush up the stairs to check Lucas.

“Is Daddy mad?” Lucas asks, and I reassure him he is not mad at him when I hear my daughter call out from the other room. I look at the door.

Suddenly, the cries of my daughter pierce the air. “Go check, sissy,” Lucas says. I sigh and pat his knee.

“I'll be right back,” I tell him.

I rush to her, comforting her nightmares, my heart heavy.

After ten minutes, I finally manage to settle my daughter, tucking her in bed, and calming her down. When I return to Lucas's room, it's empty. My stomach drops as panic surges once again, my voice echoing through the house as I call for him.

My heart skips a beat, and I look in his cupboard before I call out to him, rushing out of the room and Jonah, hearing me, rushes out in just his boxer shorts.



“What's wrong?!” Jonah asks, gripping my arms.

“Lucas! He's not in his room!” I yell.

“I'll check downstairs.” Jonah says, rushing off downstairs.

I notice someone out of the corner of my eye. A closer look reveals Temperance lurking in the corner. At least it looks like Temperance, but something is off with her. “Temperance?”

She glances at me, eerie eyes fixed on me, but says nothing.

“You're not Temperance, are you?” I ask, dread settling in.

“No, I'm Shadow.” Everything about her, from her eyes, one pink and one blue, to her words, chill me to the bone. She turns her face back to the stairs, peering up at the third floor. I edge closer, wondering if I should call out to Eziah when I spot Lucas on the third floor by the altar door. Relief flooded through my veins. *Thank god, he's ok.* I gasp when Shadow speaks behind me.

“Sometimes the dead don't want to stay dead. However, sometimes in order to live we must let go of the dead, even when it hurts to do so,” she says, her words seem to echo in the air.

I swallow, and Shadow wanders off back into the darkness of the hallway leading to Eziah's room. Reaching Lucas, I can see Kaif through a gap in the door sitting in the pentagram, his legs crossed looking at space. “Lucas, you shouldn't be up here,” I whisper.

Lucas looks up at me, only then do I realize he is crying. Kneeling next to him, I rub his arms. “What's wrong, baby?” I ask, wiping his face with my hands.

“I don't want him to go! He's my brother,” he whispers. Swallowing guiltily, I smile sadly.

“It's not safe,” I remind him, and he looks back through the door. Standing up, I try to steer him away when Lucas shakes out of my grip.

“No! He should be able to say goodbye properly,” Lucas tells me and my brows furrow at what he means when I see the shadows seep across his arms down to his hands, the tendrils so dark they're obsidian.

“Lucas!” I gasp, and he peers up at me, his eyes filled with tears.

“Please, Momma?” he begs, and my lip quivers seeing him so heartbroken when I spot movement down the hall. Dominic is standing further down, leaning against the wall with his arms folded, he nods to me and I peer down at my son. However, Lucas lifts his hand, the shadows engulfing it.

“Anail,” Lucas whispers, the tendrils spread across his body. Suddenly, he faints, crumpling in my arms.

I whimper, so worried about my baby. I want to shake him awake but know I shouldn't. Dominic moves toward me when I peer in at Kaif to find a boy standing before him. Kaif clasps his face in his hands and sobs rips out of him.

Kaif's tear covered face is suddenly replaced by his normal face. His face pales, his eyes widen, and his mouth gapes. “How? I can feel you!” Kaif breaks, clutching the boy, his body wracked with sobs. The boy is as old as Lucas, his hair a similar color. His eyes are just the same too, his face is Lucas' except for small smile dimples.

“I just wanted to play with him,” the boy Thomas tells Kaif.

“I know, I know, but it isn't safe for Lucas down there. He is alive and you are not. I'm so sorry, son,” Kaif tells him.

The little boy cries, hanging onto Kaif, and I can tell Kaif doesn't want to let him go.

“I'm sorry I couldn't save you,” Kaif says, his voice cracking. “But I can save Lucas,” Kaif tells him. The boy pulls away and nods, wiping his tears.

“But I wanna be your son too,” the little boy says, and Kaif nods.

“And you always will be. But it is Lucas’s turn now,” Kaif tells him.

The little boy nods when suddenly, his clothing turns to rags, his body is wet, his lips are blue and his fingertips are covered in blood. Then suddenly the smell of rotting apples and chilled water fills the air.

Kaif breaks down when the boy suddenly runs his fingers through his hair. “It’s okay, Papa, don’t cry,” he says, and Kaif sniffles looking up at him.

“No!” He shakes his head. “None of this is okay! But I’ll see you again,” Kaif tells him and waves his hand in the air, speaking something in a foreign tongue when light explodes in the room before falling dark.

All I can hear is Kaif wailing when Dominic touches my shoulder. I look up at him through tear filled eyes when Jonah runs up the stairs.

He stops, seeing Lucas in my arms, and then looks at the door behind me.

“No!” Jonah chokes, and I nod, my lips trembling. I can’t even bring myself to say it. Jonah rushes into the room to check on Kaif, and Dominic takes Lucas from my arms.

“Your mate needs you,” he says softly, and my eyes burn as I step into the altar room to find Kaif absolutely crushed with having to banish his son. I feel his pain vibrate through me like a physical weight in the room. Kaif’s eyes are red and swollen, his body shaking with sobs. I move towards him, placing my hand gently on his back. He flinches at first, but then leans into me, burying his face in the crook of my neck.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, his voice breaking.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about!” I tell him softly, gently rubbing his back.

“He was just a child,” Kaif says, his voice filled with agony. “He deserved to live!”

“I know,” I reply, and I do. My heart aches for Kaif, for the loss of his son, and all the pain he has endured. I hold him tightly, trying to provide him

with the comfort he needs. But even as I hold him, I know that nothing can fully ease his pain.

The loss of a child is one of the most devastating things a person can go through, and I can only imagine the agony he must feel. As we stand there in silence, Kaif's sobs slowly quiet down until he's left with a soft trembling.

"I'm sorry," I whisper into his ear, causing his whole body to stiffen.

"I need to go," Kaif murmurs, and I lift my head to see Kaif gone and Kyan's red eyes return, yet he is in no better state than Kaif.

I know Kyan loved Thomas just as much as Lucas. I'd often catch him talking to Thomas or playing with him. He pulls me closer as Jonah's arms wrap around both of us. His guilt through the bond at what he made Kaif do is palpable, strangling even.