



72 The Game He Plays

Eve~ 1

I sat up in bed, panting, my throat hoarse from screaming. Tears stung my eyes, and then I felt arms muscles around me, a warm mouth close to my ear.

"Shh... Red, it was a nightmare," Hades murmured. "You're okay." He wrapped his arms that could have been tree trunks, around my waist, pulling me closer, my face pressed against his chest.

His heart was beating steadily, a complete contrast to my own, which was erratic, almost painful with each thundering beat. I jolted when he began rubbing slow circles into my back, but soon found myself leaning into his touch. I was aware of every part of him. His scent, his hard, warm body and everything else in-between.

Danielle.

Her name slithered into my thoughts, guilt and confusion swirled in my feverish mind. How could he be doing this? It would have been less unnerving—less terrifying—if he'd shown anger. He had every right to feel it. That, I could

Her name slithered into my thoughts, guilt and confusion swirled in my feverish mind. How could he be doing this? It would have been less unnerving—less terrifying—if he'd shown anger. He had every right to feel it. That, I could understand. But this gentle care, this warmth—it rattled me far more than anger ever could. I wanted to recoil, to push him away before his kindness burrowed deeper, but my body betrayed me, leaning instinctively into his embrace. I could feel every steady beat of his heart against my cheek, grounding me, pulling me back from the lingering shadows of the nightmare.

Danielle's name echoed again in my mind, twisting my gut with a sense of betrayal—my own, for being here, for accepting his touch, for wanting it in some undeniable way. The guilt festered, making it hard to breathe, and I pulled back slightly, forcing myself to look at him.

"Hades," I rasped, my voice barely above a whisper. "You don't have to... do this. You don't have to..."

He looked down at me, his face unreadable, though his eyes softened slightly, a flicker of something that looked like understanding—or was it pity? "I'm here because I have to protect



My heart twisted at his words, both comforted and terrified by them. How could he offer me safety when all I'd done was disrupt his life? I bit my lip, searching his face for a hint of resentment, something that would allow me to cling to my guilt and keep my distance. But there was none—just that same steady calm, as if he were willing to bear the weight of my pain without question. What was this enigma of a man? A known killer, the Hand of Death himself, shouldn't have been capable of such tenderness. It made my stomach turn. 1

"What are... how can you...," I murmured, barely able to look him in the eyes.

Hades tilted my chin up gently, forcing me to meet his gaze. His fingers brushed over my cheek, wiping away the stray tear that had escaped while I was dreaming. "I've made my choice, Red. Stop questioning it," he said firmly, his tone leaving no room for argument.

I swallowed hard, the intensity of his gaze anchoring me, yet sending my heart racing. "I don't deserve this," I whispered, half hoping he would agree.

His gaze hardened, and for a moment I caught a glimpse of the man beneath the mask of care. I



His gaze hardened, and for a moment I caught a glimpse of the man beneath the mask of care. I blinked, and the harsh expression was gone. He leaned forward, pressing his forehead gently to mine. "Maybe. But I'll decide what you deserve."

In the world of Lycans, the same ones my kind had fought for generations, I deserved nothing but pain. And I knew it would come again because it never seemed to stray too far from me since the night of my eighteenth birthday. There had been no respite, no mercy.

And now I understood what Hades was doing.

He was giving me kindness now so that, when I started to believe in it—when I started to trust it even a little—he could tear it away, leaving me shattered once more. He'd offer me comfort, like holding out a fragile glass of water to someone dying of thirst, only to shatter it in my hands, letting the water spill through my fingers as I reached for it, desperate. And he'd do it again and again until I was nothing more than a shell, hollowed out and devoid of hope.

I could almost see it—a twisted game of his, built on dangling salvation just close enough to make me believe it was real. And I'd fall for it every time, because wasn't that what I craved? A



I could almost see it—a twisted game of his, built on dangling salvation just close enough to make me believe it was real. And I'd fall for it every time, because wasn't that what I craved? A fleeting sliver of hope, a chance at something that felt... gentle. Safe. But each time, I'd reach, and he'd let it slip from my grasp, watching with that calm, steady gaze as I shattered piece by piece.

I looked up at him, struggling to mask the awareness that had clicked into place. He was still watching me, his eyes searching mine as if he could see into the depths of my soul. Maybe he could, for all I knew. His fingers continued to brush along my back in soothing circles, but now, every touch felt laced with a new weight.

"So," I whispered, testing the boundaries, "you're really going to stay here... just like this?" My voice quivered with a hint of challenge.

His hand stilled for a heartbeat before resuming its rhythm, and his eyes darkened, almost imperceptibly. "Yes, Red," he replied, voice steady, as if he didn't sense the barbed edge beneath my question. "I'll stay as long as you need me to."

The words sent a chill down my spine. I wanted to pull away, to break from this spell he'd woven



He wouldn't let me forget, though. I knew that he'd be there to pick up every broken piece, to place it just close enough to let me believe I was whole again, before pulling away, leaving me shattered anew. I understood it now. This game wasn't about kindness—it was about control. And no matter how strong I tried to be, part of me feared I would always fall into his grasp. I had to fight it with every pathetic breath I drew.

"Hades,"

"Yes?"

"Could you do something for me?"

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