



112 I Am Not Him

Hades 1

Ellen was not asleep when I returned to our bedroom. No, she was sitting on the bed, her hands folded on her lap. When I stepped in, she got up.

"Welcome back," she muttered. Her voice was neither monotone nor cold.

I froze in my steps, looking her over. She worried her bottom lip, her eyes straying every once in a while. She was dressed in a pale blue nightdress that contrasted with the wild, wavy red of her hair.

"You are not asleep," I muttered. Then my stomach clenched. "What did she do this time?" I demanded, but when she flinched, I stopped myself. "Ellen..."

Ellen shook her head, putting her good hand in front of her. "She did not do anything, I promise."

I raised a brow. "What is the matter?"

Finally, her eyes stayed steady on mine, and she walked forward. "I wanted to apologize for hiding the fact that I was hurt from you and



hiding what happened."

My brows could have disappeared into my hairline. Suddenly, it dawned on me. "Just because you apologize does not mean that I will tell you what you want to know," I told her, my voice icy.

She tilted her head, confusion taking over her face, before her brows rose in realization. "No, no, it has nothing to do with that. I am not apologizing just because I want you to tell me... that... well, whatever that was."

I tried to remain hard, but her expression was open and genuine.

"If you don't want to talk about it, then it's fine. I have no right to pry. And just because I apologize does not mean that I expect something in return. It is not some trade by barter," she finished softly. Her gaze wavered, but she kept her chin high. "I'm apologizing because I was wrong to hide it from you. I was wrong to think I could handle it alone." She let out a shaky breath, her fingers nervously twisting the hem of her nightdress. "I should have trusted my instincts instead of trying to justify some sense of loyalty, especially if it was at my expense. You were right. I was being

foolish." 1

I looked down at her as if she was growing a second head. What the hell was this woman? She had been ready to fight me just this morning to protect her help, and now she was sounding so reasonable that I could have sworn it was someone else standing before me.

Ellen did not back down from my scrutiny. Her eyes were steady, though I could see the flicker of nervousness beneath her carefully constructed exterior. She was trying and I hated how much it affected me.

"You think I was right?" I echoed, my voice laced with disbelief. I never thought that I would see the day. My fiery wife agreed with me.

I studied her for a long moment, the tension in her small frame refusing to ease. It was not the apology that had taken me off guard; it was the vulnerability that she let peek through. This time, she did not conceal it with harsh words and a sharp tongue. Instead, she stood there unarmed and exposed before me, and it made something deep and uncomfortable stir within me.

"I am not used to this," I uttered truthfully.



"Used to what?" she asked, seemingly genuinely curious.

"To you agreeing with me." I never would.

She flashed me one of those rare warm smiles that only Jules or Kael were worthy of. "Kael told me--" her smile faded, panic filling her expression, but it was too late. She could not take it back. She had already let it slip.

Suddenly, I was snapped back to reality. Of course, Kael had convinced her. It had not been me. It was never me. I should have known when she agreed with me that it was too good to be true. It was Kael who had been able to reach her, not me.

A burning sensation crept into my veins, and I knew that I had been triggered. I could feel my fangs elongating in my mouth, and I gritted my teeth. I tried to walk away, but of course, she grabbed me.

"Hades, it's not what you think. Kael just explained to me---"

My head snapped to her. "He explained to you in a way that I could not because you don't trust me enough to listen," I finished bitterly. My voice came out sharper than I intended, but I didn't

care. The sting of betrayal or maybe it was inadequacy ripped through me, and my claws threatened to burst from my fingertips, I did not need to look at them to know that they were turning black.

Ellen flinched at my words, her grip on my arm loosening, but she didn't let go. "That's not true, Hades," she said firmly, though her voice trembled. "I want to trust you. I—" She hesitated, her turquoise eyes searching mine. "I just... needed to hear it from someone else. Someone who wasn't... you."

Her words were honest but felt like a slap to the face. I tore my arm free from her grasp and stepped back, trying to get a hold of myself. The beast inside me clawed at the surface, demanding control, but I shoved it down. Barely. She had to leave me alone before she got hurt.

"Why?" I asked, my voice low and dangerous.
"Why couldn't you trust me? Why did it have to be him?" 1

Her lips parted, but no sound came out at first. She seemed to be struggling, caught between the truth and her fear of how I'd take it. Finally, she spoke, her words quiet but piercing.



"Because with you, it feels like I can't afford to be wrong," she admitted, her gaze dropping to the floor. "With Kael, I can make mistakes and not feel like the weight of the world is on my shoulders. With you... I can't."

"Why?" But it came off as a growl. It was not even me—it was the contamination taking over. 2

But she could say nothing. It was all the answer I needed. I had bared my soul to her in that room, but it had done nothing to sway her. I wondered what Kael could have said to make her listen. Or was it simply because he was not me? Did she...

I stopped in my tracks when an arm wrapped around me, a head resting on my chest, as Ellen trapped me in a fierce embrace that made my mind stutter. 2

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"Ellen—" I started, my voice low and gravelly. The contact burned, not because it was painful, but because it broke through every wall I'd hastily tried to rebuild. Her warmth seeped into my skin, her heartbeat a steady rhythm against my chest. The beast was not appeased; it only sought to escape from its enclosure and claim her.

"Hades," she muttered my name with a softness that made me shudder. My name on her lips was a weapon, disarming and dangerous all at once. It struck deep, brushing against the reinforced cage that the contamination clawed at. "I am sorry," she said, her voice small. "I really am. I might not agree with you on a plethora of things, but this time I wish I had seen it the way you did. But I refused to see outside the boundaries I had set for myself," she continued, her voice trembling but steady. "I didn't want to admit that you might be right because I thought it would mean losing to you."

Her words dug into me like claws, ripping away the remains of my resolve. The beast inside me

howled, not in anger, but in something deeper—something raw and unfamiliar. It wanted her, not just to claim, to mark her and devour her in ways I had never allowed myself to imagine.

I gritted my teeth against the surge, my body vibrating with the effort of trying to keep the creeping contamination at bay. I clenched my hands into fists, my claws piercing my palms and letting the scent of blood fill the air.

I felt her stiffen against me, and she pulled away, but only slightly. She looked up at me, her eyes wide before looking down at my injured hand and the blood already dripping onto the marble tile. "Hades—" her voice was high with horror. She had seen the black claws.

I grabbed her by the face so that she would look back up at me. She swallowed when our eyes met again, her skin suddenly pale. "Hades—"

"Sh-sh-sh," I whispered, trying to keep the growl from my voice. "I won't hurt you." But the contamination had other intentions as it continued to thrash against my skin like a living firestorm trying to consume us both. The corruption clawed its way through me, trying to get to her to claim her in every atrocious way possible.

My grip on her face inadvertently tightened with every onslaught of the corruption. Luckily, not enough to hurt her, but enough to keep her eyes on me.

"Red," I rasped, my voice wavering slightly under the strain of trying to keep the curse contained. Her scent was intoxicating, a blend of everything forbidden that made the beast crave her all the more. "You don't know what you are doing to me."

She blinked, those auburn lashes of hers fluttering. "Am I doing this?" she gasped, stunned.

"I won't hurt you." The last bit came out as a growl. As if my body knew that I was feeding her lies.

I could have reeled back from shock when she only came closer, her good hand coming to cradle my face tenderly. "What about you? Am I doing this to you?" Her horror had morphed into fear. Not fear of me, but fear for me. "Let me..." she murmured, her watery eyes earnest as she searched for something in my eyes. "Let me help. Is there something that I can do? Am I the one causing this?"



I could only stare at her. To my complete astonishment, even the corruption receded a little, pulling back just to look at her through my eyes.

She shook me as delicately as she could when I did not answer. "Please tell me," she asked again, the urgency in her voice rising, her eyes filling with more tears. "Can I help?"

It was surreal watching her, her empathy directed at me and no one else—not her ire or fear or hatred. The swirls of blue and sea green in her eyes seemed to gleam with... care. She cared for me. She was worried about me. 1

"Please, Hades!" she suddenly screamed, her shaking growing more intense. "Tell me! It's hurting you, isn't it? It is because of me," more tears welled up in those beautiful depths. For the first time, I did not see Darius Valmont or Danielle. I saw her. "Is it because I am cursed?" she demanded, her tears falling like crystals. "Am I hurting you because I am cursed?" 8

Suddenly, confusion swirled through me. "What are you—" Suddenly, a rip tore through the tense air as agony like nothing I had ever felt before wreaked havoc on my body. It was too early. It was too damn early for it to reach this stage, I

thought in a panic as I tried to keep it all locked up. But it was like the floodgates had opened, and nothing would be able to keep the contamination contained.

It lashed out, black veins of all things sinister racing across my skin as my black claws grew into menacing talons of destruction. I felt my bones break as they bulged and lengthened, bringing with them more bouts of unrelenting agony. A guttural roar tore through my throat, my vocal cords disintegrating and regenerating with the force.

Ellen flinched as I backed away from her, trying to put space between us, but my eyes stayed glued to her now frozen form. The corruption growled in my ears, my eardrums splintering.

Take her. Claim her. Break her.

I shook my head against the command. "No!" I roared. But if the corruption was a malevolent force, maybe it would have worked. But this was anything but—it was an entity with purposes and agendas. And right now, Ellen was its target. Its purpose.

She was not just something to destroy but to possess, to own, and to corrupt. The entity's

intentions clashed against mine, a high tidal wave that turned my mind on its head. Yet, no matter how much I tried, I could only see her. Her terrified eyes met mine, and I growled in hunger and frustration.

"Run... now," I bellowed against every feral instinct. But the warning served no purpose because I pounced immediately after.

She barely had time to react before I was upon her, my talons on either side of her head trapping her. The marble underneath splintered and shattered as I held myself back from ripping into her delicate flesh. Every beat of her heart and pulse of her blood was amplified, roaring in my head, almost as loud as the corruption itself.

Take her. Mark her. It growled.

Where was Kael? He should have heard me. I just had to hold back for a little longer. The fact that I could still see those frightened eyes of hers on me meant that I had not reached the carnal stage.

Take her. It demanded. She is mine. She is ours. 1

I shook my head against the hunger, my talons coming closer to her despite how hard I fought it, my jaw snapping at her face.



She is ours. It screamed.

"Hades, can you hear me?" Her voice was a soft tremor against the raging storm in my head, but it reached me. Somehow, even with the corruption roaring louder, her words broke through, wrapping around the last threads of my sanity like a tether.

"Hades, can you hear me?" Ellen repeated, her voice steadier now, though her chest rose and fell with rapid breaths. Her trembling hands lifted, coming to rest on my forearms, just above where my talons dug into the fractured marble.

The beast inside me snarled. Take her. Mark her. She is ours.

"Stop it!" I roared, my voice fractured, somewhere between human and feral. My jaw snapped, teeth elongating further, aching to sink into her delicate skin. I tried to pull away, to give her the distance she needed to escape, but the corruption held me there, as though she were the only thing grounding me to this cursed existence.

Ellen's fingers tightened on my arms, a surprising show of strength. "Hades, look at me!" she demanded, her voice cutting through the



cacophony. Her gaze locked onto mine, unwavering despite the monster looming over her.

I did look at her. It wasn't by choice, not entirely. The corruption, as much as it craved her submission, seemed transfixed by her too. My vision blurred, dark and hazy, but her tear-streaked face remained clear.

"Fight it," she ordered me.

But my talons suddenly craved flesh and blood and came for her face. It was pure instinct as my jaw snapped faster, catching my arm between my teeth and biting down.

Bones cracked, but I felt nothing, my eyes on hers, black blood dripping from my arm to her chest. "Hades," a horrified whisper slipped past her trembling lips.

Mine. Mine. Mine. It growled.

My mate. It snarled in my head. 4

I froze for a moment at the pronouncement. I had to have been hearing things, yet the word echoed in my head. **Mate.** It had called her its mate.

I lost track for a moment, distracted by the



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realization. In that split second, the corruption struck at her—but before it could reach, a sharp prick of a needle in my neck made me stiffen.

Kael. Finally.

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