



## 121 Levelling The Playing Field

I crossed my arms tighter, feeling his ominous gaze settle like a shroud over me. "There's a pretty obvious power imbalance here, don't you think?" I said, trying to sound casual, but the edge in my voice betrayed me. As always. "You're faster, stronger--hell, you could break me in half without trying. Where's the fairness in that?" 1

Hades tilted his head, the glint in his silver eyes sharpening. "Fairness?" he echoed. "Red, if you want fairness, you've come to the wrong teacher."

I narrowed my eyes, refusing to let his teasing tone distract me. "Never came to you. You ripped me away from Kael like some jealous---

"Husband," he cut me off. "I ripped you away from my beta like a jealous husband." 4

My cheeks heated from the fact that he did not deny that he had been jealous. I forced my wildly pounding pulse to still. "If this is just some twisted game to you--"

"It's not," he interrupted smoothly, stepping closer, closing the distance I'd carefully maintained for a second time. "You're right,



though. The scales aren't balanced. But I have a solution."

I arched a brow, skeptical. "Let me guess. It involves more of you getting under my skin."

His lips twitched, but instead of replying, he turned around and exited the ring. He walked over to a bag in the corner and retrieved matte black box which he brought over. He slid the book open and my hearted stopped.

Fear bubbled over in an instant and I all but ran to the other side of the ring and away from him.

His expression momentarily fell, his eyes grazing over me before he shook his head. "In situations that incite fear, I don't expect a fight or flight reaction from my wife. I expected instantaneous fight. And right now, you have proven that you are still lacking."

I glared at him, fear blossoming into incredulous anger. "You tortured me with that." I pointed out. The purple nightmare in the syringe brought forth memories that were better off forgotten.

He glanced easily at sadistic instrument he held. "Nerexylin for you is a torture weapon but for me it is inhibitor."

My eyes snapped to his. "An inhibitor?" I said slowly, the words feeling foreign in my mouth. "You're serious."

"As a heart attack," he replied, holding it up between two fingers. "This little thing evens the playing field. It suppresses strength, dulls senses, and keeps instincts in check. You'll have every chance to put me on my knees, Red. I wouldn't want you thinking I'm cheating."

His smirk was infuriating.

I stared at the inhibitor, suspicion curling around my thoughts. "And I'm supposed to believe you'd willingly handicap yourself? Why?"

Hades leaned in slightly, his voice dropping to that dangerously soft pitch again. "Because if I win despite this..." His gaze flicked to the cuff. "...it'll sting that much more. And I like the thought of that, Red."

Damn him.

I hated how easily he twisted things, how he made my pulse race with nothing more than a few carefully chosen words and thinly veiled threats.





I squared my shoulders, refusing to let him see the way my fingers trembled at my sides. "You really get off on making things difficult, don't you?"

Hades chuckled low, the sound vibrating deep in his chest. "I find it builds character."

I snorted. "Whose? Yours or mine?"

His eyes flashed, a subtle reminder of the power coiled beneath the surface. "Both."

The inhibitor felt like a loaded gun dangling between us, and I couldn't decide if I wanted him to use it or smash it under my heel. Hades always operated in half-truths, letting me believe I had the upper hand when he was already two moves ahead. I wasn't naive enough to think this was any different.

Still, the idea of leveling the field was... tempting. Dangerous, but tempting.

"What if I say no?" I tested, watching him closely.

His smirk softened, but his gaze didn't. "Then I'll train you as is. And if you bleed, Red, just know I won't stop." His voice dipped into that hushed promise again. "I'd rather you learn from me than someone who won't care if you get back



up."

That was the problem. He cared just enough to make it hurt more.

I chewed the inside of my cheek, eyes flicking from his face to the syringe. Hades wouldn't bluff with something like this. If he said it dulled his senses, it did. And part of me burned with the need to make him feel that vulnerability—to force him to experience the imbalance I lived with every day.

Without another word, I stepped forward, snatching the inhibitor from his grasp.

His brow arched in surprise, but he didn't stop me as I rolled it between my fingers.

"I'll do it," I said finally. "But not because I trust you."

"I wouldn't expect you to." Hades watched me like a wolf watches prey, head tilted, curiosity brewing in his gaze. "So, when do we start?"

I jabbed the syringe into his arm without warning, pressing the plunger down before he could react. 1

His entire body tensed, silver eyes narrowing as the serum coursed through him. For a moment, I



swore the air around him darkened, the edges of his control fraying ever so slightly.

"Now," I answered, stepping back just as his pupils contracted into thin slits. "We start now."

Hades rolled his shoulders, shaking out the stiffness as if shaking off the weight of a collar. A slow grin stretched across his lips, teeth glinting sharp in the dim light.

"You've got some nerve, Red. I wanted to let you rest until tomorrow morning."

I lifted my chin. "Learned from the best."

His gaze dragged over me, appraising, measuring. "You are excited. You are like me. You want to prey on the weakness, even if it's mine," he finished, voice dark and rich with amusement.

I didn't deny it.

"You're the one who said I was lacking. Thought I'd get a head start."

His smirk deepened, but there was a flicker of something else beneath it—something that looked dangerously close to pride. "Good. Keep that energy, Red. You'll need it."

Before I could react, he moved. Not as fast as





usual, but still quick enough that I barely registered the shift. His arm swept toward me, and I ducked, rolling to the side just as his fist grazed the space where my head had been.

"Cheap shot!" I barked, springing to my feet.

"You said we start now," he reminded me, already circling like a predator scenting blood.

The inhibitor was working—his movements, while fluid, lacked the effortless power they usually carried. But that didn't make him slow. Not by a long shot.

I exhaled, forcing the tension from my muscles. If I was going to survive this, I had to stop thinking like prey.

He wanted fight over flight? Fine. I'd give him exactly that.

I lunged, aiming low for his legs, but Hades pivoted at the last second. His hand lashed out, catching my wrist. I twisted sharply, slipping free before he could tighten his hold.

A flicker of surprise crossed his face.

"Better," he said, circling closer. "But you're still pulling your punches."

I gritted my teeth. "I'm not pulling anything."



"You are." His gaze dropped to my stance, the predatory gleam returning. "Your body hesitates just before impact. You're afraid of what happens if you actually land a hit."

I stiffened.

He wasn't wrong, and we both knew it.

"You won't break me, Red," Hades continued, voice dipping low, each word pressing into the space between us like a challenge. "So stop acting like it."

I launched myself at him, fist swinging toward his jaw. He caught it easily, but this time, I didn't retreat. I drove my knee up, aiming for his ribs.

His grip loosened just enough for me to twist free and strike again. A quick jab, then another. He blocked the first but miscalculated the second. My knuckles glanced off his cheekbone.

Hades' head snapped to the side, and for a breathless moment, I froze.

Slowly, he straightened, turning those silver eyes on me.

The corner of his mouth curved upward, the faintest trace of blood glistening where my punch had split his lip.





"Finally," he drawled, tongue darting out to taste the crimson streak. "I was beginning to think you liked playing the victim." 2

"Don't push your luck," I warned, shaking out my stinging hand.

His laughter was dark and rich, vibrating in my chest. "Push my luck? Red, that's adorable."

Hades shifted his stance, cracking his neck as if he were just warming up. The inhibitor clearly hadn't stripped him of his arrogance. If anything, it only made him more insufferable.

But I could tell. He felt the difference.

His steps weren't as heavy, and the deadly, fluid grace he usually carried was slightly dulled. Not enough to make him weak, but enough to make this feel less like an impossible climb and more like a fight I could actually win.

I just had to survive long enough to prove it.

Hades wiped the trace of blood from his lip, glancing at the crimson smear on his thumb before licking it off with deliberate slowness. "You taste like adrenaline, Red."

I narrowed my eyes. "And you taste like poor decision-making. Let's see how far that gets

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you."

His grin widened, but there was a glimmer of something darker beneath it—satisfaction. "You know how I taste?" 4

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