



182 We Love You

Hades 1

Ellen settled onto my lap as if she had always belonged there, her body fitting against mine with a familiarity that sent a sharp jolt through me. She was light, yet I could feel the tension coiled within her, the weight of her every breath as she squared her shoulders and faced her family.

Darius stiffened, his composure cracking for the first time. Lyra's lips parted, eyes widening with unguarded shock before she masked it. Even James, ever the unreadable shadow at Darius' side, tilted his head slightly as if reassessing the woman before him.

I, however, did not react.

Not outwardly.

Pride swelled in my chest, sharp and hot, but I kept my expression neutral, my arms shifting to accommodate her, to hold her without making it obvious that I could feel the slight tremble in her limbs. She was still fragile, still teetering on the edge—but she was standing. Fighting.

And that, more than anything, made the Flux churn.

Dark, possessive satisfaction unfurled within me, pressing against my ribs, against my skin. Mine, it whispered. Strong. Still mine.

How could anyone not love you? 2

Ellen's fingers curled against my chest for the briefest moment before she lifted one delicate hand and cupped my face. It was meant to be a show—an assertion of her stance, a declaration of where she stood—but her thumb brushed over my cheekbone in a touch so fleeting, so gentle, that it nearly shattered my restraint.

I swallowed back the flicker of shock that threatened to rise, my gaze never leaving hers.

Her fingers were cold.

Her lips were chapped.

The dark circles beneath her eyes were deeper than I remembered.

She was still unsteady.

But only I knew it.

Only I could feel the way her pulse thrummed too quickly beneath my touch, how she leaned

against me just slightly, as if grounding herself.

So I played my part.

I caught her trembling fingers in mine, intertwining them, pressing a slow, deliberate kiss against her knuckles. A show of dominance. Of ownership.

Of devotion.

She did not flinch.

Her gaze remained locked onto her father's, her voice smooth and edged with something that cut deep. "Who is this unstable daughter you speak of, Father?"

Darius' expression was unreadable, but his fingers flexed against the table.

Lyra let out a slow breath. "Ellen—"

"You speak as if I am not sitting right before you," Ellen cut in, her tone cool, measured. "And yet, I am here. Whole. Standing. Breathing." She tilted her head, eyes sharp. "Or does your definition of sanity only apply to the pieces of me that were broken enough to obey you?" 1

Lyra paled.

Darius, however, smiled.



It was not a kind smile.

It was a knowing one.

"You misunderstand," he said smoothly, regaining his composure. "We do not wish to strip you of your will, my daughter. We simply wish to protect you."

Ellen let out a quiet, humorless chuckle. "Protect me?" Her eyes gleamed in the dim light. "Is that what you call what you did to me?"

Darius did not flinch, did not blink. "We gave you freedom."

"You gave me a cage," Ellen countered. "A gilded one, perhaps. But a cage nonetheless." 2

I exhaled slowly, watching her, the way she wielded her words like a blade. This was no frantic outburst. No desperate attempt to gain footing.

This was a test and challenge wrapped in one.

Not just for them.

But for me.

Would I let her fight?

Would I let her stand, even knowing how fragile she still was?

The answer came easily.

Yes.

Because I had already seen the fire in her.

And so I sat, silent, watching as she met her father's gaze head-on, rocking her gently against me.

"If you were so concerned about my mental state," Ellen continued, "you should have considered it before carving me hollow by filling me with wolfbane. Before sending me here without so much as a word of warning." Her fingers tightened slightly in mine, but her voice remained steady. "Or is it only now, when you fear losing your leverage, that I suddenly matter. You believe that I might fully join the other side?"

A slow, cold silence filled the room.

Darius exhaled, shaking his head. "We are allies, there are no sides here."

Ellen arched a brow. "It's far more complex than that, dad. You are too calculated to truly believe that."

Darius studied her for a long moment, then sighed, as if speaking to a willful child. "You do not understand, Ellen."



She tilted her head. "Then explain it to me."

Another silence.

Another pause.

Lyra's nails dug into the armrest of her chair, her eyes flicking between us, searching for something. James remained unreadable, but the faintest crease appeared between his brows.

And Darius?

He exhaled slowly, his jaw tight.

"I will not argue with you," he finally said, voice steady but laced with finality. "You are coming home. It's for your own good. This pretense will not work."

James spoke up, his eyes piercing as if trying to peel back her layers. "We saw the pictures, Ellen. You looked like a mad woman."

A chill licked up my spine, the flames of anger stoking. Just how much has that bitch of a woman exposed. I should have known she would have been up to no good, she had been too damn quiet for too long.

I felt Ellen stiffen against me, yet she smiled.

It was a cruel, beautiful thing.



"So?"

Darius' expression did not change, but something sharp flashed in his gaze. "It is not a request." 1

"And I am not asking for permission, the clause in the contract cannot suddenly be made invalid. There are rules to this."

"Of course there are. What is a game without rules?" She replied.

The silence that followed was different this time.

Thicker.

Charged.

Darius' jaw tightened, his patience thinning.

"Ellen—"

"You signed me away," Ellen cut him off, her voice soft but unyielding. "For the sake of our pack. Just because I had one episode does not mean that I should suddenly be institutionalized for insanity."

Something flickered in Darius' eyes, something dangerously close to real anger. "This is not just about you," he drawled, letting the darkness within him see the light. I saw as he caught himself, his eyes suddenly warming again. "Of



course, it about you and us," he gestured to his wife. "You see, we miss you dear. Especially your mother. It was very hard to to watch you go but pull away so we wanted to use this." He smiled, like a nervous old man, running his hand through his hair. "You know how Hades can be, you must know after living with him. He would not have made it easy for us. To him, you are assersory in this alliance but us..." 1

Lyra took over. "We will always be your family. Your blood. To be honest, we were intimidated," she made a calculated glance at Hades before returning her gaze to Ellen. "The alliance was still fragile in the beginning, we were beggars looking for peace..."

I watched Darius grimace at her words, his fists clenching, his eyes glowing amber for a moment.

"We had to be patient until the cement dried, hoping you would adapt as well. That's the reason the clause was written so we could save you if not."

"At least for a little while," Darius hastily added. "Don't you miss home? The food, your people. Lunar Heights has been dull without its favorite firecracker." He smiled.



Ellen remained perfectly still, her body relaxed against mine, yet the tension simmering beneath her skin was palpable. Outwardly, she exuded an eerie calm, but I could feel it—the quiet storm rolling beneath the surface, the slow-burning rage held on a razor's edge.

She tilted her head slightly, regarding Darius with a measured expression. "Dad, you want me back home."

Darius exhaled, relieved, mistaking her tone for consideration. "More than anything."

Ellen's eyes narrowed, her fingers curling slightly against my arm. "Then state the real reason. And I might consider it."

Silence.

Darius' jaw tensed, but before he could respond, Ellen continued, her voice soft, almost thoughtful.

"For my next dose of Wolfsbane?" she mused, tapping a finger against her thigh. "Another pleasant visit to Facility Thirteen? Another round of—" 1

"What are you talking about?" Lyra's voice sliced through the air, her composure cracking as she



abruptly stood. Her eyes darted between Ellen and me, wide with something dangerously close to fear.

She did not want her speaking.

Ellen merely blinked at her, unmoved.

Lyra let out a shaky breath, then turned her gaze to me. "He has brainwashed you," she whispered, her voice trembling with frantic desperation. "Oh, the Goddess save me. These are signs of Stockholm Syndrome! Where are you getting these ideas from? You are far gone—far, far worse than I thought."

She clutched at her chest, the first tears spilling over, rolling down her cheeks in perfect, glistening streaks. "This is why you need to come home, Ellen. You need help—from those who truly love you."

A perfect performance.

I felt Ellen's body tighten against mine, her fingers flexing as if restraining the urge to claw through her own skin. But her face? Her face was an exquisite mask of neutrality.

She let the silence settle, thick and suffocating, before exhaling softly.



"Help." The word rolled off her tongue as if testing its weight. "From those who truly love me."

Her gaze flickered to Darius, to Lyra, and then—slowly—to James.

None of them spoke.

She smiled.

A slow, deliberate thing, devoid of warmth.

"Mother, don't make me laugh."

"This is no trivial matter, Princess," James got up, sitting Lyra down. "You act like his majesty, Hades Stravos is your savior, the one you obviously trust above your own family. Yet he cannot formally pronounce you his Luna before his pack," For the first time he smiled at her and I felt her shiver. 2