



183 The Disparaging Beta 1

Hades 1

James' voice was smooth, diplomatic—a polished blade sliding between Ellen's ribs.

"I have to admit, Princess," he mused, tilting his head, "I never imagined you would be so... easily swayed. To think that the Ellen I knew—the daughter of Darius and Lyra, the rightful heir of Lunar Heights—would discard her own blood so effortlessly. All for a man who was once our enemy."

Ellen did not flinch.

But I felt her.

The way her fingers flexed against my arm, gripping me tighter, grounding me.

Because she knew.

She knew I wanted to speak.

No—she knew I wanted to end him. 1

James' lips curled slightly, his words calculated, pressing against every crack she had tried to seal. "You speak of cages," he continued, voice light, conversational. "And yet, you have willingly



stepped into a far more dangerous one. You cling to him. Defend him. And for what, exactly?"

His eyes flicked to me, sharp and knowing. "All for a man who would never choose you. Never mark you. Never make you his Luna before his court and his pack."

Silence.

A silence that sliced.

I felt the weight of it settle over Ellen like a vise, pressing into her ribs, clawing at old wounds.

James wasn't done.

"To the Lycans, you remain a target. A weakness."

His tone softened, almost pitying. "There is no certainty for you here, and yet, you latch on. To them you are desperate and pathetic." 1

The Flux raged.

It crawled under my skin, a violent tide, whispering in the darkest corners of my mind. It demanded blood. Demanded correction.

James' words were not just taunts—they were calculated strikes, each one pressing against old wounds, against buried insecurities, against the flickering embers of a past Ellen had barely begun to bury. 1

And she—

She did not waver.

But I felt her.

The way her fingers tightened against my arm,
her nails pressing just enough to send a message:

I exhaled slowly, restraining the instinct to tear
the Beta apart. Barely.

James smiled, sensing my restraint, and that
alone nearly snapped my patience.

But Ellen spoke before I could.

"I see," she mused, tilting her head slightly, the
ghost of amusement dancing in her eyes. "You
believe I've been manipulated, then?"

James arched a brow, feigning mild surprise.
"Haven't you?"

She let out a soft, almost pitying laugh. "How
fascinating," she murmured. "That a Beta—an
enforcer—of a family that fed me wolfsbane,
stripped me of agency, and discarded me like a
political pawn is suddenly so concerned about
my free will." 1

James' expression did not change, but I saw it—



the slight flicker in his gaze, the momentary pause before he recalibrated.

Ellen pressed forward.

"You speak of my blood, of my duty to the Heights, yet you seem far more invested in discrediting the choices I make rather than understanding them." She tilted her head. "What is it that truly concerns you, James? That I might have actually chosen this? That I might have chosen him?"

James gritted his teeth but exhaled, as if disappointed. "It's not about choosing, Ellen." His voice was steady, deliberate. "It's about consequences." 1

A beat of silence.

Then, softer—"You are smart enough to know that there is no future for you here. You will never be one of them. You will never be safe. To the Lycans, you are neither wolf nor mate—you are leverage. A bargaining chip. A weakness." His eyes darkened. "And no matter how deeply you dig your nails into him, he will never mark you."

I snapped forward, the chair groaning beneath me.



Ellen's grip tightened.

It was subtle—just a slight squeeze, but enough.

Not yet.

My jaw clenched. I wanted to end him. Wanted to carve the arrogance from his throat. But this was her battle.

And she was winning. 1

Ellen smiled—mocking, unshaken.

"Interesting," she mused. "So let me see if I understand your concern properly." She tapped a finger against her chin, feigning thoughtfulness.

"One," she began, holding up a finger. "You believe I am being manipulated by Hades."

A second finger. "Two, you believe I am a weakness to his people."

A third. "And three, you believe he will never truly claim me because I do not belong here."

James said nothing. He did not need to.

She had summarized his arguments precisely.

Ellen exhaled, almost as if disappointed. "How dull."

James' brows lifted.



"I expected something new, James. Something more than just repackaged fear-mongering. But you and my father seem to operate on the same, tired narrative." She leaned forward slightly. "Tell me, how long did you rehearse this before coming here?" **2**

James' jaw tightened, but he did not break.

He was too disciplined for that.

Ellen let the silence stretch before speaking again, softer now, more insidious.

"You're right about one thing, though." She let the words settle, deliberately allowing him to hope she was conceding something before she drove the blade deeper.

"I am not safe."

James' gaze sharpened, watching her.

"But not for the reasons you think."

She exhaled, shaking her head slightly, as if disappointed. "You are so focused on the idea that I have been manipulated, that I have been claimed, that I am somehow beholden to Hades. But you've missed the most important part."

A pause. A shift in the air.



And then—

"I am not beholden to anyone. Not to you. Not to my father. Not even to him." 1

Her words rang out like a warning shot, cutting through the room.

James' expression did not change, but I felt the tension coil within him. The first sign of uncertainty.

Ellen continued, pressing the moment further.

"You call me a weakness," she mused, shaking her head. "But a weak woman would have crawled back to the safety of her family after being abandoned. A weak woman would have begged to be taken home." Her voice sharpened, a quiet blade slicing between them. "A weak woman would have feared this life."

A slow, deliberate pause. 2

"And yet," she said softly, smiling, "I am still here." 4

