



## 184 The Proclamation

### Hades 1

James exhaled, measured, but I could see the frustration buried beneath his careful mask.

Ellen had taken his argument, dismantled it, and turned it into a weapon.

And he knew it.

But James was not a man who enjoyed losing.

So he pushed again.

"And when the day comes that he casts you aside?" he asked, voice smooth, quiet. "What then, Princess? Where will all this strength of yours take you then? "When you finally get off his lap..." James trailed off, letting the words settle, a smirk curling at the edges of his mouth. "What will be left of you then?"

His voice was smooth, almost pitying, but the venom in it was unmistakable. He leaned back, studying Ellen as if she were a puzzle missing its final piece. "You fight so hard to prove your independence, yet you sit there, perched on his throne—on his lap, at his mercy, as if you have already surrendered."



My vision darkened.

The Flux churned, roared, raged.

It wanted violence. It wanted James' spine torn from his body, his blood painting the floors.

But Ellen's grip on me did not loosen. If anything, it tightened.

Not yet.

Her pulse, though rapid, was steady. Her breathing was even.

And when she spoke, her voice was calm, measured, cutting.

"Is that what this is about, James?" she mused. "The fact that I am seated here and not standing over there—beside you? That I have chosen a throne of my own, rather than be a well-trained hound at my father's heel?"

James' smirk twitched, but he did not falter. "A throne, you say? You're delusional, Princess. If this is a throne, then what does that make you? A queen?"

Ellen tilted her head, gaze unyielding. "No. But neither am I a pawn."

A sharp, electric silence cut through the air.



James' amusement waned, the mask slipping just slightly.

Ellen didn't stop.

"You act as if my choices have stripped me of power," she continued. "As if my worth is dictated by whether or not Hades marks me, as if my position is meaningless without some grand public title." She exhaled, shaking her head. "You truly think I am desperate for some superficial claim? That his recognition—or yours, for that matter—defines me?"

She leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping just enough to slice through him.

"I was born a daughter of Darius and Lyra." A pause, a soft, knowing smile. "And yet, here you are, trying to convince me that I am not enough unless I am named by a man." 2

A flicker of something dangerous crossed James' face.

Annoyance.

Frustration.

She had backed him into a corner, and he knew it.

His fingers tapped against the table, slow and



deliberate. "You're dodging the point, Ellen." His voice was still smooth, but there was an edge to it now. "You can twist words all you want, but none of this changes the fact that you are sitting here as nothing more than a kept woman."

The Flux snapped.

Dark, creeping tendrils spilled from my fingers, coiling and twisting like living shadows. Not yet, not yet, not yet.

Ellen sensed it.

She felt me unraveling.

Her grip on me tightened further, nails biting into my skin, the silent warning pressing into my flesh—don't.

She was right.

This was her battle.

And yet, James had pushed too far.

Ellen's lips parted slightly, her expression unreadable. For the first time, she tilted her head back slightly, as if considering. And then—

She laughed.

A soft, breathy thing. Amused. Almost pitying.



"Oh, James," she murmured, shaking her head, her fingers finally relaxing against my arm. "Is that really the best you can do?"

James' jaw ticked.

"You think calling me a 'kept woman' will wound me?" she mused, watching him as if he were an amusing fool. "Is that what you tell yourself? That you still hold power over me simply because of that?"

She exhaled, leaning back into me, deliberate in her ease, in the way she settled against my chest. "That must be exhausting for you, James. To come here, to say all this, only to realize that your words mean absolutely nothing to me."

James' fingers clenched against the table.

It was slight. Barely noticeable.

But I noticed.

Ellen did, too.

She smiled.

"The difference between you and me?" she murmured. "I don't need to be named." Her voice softened, but the words were razor-sharp. "I don't need a title, a claim, or a declaration before a pack."



And then—the killing stroke.

"I simply am."

A beat.

A slow, cold silence stretched between them.

James stared at her.

His jaw clenched, his eyes flickering with something he tried to smother—something dangerously close to anger.

And yet, he did not respond.

Because there was nothing left to say.

Ellen had won.

Suddenly, James' smirk returned, sharper now, his eyes glittering with the cruel satisfaction of a man who had found the chink in his opponent's armor.

"You can say all the pretty words you want, Princess," he murmured. "But at the end of the day, words won't change reality. And reality is this—Hades will take another Lycan as his true chosen mate." 1

Ellen stilled.

James saw it.



He saw the way her breath hitched, the way her fingers tensed against the armrest, the way her pupils flared just slightly.

He pressed on.

"You think you're untouchable," he continued, voice soft, cutting, "but you're not. You're one of us playing queen in a court that will never truly be yours. And when Hades inevitably takes a Lycan for a mistress, for his Luna, for a chosen mate, and you? You'll be nothing but an unwanted wife." His gaze flicked over her, assessing, gloating. "You've already burnt your bridge with your family, so when that day comes... where will you go then?"

James' words landed like a knife, sliding between Ellen's ribs with unerring precision. She stilled—so subtle that anyone who wasn't watching closely might have missed it.

But I saw.

I felt it.

The wound. The raw, open thing left behind by his words.

"when Hades inevitably takes a Lycan for a mistress, for his Luna, for a chosen mate."



It was a statement, not a question. A truth he had woven into the air with cruel confidence.

"And you? You'll be nothing but an unwanted wife."

She didn't flinch. Not outwardly. But I saw the slight tremor in her fingers, the way her pulse jumped against the delicate curve of her throat.

She believed it.

She believed him.

And that—that—was what shattered my restraint. 3

Darkness roared through me, a force I didn't attempt to contain. The Flux writhed, twisting around my arm as I moved, shifting it into something no longer human. Shadow and bone, claw and ruin.

James barely had time to register the shift before I struck.

The impact was devastating.

His body crumpled beneath my blow, weightless as I hurled him across the room. He slammed into the far wall with a sickening crack, the air leaving his lungs in a sharp gasp.

Silence followed.





A moment of suspended stillness before the room erupted.

Darius was on his feet before James had even hit the ground, his expression as impassive as ever, but his eyes—calculating, gleaming with something sharp and dangerous.

Guards stepped forward, surrounding us, their hands poised on their weapons, awaiting orders.

I didn't move.

James groaned, dragging in a ragged breath, his limbs twitching as he tried to push himself up.

Darius exhaled, slow and measured, his voice devoid of anger, only quiet certainty. "He has said nothing wrong."

I bared my teeth. Shadows curled around me, breathing, alive.

Darius met my gaze without flinching. "She has no clear title," he continued, each word slow, deliberate. "No certainty. So, of course, she will be a target in a court she will never fully belong to."

The words grated against something primal inside me. But it wasn't me who reacted.

It was her.



Ellen inhaled sharply, the sound quiet, barely audible.

But I heard it.

I felt it.

Darius knew it too.

And so he pressed the knife deeper.

"She cannot be your Luna," he mused, tone light, almost amused. "A werewolf, ruling over Lycans? It is laughable. Impossible." His gaze flicked to Ellen, cold and dismissive. "You should not listen to her foolish ranting. Release her to us. To me. She needs her family, even if she is too stubborn to admit it." 1

Something ugly coiled in my chest. Something violent.

And then—I saw her.

Ellen.

Still in her seat, still composed.

But she was pale.

The blood had drained from her face, leaving her ashen. Her lips parted slightly, as if she wanted to speak, but no words came.



Her hands clenched against the armrests, fingers gripping so tightly they trembled. She looked small and vulnerable, her fright so palpable that I could taste it.

She wasn't afraid of the court.

She was afraid of going back. 1

A sharp, unfamiliar pang lanced through me.

I had seen her battle her situation. I had seen her wield her tongue like a blade.

But this?

This was different.

This was the fear of a woman who knew that if she left this room with them, she would never return the same way.

And I would not allow it.

I moved before I could think.

"I will keep her safe."

The words rang through the room, cutting through the quiet.

Darius' head tilted slightly, his calculating gaze shifting to me, assessing.

I took a step forward, my voice steady,



unyielding. "I will give her certainty."

The court was silent.

Ellen's breath hitched.

I didn't stop.

"I will carve it in stone," I said, my voice a vow, a declaration that would leave no room for doubt.

"Her title. Her worth. In my court."

Darius didn't speak. He was waiting.

Waiting to see if I would take the final step.

And so I did.

"I will mark your daughter." My voice was unshaken, unyielding. I let the words settle, let them carve themselves into the air. "She will be my mate and I will make her my Luna." 11