

## 208 Play

Eve 1

"This is between the three of us," Amelia affirmed, adjusting the collar of my blouse. Kael stood beside Hades. I nodded and glanced at the clock. The meeting would begin at eight, and now it had just struck seven fifty-one.

Hades' expression was intense, with an undercurrent of anxiety. His gaze did not stray from me, his lips pressed into a perpetual hard line. "If you don't want to do this, you know I will make sure—"

"I have to do this. I will have to do this at some point, and after this, there will be no more obstacles. It's fate," I murmured. "I promise I will be fine."

"We will be alert," Rhea's voice rippled through my thoughts. "I am with you, and I am not going through this a second time."

I chuckled in my head. "Of course, you're not. I won't hesitate this time. I'll fight if we have to."

"Now you choose to fight," she murmured, bemused.



She was trying to tease me out of my restlessness.

I exhaled slowly, grounding myself as the weight of the moment settled over me. Hades still looked unconvinced, his body rigid with tension as though he were restraining himself from tearing the entire situation apart.

Kael shifted beside him, arms crossed. "You're sure about this?"

I nodded. "I am."

Kael smirked, nudging my shoulder lightly. "Just don't forget to flash that badass smile of yours. Their timbers were shivered last time. Even I was surprised."

I let out a soft laugh, shaking my head.

"Just know you have a friend outside those bastards," he continued, his voice carrying an unexpected warmth. "You have my friendship and loyalty."

Then he sighed loudly, rubbing the back of his neck with exaggerated exasperation. "And, most importantly, my head is still attached."

He turned to Hades, raising an eyebrow. "You've



finally grown out of your jealous streak. Never thought I'd see the day. Then again..." He glanced at me before giving a lopsided grin. "I see the appeal."

A sharp tension filled the air.

Hades' gaze darkened instantly, his jaw tightening as a muscle ticked in his cheek. "You assume too much," he said, his voice a low, controlled growl.

Kael held up his hands in mock surrender, eyes gleaming with mischief. "Just an observation, my Lord of the Underworld. No need to incinerate me where I stand."

Hades' lips curved into something that might have been a smirk—if it weren't so laced with menace. "Incineration? That would be too merciful."

Kael snorted. "See, Eve? This is what I deal with." He motioned toward Hades before dropping his voice conspiratorially as he moved toward Lia. "He used to actually glare at me for breathing in your direction. I mean, who even does that?"

Lia's lips tilted up slightly.

I rolled my eyes but felt some of my tension ease





at their exchange. It was Kael's way of keeping me grounded, reminding me that no matter how dire things became, I wasn't alone.

"You should be flattered," I murmured, tilting my head at Hades.

His piercing gaze snapped to mine, and in that moment, the smirk was gone. The intensity in his eyes held something deeper, something unspoken but undeniable.

"I am," he admitted. "But that doesn't mean I trust anyone."

Kael sighed dramatically. "See? No progress. The man is a fortress."

"You're still talking," Hades noted dryly.

Kael gave me a meaningful look. "If I die today, make sure they write something poetic on my grave."

I chuckled. "Like what?"

He grinned. "Kael, beloved warrior, loyal friend... snarked his way into the abyss."

Hades exhaled, pinching the bridge of his nose. "We're wasting time."

I straightened, the weight of the moment



settling over me once more. Kael had done his part, lightening the tension. Now, it was up to me to face what lay ahead.

I glanced at the clock again. Seven fifty-four.

"One more thing, about your identity," Lia cut in as we made our way out, Hades on my other side. "You are Eve to us, but to everyone..."

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"You are still Ellen," Hades added.

The hairs on my neck rose at the name that had started to sound foreign.

"They believe they hold that card. Let them believe that their deception still stands. No one else will know for the time being. Complicating things in the Obsidian Court is the last thing you need. You and Rhea have to get stronger first."

I inhaled sharply, letting the name settle in my mind like the ghost of another life. Ellen. It felt foreign, like a dress that no longer fit but still hung in the back of my closet—a reminder of who I used to force myself to be.

Lia's voice was measured, careful. "It's a risk, but it's the best way to keep you in play. For now, you remain Ellen to them."

Hades' expression was unreadable, but his grip on my wrist told me enough. He hated this.

Kael, ever perceptive, nudged me lightly again. "You okay?"

I swallowed, pushing past the unease curling in my stomach. "I don't have a choice, do I?"

Hades' gaze sharpened. "There is always a choice."

I exhaled, shaking my head. "Not this time."

We reached the grand hallway leading to the room. The doors loomed ahead, and in every corner stood uniformed guards.

I could smell the platinum rounds in their weapons.

Lia touched my arm lightly, offering one last word of reassurance. "You are ready for this."

Kael smirked. "Damn right, she is."

I lifted my chin, letting the mask slip over my features. The hesitant girl they thought they knew. The pawn they thought they could manipulate.

They had no idea what was coming.



But neither did I.

I could only hope that the heavy weight of anvils in my gut was just constipation and nothing more.

Rhea's voice thrummed in my mind, steady and resolute. "Let's give them a show."

"Show those bastards, and come back to me," Hades whispered before punctuating his words with a kiss on my forehead. "I will be watching like a fucking hawk."

I nodded and stepped forward, the doors to the room swinging open.

I walked into the room, the doors shutting behind me. Staring forward, I kept my face straight as I made my way to my designated seat, opposite my father.

The room was bright, cameras positioned everywhere. The tension was thick enough to cut with a knife.

My father cleared his throat. "You are beautiful, my dear."

I felt my stomach turn. "No need for pleasantries. Let's get on with it." My tone was cutting, sharp.

My father's amicable expression fell in an instant. "Of course, I can't waste the time of the future Luna," he said dryly. "But first, as a refresher..."

James placed a tablet on the table. "I doubt you ever got to see that murderous sister of yours die on camera."

My heart lurched, my grip on my skirt tightening.

"Keep your head, Eve. They want to make you emotional." Rhea murmured in my head.

I tipped my chin up. "I was there, wasn't I?" I countered.

"No, no, no, it's nothing like seeing the clear footage yourself. It really puts things into perspective."

"What is the point?" My voice was stable.

"So you remember," his smile was eerie.

"Remember what we are fighting for, of course. Just to let it all sink in."

Bile rose in my throat.

James tapped "play."