



254 Standoff Between Brothers

Hades 1

The halls leading to the holding wing felt longer than usual—colder, narrower. The further I walked, the deeper the weight in my chest became. Not guilt. No, not anymore.

Just pressure.

Like something inside me was growing too big for the skin that held it.

The lights flickered above in rhythm with my footsteps. My shadow stretched and warped across the walls like something unrecognizable, something... watching.

Five personnel followed at a distance. Clad in white medical coats, they whispered among themselves, clipped voices and tight grips on their clipboards. Each held paperwork.

They didn't have to.

I could smell their fear.

I stopped in front of Kael's cell.



The guards bowed their heads as I approached. I didn't acknowledge them.

I stepped inside.

The door sealed behind me with a finality that rang louder than any lock.

The room was spartan. No windows. Just a reinforced cot, a chain loop embedded in the wall, and a single overhead light that buzzed faintly like a dying thing.

Kael was seated at the far end, wrists still bound, a faint shimmer of runes glowing beneath the skin—preventing his shift, suppressing his strength.

He didn't look up at first.

But when he did, his gaze locked onto mine—and narrowed.

"You're worse," he said flatly.

I tilted my head, the shadows catching the edge of my jaw.

"Hello, Kael," I said. My voice was deeper than usual. Thicker. Like something else was speaking



with me.

Or through me.

He stood slowly, shoulders rolling back despite the ache in his wounds. "What did you do?" His voice was grave. "You are so pale, your eyes are bloodshot but I can't smell alcohol."

Despite his light hearted nature, Kael was always straight to the point, even now it surprised me. "You will be out soon," I told him. "No need to worry."

He looked at me like I had grown a second head for a second before he let out a laughter, a maniac one. He walked towards me, shaking his bound hands in my face. "You think I give a fuck?" He spat. "I look like I care. Did I beg for release?"

He looked at him not speaking, and he grew more agitated. "Tell me, your Majesty. Can you not talk to me anymore?" He demanded.

"We are talking Kael," he replied, somewhat numb with a dull ache somewhere that I could not name.

"Then tell me!" He growled. "I did it for you and Eve before you ruined the one thing that helped you



heal, while you destroy the one person that could love an heartless king like you." 2

It stung. "I know," I replied quietly. "I understand."

>"Do you now?" The flux drawled.

I ignored it.

"I know you did it for Eve..."

"And you..." the softness of Kael's voice returned.

"Both of you were healing, each other. You are stomping on that because of tests that could have been tampered with. You are throwing her away for this."

I said nothing. He still had much he wanted to offload.

Kael's chest rose and fell, his breath ragged, but not from exertion.

From restraint.

He paced, the shackles clinking softly with each movement. The runes shimmered against his skin with each angry pass beneath the flickering light.

"You think this is justice?" he said, voice low now.

"You think the world is so black and white that you



can look at a damn test and decide her worth?"

I said nothing.

Because the part of me that once would've argued... wasn't sure anymore.

Kael stepped closer, just outside the barrier of the suppressive sigils. "Do you remember what you told me the day Danielle died?"

I blinked.

A memory itched at the edges of my mind, but the flux swarmed in to drown it—too loud, too sharp.

"You said," he continued, "that if you ever lost sight of yourself, I had permission to drag you back. Kicking and bleeding if I had to. You remember that?"

I did.

Vaguely.

Vividly.

Too well.

"You're gone, Hades," he whispered. "She's still trying to reach you, and you're digging your own



grave because vengeance whispers sweet things to you in the dark." 3

I clenched my jaw.

The flux purred, amused. > "He still thinks you can be saved. Isn't that adorable?"

"I've made my decision," I said, each word heavier than the last. "She will be extracted. The marker in her blood is too rare, too volatile to be ignored."

Kael's fists tightened. "You're harvesting her, not punishing her."

"That's semantics."

"No," he snapped, eyes burning. "That's cruelty. That's what Vassir would do. That thing that your father let run rampage beneath your skin."

The name struck a nerve.

The flux hissed like a snake disturbed in its nest.

"You speak his name like you understand what he is," I said.

"I understand enough to know he's not you," Kael shot back. "But every second that thing lives in your veins, you lose another piece of yourself. You



can't love. You can't mourn. You can't—"

"I can't afford to!" I thundered.

The walls trembled slightly. The medical staff
flinched behind the cell's glass barrier.

Kael's voice dropped. "Then you're already lost." 1

A long silence followed.

He watched me, eyes soft now. Not forgiving, not
pleading.

Just tired.

Tired of losing people to pain.

"She still believes in you," he said. "Even if she's
hurting. Even if she's afraid. But one day, she
won't." 1

I let my pain and again simmer, I would not drive
myself to hurt him. I was not that lost yet. I knew
why he was the way he was. For the first time, I
had to be the level headed on, especially with
disaster thar it had all turned out to be.

I took a deep breath. "I trusted her too. I wanted to.
I really wanted to."



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"But you didn't give her a chance." His voice was hollow.

"I did." I turned to the guards waiting outside.

"Bring them in." 6

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