

276 GOODBYE

Eve 1

He shifted forward, inch by inch, his voice unraveling with every word.

"I dream about you. Not the nightmares—I deserve those. But the real ones. The ones where you smile, where you touch me like I'm still human. I wake up choking on them. On the thought that I burned the only good thing that ever looked at me like I could be more than a curse." 1

He reached for me again, then stopped himself. Hovered.

"I love you. I love you in the way broken things do—sharpened and sick and hungry. I love you, and it's killing me."

I felt it before I saw it—the shudder in his frame. The hiccup in his breath.

Then—

He wept.



Not a soft, cinematic thing. A collapse.

His head bowed, shoulders curling in like he wanted to bury into the floor. His hands trembled against the ground. His chest heaved.

And from his eyes—

Red.

Not tears.

Blood.

Dark, sluggish, seeping like the grief had ruptured something not just emotional—but elemental. Like the Flux inside him was mourning too.

Even he paused. Stunned. He touched his cheek and stared at the red on his fingers, blinking like he couldn't understand what his body was doing. 4

He looked afraid.

That was what undid me.

I reached forward—slowly—and wiped the blood from beneath his eye with my thumb. His breath caught. He flinched, then leaned into the touch like it was the only thing keeping him tethered.



"I didn't know I could still cry," he whispered.

I cupped his cheek with my hand, the same hand that had weighed down with chains. That had bled for him.

"I love you too," I whispered. "Gods help me, I do." We were past the point of lying. I had lied too many times before, to protect myself but now there was nothing left to protect. 2

His eyes widened.

"But love doesn't fix this," I added gently, even as my voice trembled. "It doesn't make us safe. It doesn't make me whole. And it doesn't make what we did to each other disappear."

He shook his head. "Don't say that. Don't—"

"I need space, Hades."

"No." The word ripped from his throat like a wound. "Eve, please. Don't leave me. Don't—" 4

"I'm not leaving you," I said, though my chest cracked with every word. "But I can't stay like this. Not right now. I can't heal with you breathing down my ribs, waiting to be forgiven." 2



He crawled closer again, kneeling now so our foreheads nearly touched. "I'll wait," he said. "I'll wait forever. I'll tear my heart out and hand it to you if that's what you need. Just—don't take yourself away from me." 7

"I already did," I whispered. "When you let me rot." 3

He flinched.

And for the first time, Hades Stavros—The Hand of Death—looked like a man who no longer knew how to survive the consequences of his own heart. 1

He looked like a man crumbling under the weight of too many wars—some he fought, most he lost. And I...

I was one of them.

We were both doomed, but I was past trying hope.

I was so tired. So drained.

But then I saw it again—just beneath his skin. The red pulse. The faint shimmer in his eyes that didn't belong to any man I knew. The Flux. It was



bleeding through him more and more. Leeching. Spreading.

"You need to fight it," I said, softly but firmly.

"Hades... you need to fight it."

He blinked. Confused. Shattered. "Fight what?"

I touched his chest—over his heart, where it burned warm and sick under my palm. "The Flux. It's killing you." 1

He shook his head, lips parting to argue, but no words came. Just a gasp—then a sob.

Real. Raw. Messy.

He crumpled further, burying his face against my lap like a man begging a god that didn't exist. His whole body shook with grief that had nowhere else to go.

"I don't know how," he rasped. "It's in me. I let it in. I wanted it. I thought it would help me hate you. I thought—" He choked. "I thought it would let me bury Danielle without losing myself to you."

I threaded my fingers through his hair. Pressed a kiss to his temple, not because he earned it—but



because he needed it.

"You did lose yourself to me," I murmured. "And I lost myself in you." 1

He whimpered—actually whimpered—and it made me want to scream.

"You need rest," I said, gently now. "You haven't slept. You look like death."

"I am death," he whispered back.

"No," I said, voice firmer. "You're not. You're just tired. And hollow. And breaking apart." Even now, I still dared to care. I never learned it would seem. 1

I love too deeply.

I shifted, gently nudging him until he looked up at me with wide, bloodshot eyes.

"I made space for you," I said. "Right here."

I pulled the edge of the blanket back and gestured toward the bed, just beside where Elliot lay curled against me like something I could never afford to lose again.

At first, Hades didn't move. He looked at the

space like it was a trap. Like lying beside me
would shatter what little was left of him.

But then he came.

Wordlessly. Slowly. Fragile.

He crawled in beside us—careful not to touch
me. Not yet. He lay on his back, rigid and
trembling, eyes locked on the ceiling like if he
blinked, I might vanish.

I turned on my side, facing Elliot, my arm curled
around the boy I owed everything to. Hades
didn't move. Not even when his hand
accidentally brushed mine beneath the blanket.

We didn't speak again.

Not that night.

The three of us slept in the same bed.

But only one of us truly slept.

Because tomorrow—I would have to wake up
and regroup.

Rebuild.

And decide if I could ever let the man beside me



stay. 3

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HADES

The first thing I noticed was warmth.

Not fire. Not blood. Not the scorching grip of the Flux coursing through my veins like venom.

But actual warmth.

Soft. Real.

And the second thing—

Breath. Small. Shallow. Against my ribs.

I blinked, slow and groggy, like surfacing from the bottom of a dark ocean.

My mind fumbled with the sensation—trying to reconcile the impossible stillness with the chaos I had become accustomed to. For the first time in weeks, maybe months... there was no screaming in my head. 1

No Flux whispering beneath my skin. 1

No claws at my throat.



Just breath.

And—

A heartbeat.

I looked down.

My arm was wrapped around Elliot.

He was still asleep, curled toward me, his little hand clutching the fabric of my shirt like a lifeline.

Gods.

He hadn't flinched from me.

He hadn't run.

The realization shattered something inside me that I didn't know was still whole enough to break.

I turned my head slowly—aching, cautious.

But the space beside me was empty.

My chest tightened.

No—



Not empty.

Not entirely.

There was something on the bed. Resting on the sheet, where her warmth had just been.

A piece of paper.

I stared at it.

For a moment, I didn't move. Couldn't.

The air around me thickened, the walls closing in. My breath stilled in my throat.

Then I reached out with fingers that shook more than I wanted to admit.

I unfolded the paper.

And there it was.

One word.

Goodbye.