



278 Muzzle Cam 4

Hades 1

My first step into the familiar sterile chamber was greeted with silence as everyone present ceased speaking or shuffling about.

But Mara came forward, tablet in hand, tapping away at something that I did not bother to be curious about.

"Your Majesty..." she paused as she took me in. She glanced uneasily at Kael, her concern evidenced in the way her brows knitted.

Kael shook his head, a barely interceptable gesture. "There are others coming," he drove the discussion away from my appearance. "We will wait."

As though at cue, the white doors creaked open, and knew who it was without turning to see. 1

I knew their scent, it had grown stronger.

Lucinda, despite her habit of dousing herself in fragrance like her daughter, always seemed to

smell faintly of bloodwine.

If there was Lucinda, there would be Montequé. 1

Lucinda made her way in front of me, appearance still flawless despite all the revelations of her daughter's atrocities. Despite the fact that was now in a maximum security cell under 24 hour surveillance. The room lined with Silver to weaken her without having to drug her directly. 2

But the signs of stress were there.

"We need to speak..."

My answer was swift. "We have nothing to speak about." The venom in my voice peeking through despite the hollowness in my chest.

"No, no, we have to speak!" Her voice grew shrill. "This is a ploy and now I hear that the bitch is out of our sights? She won that easily? Just because of a few fucking papers?" Her voice carried as she slammed closed fists against my chest. "You let Danielle die. You failed as a damn husband and then you let yourself be manipulated into accusing my only child?" 2



Numbness was all I felt as I looked down at her, letting her bunch my shirt in her fists. I simply observed, as though from a distance.

I failed thrice indeed.

Failed Danielle.

Failed Elliot.

Failed... Eve.

I didn't move.

I let Lucinda scream, let her fists batter weakly against my chest like a bird crashing against a tombstone. 1

Her words didn't pierce me. They floated past, noise on the edges of a deeper collapse.

I had no ground left to stand on.

No cause left to fight for.

No forgiveness to ask for.

The guilt spread inside me like ink spilled in clear water—bleeding into every untouched part of me, darkening even the places I thought too black to take more. 3



You let her rot.

You let her bleed.

You let her go.

The Flux did not mock me this time.

It stayed silent.

Silent, but present.

Like it was savoring my downfall. Like even it knew there was nothing left worth mocking.

I let Lucinda claw at me because I deserved it.

I deserved worse.

I let my wife die.

I let my mate break.

I let my son suffer.

And I had no one to blame but myself.

Lucinda's sobs turned to screams—shrill, feral—but even those dulled around me, muffled under the crushing, spiraling weight of self-hatred that twisted like a noose inside my gut.



I didn't even look up when Montegue stepped forward.

He was slower than usual.

His once-strong shoulders hunched forward under invisible weight. His face looked older—years older than the last time I saw him. Deep lines carved his features, sorrow etching itself into every plane of his face.

He didn't say a word.

Just reached out and gently, almost apologetically, peeled Lucinda's hands from my shirt.

She fought him.

Screamed at him.

Begged him.

But Montegue didn't flinch.

He simply gathered her into his arms and held her there, her fists pounding uselessly against his chest now, her screams muffled against the wool of his coat. 1

He didn't look at me.



Not once.

Because there was nothing left to say.

Because we both knew what I was.

A ruin.

A monster wearing the skin of a king.

A boy who wanted to be a hero—and became the very thing he tried to save everyone from.

Mara cleared her throat.

A soft, deliberate sound that somehow cut through the cavern of my shame.

When I finally raised my head, she was there, standing stiffly by the data terminal, the tablet clutched to her chest.

"Alpha Stavros," she said, voice carefully neutral. "The encryption is broken. The files are ready."

I swayed on my feet.

Kael stepped up beside me without a word, close enough that I could feel his steady presence—like a tether, should I need one.



But I didn't move.

Not yet.

I stood there, staring at Mara, at the terminal glowing coldly behind her, and realized—

This was it.

The last string.

The last thread tying me to Eve. To the truth.

I would see everything now. Everything she had hidden. Everything she had endured.

And after that—

There would be no excuses.

No redemption.

Only reckoning.

The Flux inside me stirred at the thought—but I crushed it down.

Not now.

Not yet.

I took one slow, dragging step toward the

terminal.

Then another.

And another.

Toward the evidence that would either damn me fully—or finally force me to become something she could be proud of again.

If it wasn't already too late.

If she hadn't already buried me in her heart.

And gods...

I deserved that too.

I reached the terminal, fingers hovering above the screen.

But I didn't touch it yet.

Not until I knew.

"What was the password?" I rasped, not looking away from the blank command prompt pulsing expectantly on the monitor.

Mara hesitated. Then cleared her throat again.

"Uniform," she said. 3



The word barely registered at first.

Uniform?

Kael stepped forward, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "I thought it was strange too. But... Eve said it made sense. That it was something her sister used to say when they were kids."

He grimaced faintly. "Apparently Ellen couldn't pronounce 'unicorn.' Called it 'uniform' instead." 1

I felt something twist deep inside me.

Pain—familiar and raw.

It wasn't the word that gutted me.

It was the memory.

A flash:

Eve, smirking as she shoved a ridiculous unicorn onesie into my arms, daring me to wear it.

The way she laughed—really laughed—when I finally gave in and put the stupid thing on just to see her smile.

The way the next day, I found her curled up in

the room clutching her stomach, biting back tears she thought I couldn't hear. 1

The memory of sliding down to her, pulling her against me, holding her through a breakdown she never explained.

Gods.

All this time—

Memories.

Even when she couldn't bear the weight herself.

I dragged a hand down my face, the ache in my chest nearly unbearable.

Kael spoke again, voice lower. "Looks like Ellen... wanted her to see something. Wanted her to know something."

I clenched my jaw.

"Why?" I asked hoarsely. Why would her snake of a sister want her to know something.

Silence.

Kael didn't answer.



Mara shifted uneasily, then finally spoke—quiet, steady.

"I believe it's something you all have to see for yourselves." 1

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