

284 The King And His Child

Hades 1

The words felt too small, too late, but they were all I had.

Elliot watched me.

Silent.

Unmoving.

I held my breath, afraid to even blink. Waiting.

Waiting for something—anything—that would tell me it wasn't too late.

But then—

Elliot's gaze flicked over my shoulder.

Past me.

Searching.

Hope flared in those green familiar eyes, sharp and desperate.

Searching for her.



For Eve. 1

And when he didn't find her—when the doorway
stayed hollow, silent, empty—

his face crumpled.

Not with tears.

But with a hollowness that split me open.

He looked back at me, and there was nothing
warm in that look. No forgiveness. No trust.

Only the fragile, shattered remains of a child
trying not to hope anymore.

I moved without thinking, reaching out a hand—
slow, careful, like taming a wounded animal.

But the moment I got close, Elliot flinched.

He recoiled so violently it was as if I had struck
him.

My hand froze mid-air, fingers trembling.

Gutted didn't even begin to cover it.

He didn't trust me.

He was afraid of me.



The realization carved itself into my chest, deep and ugly.

He was just a child.

A small, traumatized child who had endured more betrayal, more abandonment than he could even put into words.

And now—

I was just another monster in the long, endless line.

I lowered my hand slowly, pressing it to my thigh to stop the tremor.

I opened my mouth to speak—to beg—but before I could, the Flux stirred.

>Rude little mutt.

The voice slithered through my skull, oily and cold. 2

>Ungrateful, filthy pup.

My vision blurred at the edges, black creeping in.

My fingers twitched at my side, the muscles



spasming against my will. 3

>Discipline.

>You need to discipline him.

>Show him fear before he forgets who you are.

No.

I clenched my fists until my nails broke skin.

>Weak. You let him disrespect you like a
sniveling mortal.

The whisper grew louder, crowding out the
silence.

I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting it, fighting it—

>You should have learned from your father.

The world tilted. I felt myself slipping.

Falling.

A red haze descended over my vision.

Before I could think—before I could stop it—the
thought rose:

Hurt him.



Teach him.

"No!" The roar tore from my throat, ragged and broken, reverberating off the sterile walls.

I grabbed at my hair, tearing, yanking, anything to drown out the voices, anything to keep the monsters clawing inside me at bay.

Elliot scrambled back at the outburst, his eyes wide with terror.

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing the voices to stop, the Flux to quiet, the damage to undo itself.

"Get out," I hissed, the words scraping my throat bloody.

"You don't own me," I growled, teeth gritted so hard my jaw ached. "I took you in. I used you. You don't get to control me."

The Flux only chuckled.

>You didn't take me in, it whispered silkily. I chose you.

I filled the hollow places you carved yourself.

I am you.



I slammed my fist against the wall, the impact jarring up my arm.

"You're wrong!" I roared, my voice raw. "You're nothing but a parasite! A crutch! I'm stronger without you!"

Another laugh, low and slithering, coiled around my spine.

>Then why are you begging a child not to fear you, little king?

I staggered, the words hitting harder than any blow.

When I managed to wrench my head up, gasping, my hand still bleeding from the self-inflicted gashes—

he was gone.

"Elliot?" My voice cracked.

Panic shot through me like lightning.

I stumbled to my feet, my boots skidding across the marble.

"ELLIOT!"



I turned over the couch. Nothing.

I flung open the bathroom door. Empty.

I stormed through the room, tearing open every closet, every drawer—

Until a whimper stopped me cold.

Small.

Fragile.

Under the bed.

I dropped to my knees, ignoring the pain, and peered underneath.

There he was.

Curled in on himself. Shivering. His little fists clenched tight against his sides. 1

His eyes—gods, those eyes—were wide and glassy with terror. 1

His chest heaved in panicked, shallow gasps, and when he saw me reaching out, he recoiled so hard he banged his head against the wall.

"Easy, easy," I rasped, my hand trembling in the



air.

But it wasn't just a hand anymore.

Talons had sprouted from my fingertips, wicked and black, gleaming in the dim light.

I yanked my hand back with a choked noise, scrambling away from him.

I pressed my bleeding palm to my chest, feeling the wild hammer of my heart, the sickening twist of horror.

The Flux howled with laughter in my mind.

I was losing him.

I was becoming the nightmare my father had been to me.

And Elliot—

Elliot was staring at me the same way I had stared at my father in the dark, when I was small and afraid and still stupid enough to believe monsters were just stories.

I pressed my back to the wall and squeezed my eyes shut, willing the voices to stop, the Flux to quiet, the damage to undo itself.



But there was no undoing this.

I cracked open one eye and saw Elliot trembling harder, shrinking even farther into the corner beneath the bed.

I lowered my voice to a whisper. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry, Elliot. I didn't mean to—I would never—"

The words tasted like ashes in my mouth.

Meaningless.

Because fear had already rooted itself inside him.

Just like it had rooted itself inside me all those years ago.

I stayed there, pressed against the wall, hands open, bleeding, shaking, until my heart slowed from a frenzied gallop to a miserable crawl.

Until the flux slithered back into the shadows of my mind, retreating, sated for now by the carnage it had caused.

Until Elliot's breathing steadied—slightly.

I couldn't force him out.



I wouldn't.

I would not become the man who tore sons apart because he couldn't bear his own reflection.

I wiped my face roughly with the back of my sleeve, blood smearing against my skin.

I swallowed back the bile clawing up my throat.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow I would tear this sickness out of me root and stem if it was the last thing I did.

But tonight—

I sat against the wall, a broken thing, keeping vigil over the only piece of goodness I had left.

The only proof that there was still something in me worth fighting for.

Something in me still human enough to love.

Even if he couldn't love me back.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

< 284 The King And His Child



But I would stay.

Because that's what fathers were supposed to do.

Even the broken ones.

Especially the broken ones.

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