



285 Playback

HADES 1

"He is asleep now," Kael said softly as he stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him without a sound.

I didn't answer.

Couldn't.

As we made our way to my office, staring into a void that offered no answers. My hands, still bloodied from earlier, hung limp at my sides, fingertips stained crimson, nails cracked and blackened from the transformation that hadn't completed but had come far too close.

The hallway stretched long and empty ahead of me, lit only by the soft flicker of wall sconces. My legs didn't move.

I had no right to step forward.

No right to breathe easier.

He was asleep.



That was mercy.

That was Kael's doing.

Not mine.

I'd driven him to hide. I'd made my son crawl into the dark like an animal, fearing what his father might become. And gods, he was right to fear me.

I'd felt the Flux curling around my bones again like a second skin, whispering things I almost listened to.

Almost acted on.

The idea made my stomach twist, bile rising fast enough to sting my throat. I staggered to the wall and leaned against it, one arm braced as if the corridor itself might collapse without it. Or maybe I would.

Every breath scraped.

Every inch of air hurt.

I had nearly hurt him.

My son.



Danielle's son.

The child we had made out of something pure—something soft in a world built on teeth and power.

And I had let that be twisted, tainted by my rot, my ruin.

What kind of man almost raises a hand—no, a claw—to the only innocent thing left in his life?

The kind of man who should've died long ago.

The kind of man I'd always sworn I would never become.

But I had.

I was already there.

And the silence in the hallway only made it worse, stretching and echoing until I couldn't tell if the noise in my head was the Flux or just my own thoughts turning into knives.

A faint creak made me lift my head.

Kael had stopped halfway down the hall. He turned slowly to look back at me, his gaze unreadable.



He stood by the open door of my office, waiting.

"Get in," he said with a quiet firmness. Not a command. Not a plea. Just a step forward I hadn't yet earned.

I stared past him, not at the door but at my own hands. Blood still clung to the creases of my palms, dried now but tacky in places. I could see the curve where my claws had begun to push through the skin, now receded but not forgotten. It would be easy to pretend they weren't there. But I couldn't.

Kael followed my gaze. A sigh left him, sharp and tired. "With the way you stink, I'm surprised the boy hasn't packed up and tried to run altogether." 1

My lips twitched, but it wasn't a smile. Not even close.

I stepped past him, each footfall heavy, dragging guilt behind me like chains. The door shut with a soft thud as Kael entered behind me.

I didn't sit.

I just stood there in the middle of the room, like



a man staring at the gallows.

"I can't even touch him," I said finally. "Much less console him. After all he's lost, all I've taken from him—he flinches at the sound of my voice."

Kael leaned against the wall, his good arm folded across his chest. His expression wasn't pitying, but it wasn't cruel either. 1

"You were like that with Amella," he said.

I looked up.

He gave a small shrug. "Same eyes. Same silent stares. You couldn't even speak to her without glaring like you weren't sure you wanted to rip off her face or hide, remember? Couldn't let her touch you for months. Until she broke through...a little. Elliot... just takes after his father."

That hit harder than I expected.

My jaw tightened.

So it wasn't just the pain I passed on. It was the fear, the recoil, the self-preserving detachment.

Inherited like a curse. 1



Kael didn't say anything else for a moment.

But when he did, his voice shifted—lower, more grave.

"And it's not just him."

I turned to him, frowning.

Kael pushed off the wall and moved toward the desk, grabbing the small remote used for secure playback. He tossed it lightly from hand to hand, but his face was too still.

"He isn't the only one who recoils from you, Hades. There's something else. Something clinging to you."

I stiffened.

"The Flux?" I knew that already but had it truly been so obvious that Kael's tone would deepen with dread.

"No," Kael said flatly. "Not just the Flux. It's deeper now. Woven in. Like rot under flesh. You remember how Eve looked at you in the last days? Before everything started falling apart?"

I didn't answer.



He didn't need me to.

"She felt it. She knew something had changed.
Not just the anger. Not just the power. But you."

I looked down again.

"That's why we have to review the footage," Kael
said, voice tight. "Because what I saw... is going
to be one hell of a demon to exorcise."

A chill broke across my spine.

Kael walked to the screen embedded in the wall,
as slid open, fingers tapping the console as the
security seal blinked to life.

"Your father said once that the Flux feeds on hate
and fear. But this? This is more than feeding."

He turned to face me.

"It's nesting."

I didn't move.

Couldn't.

Kael's voice dropped to a whisper, his voice
laced with a silent terror that he tried to conceal.




"And if we don't cut it out soon, Hades, there might not be a you left to fight for."

He keyed in the code.

The screen flickered.

And the frame of Eve's recapture began to play.

My chest grew tight the moment it began as I took in the scene of Montague with the weapon that I had not been aware of its existence, aimed right for Eve's skull. 

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