336 The Puppeteer

Eve 1

His talons ripped into my side, my body lurching against the agony that blossomed. I bit back a scream, gulping down the sound as my jaw set in desperate determination. I opened my mouth to tell him I was not the enemy, that I would never hurt or fight him, but I was cut short...

By his talons plunging into my now bleeding side, deep and without trepidation, I choked on a gasp as my eyes found his through the veil of anguish that was pulled over me, ripping the strength from my body, hope from my soul.

We held our gazes like that, his jaw grounded, teeth grating, shoulders bunched, face filled with —filled with betrayal masked as fury. But beneath the snarl, beneath the war mask he wore like second skin—I saw it. The fracture.

A flicker of something ancient and wounded.

His pupils shook. His breath caught.

And for a single heartbeat, I felt his pain merge

with mine—not as enemies, not as monsters in war, but as two souls broken by the same curse.

"Please..." I whispered, barely able to speak as blood pooled beneath us. "If there's any part of you left that remembers me... don't make me fight you."

His hand trembled where it was buried in my flesh.

But he didn't pull away.

"It's not real," Rhea whispered, but even her voice was strained, our misery physical and beyond shared.

He twisted his hand inside me, shredding my insides without a second thought. The pain was nothing compared to the flickers of vulnerability and fear on his face, emotions that he attempted to shield from me with the veil of wrath. He was still there, Lucien being hidden by Hades even now. The part that was afraid was still there, the part that would want to be saved still existed beneath the carved mask of rage.

So I did what I believed he needed. He did not need another person telling him it was okay. It

would not be enough—it could never be enough after what he had gone through—or someone trying to pull him to a safety that he would never believe existed. It would simply never work. He was afraid, paranoid, apprehensive, and volatile.

My ears perked up at the sound of destruction that not only seemed to be racing to our location but was most definitely going to get here. And Hades, whether innocent or not, would not be spared. The Fenrir's Marker would not discriminate. It was a part of me but not me; it would act on instinct, not on empathy. It was simply force. One that I could not control in this realm or space.

I reached out and Hades recoiled as I placed my hand on his cheek. He was burning, the heart of his body searing me, inside out.

My fingers brushed his cheek, seared at the edges from his feverish skin. But I didn't pull away.

I couldn't.

"You never deserved this," I whispered, voice shaking like the walls around us. "You never had to go through this. You were so young. You still

are." 1

A breath caught in my throat, thick with blood and salt and love.

"I know I'm late."

He didn't answer. But he didn't move either. His hand—still embedded in my side—twitched like it wanted to pull free but didn't know how.

"I failed you," I said, letting the words crack. "I'm so sorry."

A single drop fell from his eye.

Thick. Crimson.

He didn't notice.

But I did.

And I smiled.

Gods, it hurt.

But I smiled anyway.

"I know a way out of here," I breathed. "I can get you back. I can keep you safe. This time, I promise."

His lips parted.

No growl. No curse.

Only breath. Quivering. Childlike.

"There are people who love you," I went on, tears finally spilling down my cheeks. "I love you. I always have. I always will."

His eyes—so wild before—shimmered. Softened. The red bled into amber at the edges, faint but real. And for a heartbeat, I saw him.

Lucien.

Not the weapon. Not the heir. Not the beast.

Just... Hades.

His lips moved.

"You promise?" he asked, voice barely audible. "You'll keep me safe?"

"Yes," I whispered. "With everything I have. Even if it means bleeding beside you."

"But... why?" he rasped, voice splintering into something fragile. "Why would you still... after everything I did—"

"Because I know who you are," I interrupted gently. "Not what they made you. Not what the Flux turned you into. I remember who you were when you held me the first time. When you told me I wasn't just a pawn in a prophecy. You were the one who made me feel real."

His brows furrowed, torn between belief and fear. The weight of his hand trembled. I felt it— some of the Flux retreating, like a tide pulled back by a hesitant moon.

"I don't deserve this," he whispered. ①

"Maybe not," I replied. "But you're still getting it. Because you matter to me. Because I refuse to let you go."

His eyes locked with mine, and for a second—

A full second—

He was coming back.

But then—

Laughter.

Cruel. Wet. Echoing across bone and void and magic.

Not from him.

Not from here.

From everywhere.

And only I heard it.

"Still so soft," Vassir's voice hissed through the dark. "Still reaching for ghosts you were meant to bury."

It was fractured, scattered, slipping—because the Marker's cleansing was working. He was losing his grip.

But he wasn't going without dragging someone down.

And the moment shattered.

The floor groaned.

Air snapped.

And then—

A new presence bloomed.

Not summoned. Not called.

Arrived.

The world bent around him as he stepped into the Black Room, as if the walls themselves remembered to fear.

Hades froze. The hand in my side went still.

"What are you doing, son?" the man asked.

His voice was smooth.

Polished.

Familiar in the worst way.

I turned.

And saw him.

Hades' father. ①

Wearing shadows like a mantle. Skin like marble cracked with night. Eyes—pitiless.

The presence of a god.

Or something fouler.

"You are failing the test," he said, stepping closer, each word dragging gravity behind it. "How is she still alive?"

Hades didn't breathe.

Didn't blink.

Didn't even tremble.

He just... stopped.

Like a puppet waiting to be retied.

And the warmth I'd just reached? It vanished. Pulled back. Swallowed whole.

The Flux surged.

Again

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