



351 Goodbye, Mama ¹

Hades ¹

I stepped into the scene, Eve not even realizinh
that I had taken a position beside her. My heart
wincd as I took it all in. ¹

My son, standing before his mother's painting,
eyes alight with awe, wet with tears not shed.
Muscles in body locked in as I watched him,
stare, emotions whirring in too probably too
convoluted for him to decipher. All he could was
feel them, let them wash over him as they
washed over me now, as I stood as a witness to
it. ¹

He looked lost, yet so found, As if the pieces
inside him that had never quite made sense
were clicking quietly into place.

He didn't speak. He didn't sign. He just stared.

And I...

I couldn't breathe.

Because there she was.



Danielle.

Painted in the softest color I'd ever seen her wear, her cheeks blooming with warmth I hadn't seen since before the war. The curve of her lips—tired, proud, glowing with love. Love for the baby in her arms. For him.

The one we never got to raise. The one we never got to name together. The one she never got to watch grow.

And gods help me—

She had finished this painting. She had sealed it with everything she never got to say even when she was not aware of her fate.

The green eyes of the child were vibrant and otherworldly—his eyes—but I knew they hadn't always been that way. She'd repainted them. She must have. Again and again. Waiting for them to be perfect.

I recalled her saying she wanted Elliot to have my eyes—my real eyes, before my father took them, before Flux took them, before Obsidian and blood and war turned them cold.



But I had convinced her.

Convinced her that green would suit him better.
Not a mirror of me but as a mirror of all I held
dear back then; her. I said it would make him
look softer, gentler. She'd laughed and said, "You
just don't want him to grow up brooding."

And maybe I didn't.

But now, standing here, watching him lift a hand
as though to touch the boy in the painting—
himself—I realized she had painted them green
because of me.

Because I asked.

Because she trusted me to know what kind of
legacy we'd be leaving behind.

And now... it was the only color on that canvas
that didn't feel like grief.

It felt like love.

Elliot was what remained of that love.

Not just her laugh or her hands or the way she
used to hum when she braided her hair.

I missed this. The pieces of her I hadn't even



known were missing until they stared back at me in our son's face.

I took a breath and finally knelt beside him. Not touching—just close enough.

"Do you know what this means?" I asked.

He didn't look at me, but I saw his head tilt—listening.

"It means she saw you," I said. "Even before the world got to."

He blinked slowly, lashes wet but no tears falling yet.

"She knew who you'd be. She saw your eyes, even when the rest of us couldn't. And she put them here. For you."

He turned to me, just a little.

"She didn't leave," I said quietly. "She just... stayed where you could find her again."

He opened his hand, revealing the small carved wolf still resting in his palm.

He hesitated, then gently placed it at the foot of the painting—beneath the folds of Danielle's



painted shawl, as though offering it to her.

And I—gods, I couldn't stop it.

The ache rose in my throat like a storm tide, and I reached out, cupping the back of his head as I pulled him into my arms.

He didn't resist.

He buried his face into my chest, and for a long moment, we stayed like that—father and son, both too full of everything to speak.

Behind us, Eve said nothing.

But when I looked up, her eyes shimmered.

She didn't try to interrupt.

She didn't try to comfort us.

She simply let us have her.

Danielle.

In silence. In oil. In the only truth left behind that didn't demand to be explained.

Elliot shifted in my arms.

Then slowly, he turned his head, peeking past my



shoulder. His hand reached outward, small fingers curling in the air—beckoning.

Toward her.

"Mummy," I heard him murmur, voice hoarse but steady.

She blinked.

Her posture stiffened like she was about to take a step back, to fade into the shadow of the doorway where she always seemed to retreat when the moment felt too tender. She shook her head softly, already lifting a hand in polite refusal.

"I don't want to intrude," she whispered, trying for a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "This is your moment. His. Yours and Danielle's."

But Elliot didn't waver.

He stood from where he'd knelt, turned to her, and signed something with both hands—something deliberate, something that stopped her breath:

"You are part of my always too." 2



Her lips parted, stunned.

He signed again, slower this time, so she wouldn't miss it, because maybe words would not be enough.

"She gave me life."

"You gave me back."

Eve's hand fluttered to her chest, and for a second, her control cracked. The grief, the guilt, the undeserved weight of it all—crumbled.

Her voice was barely a whisper. "Elliot..."

He took a step forward.

Then another.

Then walked up to her and wrapped his arms around her middle.

Not tentative. Not questioning.

Like he had always known where she fit.

She froze—startled—then slowly lowered her arms and knelt, just like I had.

And just like that, he pulled her in too.



His arms around her shoulders. My hand still resting on his back. The three of us forming something I couldn't name. Something broken, maybe. But still... something whole enough to hold onto.

I watched as Eve buried her face against his hair, trembling.

And I let my forehead press against both of theirs.

The greenhouse had been transformed.

Not into something grand or ostentatious. No—the opposite.

It was quiet. Reverent. Sacred.

The air was thick with the scent of blooming moon lilies—flowers that only opened under silver light, their petals curled like whispered prayers. Ferns and ivy cascaded down from ceiling beams. Pale-glass panes caught the filtered light of morning, casting soft rays over the circular garden bed at the heart of the room.

And in the center of it all... she slept.



Encased in crystalline stasis, her body preserved in peace at last.

Danielle lay inside a clear capsule, her hands folded over her chest, her dark hair splayed over ivory linen like ink spilled on silk. She wore her favorite color—soft dusk blue—the same shade she'd worn when Hades first told her he loved her. A single moon lily was tucked behind her ear, its petals glowing faintly.

Her face was still.

Untroubled. Young. Far younger than the years she'd earned.

The Montegues stood beside her—Lucinda veiled in dark mourning silk, her fingers clutching the family crest so tightly her knuckles whitened. Montegue himself stood like a statue of granite, only the slow drag of breath betraying that he was still human. His rage had finally settled—tempered by sorrow.

Cain came in quietly, his hand brushing Eve's shoulder before taking a place by the arched doorway. Kael stood beside him, back straight, eyes red but proud. Silas, Gallinti, and two visiting Alphas from the Eastern Reach had taken



positions near the ceremonial vines—each present not for politics, but because Danielle had mattered. To all of them.

The only sound was birdsong from beyond the glass walls.

And Elliot's footsteps.

Tiny. Soft.

He walked ahead of us.

I wanted to carry him, but he had insisted.

"I want to go by myself," he had said.

Eve and I stood back, hands entwined, watching as he stepped up to the capsule alone.

He stared down at his mother.

Utterly silent.

The kind of silence that bent the world.

And then...

A sound caught in his throat.

A whimper.



And his shoulders shook once.

The room held its breath.

Then he collapsed to his knees, hands pressed against the capsule, forehead touching the glass as the dam finally broke.

"I tried," he sobbed.

"I was good. I was good."

His fists clenched on the edges of the capsule, knuckles whitening like he wanted to break through.

"I didn't cry that day. I didn't cry when she hurt me. I didn't cry when she said you were gone."

His voice was high and ragged, a child's voice splitting at the seams.

"I was strong, like mummy said. I tried. I wanted you to be proud of me—are you proud of me?"

His head hit the glass again, gently. Again.

"Mama, are you proud of me?"

Lucinda gasped behind us, the sound of it like shattering porcelain.



I didn't feel my knees move—I just found myself there, behind him, wrapping him in my arms.

He collapsed into me.

Sobbing. Wailing.

Not like a prince. Not like a warrior.

Like a son.

Like a child who had waited his entire life for a goodbye that would never be enough.

And I broke.

There, with my forehead pressed to his shaking back, I shattered.

Not because he was in pain—

But because she wasn't there to hold him.

Because I had failed them both.

Eve stepped forward, kneeling on the other side of the capsule, her hand resting flat on the crystal near Danielle's heart. Her tears fell soundlessly, but her eyes never left Elliot.

"You were everything she hoped for," she



whispered. "Everything. She's proud, baby. So proud."

He turned his face to her voice.

And crawled into her arms.

We knelt around the capsule like a family wrapped in grief.

Not perfect. Not whole.

But real.

And when the vines of the ceremonial garden slowly crept forward to seal the capsule, encasing Danielle in moon lilies and soil, Elliot didn't look away.

He kissed the glass once.

And whispered, "Goodbye, Mama." 3

