

376 It's Okay

Hello, I am sorry for the inconsistent updates, I relapsed and was too weak and in no state of mind to write this sort of chapter. I am still reeling but fighting through it. We are about to come to an end of the book. We have roughly about 70 chapters left. I hope you continue to enjoy the book to the end. 1

HADES

I counted the seconds as they slowly threaded by. With every moment, the weight on my chest increased in tandem with Kael's fading heartbeat. I glanced at his unmoving body, the lump in my throat choking out my patience. We had no time to wait, but I knew all their forces had to loop back before we could afford to make any noise. 1

If we blew our cover, we would lose Kael anyway, and all this would have been inconsequential.

I bit my tongue until the familiar scent of blood filled my senses.

And then—



I heard the final fading footfall.

Cain and I shared a glance before I closed my eye, letting the vibrations around us hum in my bones—sensing, waiting, watching with anything other than my eyes. At first, it was my pulsing heart I could hear. Then I let it fade into the background of my subconscious, letting the ripple in the air and earth deliver the information I sought.

But there was nothing.

Seconds passed.

Until I heard mechanical gears grinding in the distance—then a slam. That was how I knew for sure the Gammas were securely back in their fortress.

"Well?" Cain whispered, the urgency in his voice exacerbating mine.

"The coast is clear," I replied, my voice low.

The jump into action was instant the moment the words left my mouth. Everyone turned to Kael, and I reached two fingers to his throat to find his pulse.



For one aching second, I found nothing—

Then, a faint jump of the artery. It filled me with enough relief to make me double over.

Cain was already tearing at the remnants of his clothing—ruined by claw, teeth, and blade.

My breath turned shallow as Cain revealed the injury beneath. Black-blue bruises adorned Kael's chest, deep and bloody gashes exposing bone. I could see parts where his flesh had already initiated healing— 1

But the process had halted. As though healing had started, then been violently stopped.

Cain let out a hiss, and there was an uncomfortable murmur among our men.

They could feel it too—

The pain of having their healing stripped from them.

Now, with our waning adrenaline, the repulsively corrosive odor of wolfsbane filled the stolen space.

I recoiled, even though I had already known



what they'd done to him.

"It's obvious," Cain said, voice laced with acid enough to melt steel. "They used wolfsbane, like we thought. But not to hollow him—they just wanted to seize his healing while they gutted him for information."

At least they didn't hollow him. Not like Eve.

I tried to keep a positive outlook, but it did nothing to unravel the tight tangle of anxiety in my stomach.

I turned my head away, jaw clenched so tight I thought it might crack.

No.

I shook it off.

"This was deliberate," Cain continued, crouching beside Kael. "They didn't want him dead. Just broken. Just... slow enough to talk."

I swallowed the bile in my throat. My hands hovered over Kael's chest, unsure whether to touch or pull back. His body shuddered with each breath like he was being punched from the inside.



"He's freezing," one of our men muttered, voice tight with panic. "He's not regulating his core temperature."

"We need heat. Now." My voice sliced through the space.

Blankets were already being pulled from packs, coats stripped off backs.

A fire couldn't be lit—not without giving away our position.

So we made do with body heat and layered fabric, wrapping Kael until only the blood at his throat remained visible.

Cain pressed the back of his hand to Kael's cheek. "His heartbeat's slowing again."

"We need to get him to a medic."

"We *are* the medics," Cain shot back. Then, softer. More broken—

"At least tonight we are."

The silence that followed tasted bitter.

I watched Kael's face, waiting for some flicker, some twitch—anything.



But he didn't stir. His chest rose once... then paused.

Too long.

Too still.

"No—no, no, no." I dropped to my knees and gripped his shoulder. "Kael. Kael, you're not doing this. You hear me?"

Nothing.

"*Kael!*" My voice cracked as I leaned in. "You don't get to die. Not after everything. Not when we just got you back."

Still nothing.

Cain stepped back, giving me space, but I could feel the weight of his gaze on me. Everyone could hear how my voice was fraying.

I leaned forward, forehead brushing against Kael's temple, breath shallow.

"You remember that stupid night in the ravine? When we were seven and you told me you could fly off the cliff if you could call on Elysia?"

I let out a dry laugh, more broken than amused.



"I told you gravity didn't give a damn about wolves—but you still jumped. You screamed all the way down until you hit the water and shattered your tailbone. You couldn't sit for a week."

My throat burned.

"You said it was worth it. That the fall felt like flying."

Still nothing.

My fingers clenched tighter into the fabric of Kael's ruined shirt, knuckles pale with the force of it.

"You remember that night? When you tried to do stand-up comedy in the old training barracks without the old king's permission? One of the many times we snuck in?"

I closed my eyes, the memory bleeding in like light through cracked stone.

"We were seven," I whispered, voice splintering. "Your timing was awful. Your impressions were worse. No one was listening. Only me.

You just stood on that stupid overturned crate



with that stupid paper crown on your head, cracking joke after joke like someone had promised you a kingdom if you could make us laugh."

A wet sound escaped me—half laugh, half sob.

"But no one cared. Everyone just kept eating, sparring, ignoring you like you didn't even exist."

I looked down at him, at the blood crusted at his lip. He was so still.

"And then Cain—" My voice caught. "Cain stood up. Didn't say a word. Just walked to the center of the room and said, 'You're all going to laugh now.'"

Cain shifted beside me, quietly pulling his coat off. The movement was slow, somber—like we knew what would come next, but no one dared voice it.

Even our men were utterly quiet, which would've been impossible for a rowdy crowd of soldiers in any other situation.

"You remember that?" I asked, not expecting an answer.



"He stood there like a damned general at inspection. Made every recruit in the room sit their asses down and listen.

Ordered us to laugh after every punchline. Forced it out of us until—"

I swallowed thickly.

"Until we started laughing for real. Because gods help me, Kael... you were actually funny. You made Cain snort. Do you know how hard that is?"

Cain didn't speak, but I heard him kneel.

Without ceremony, he gently pulled Kael into his lap, wrapping both arms around him.

His chest pressed against Kael's back, one hand at his sternum, the other gripping Kael's limp wrist like an anchor, as he enveloped him in his fur.

Cain's voice was low, hoarse in my mind through the link.

"He's freezing. My core's stable. Maybe it'll help."

I nodded, words locked behind a thousand



emotions I couldn't afford to feel.

Kael didn't move.

I reached forward again, brushing a thumb along the side of his jaw, watching for a twitch, a blink—anything.

"Come on," I whispered, voice cracking open. "If you ever needed to land a punchline... it's now."

But he stayed silent.

And outside the shelter, the darkness pressed tighter.

The weight of the world shifted ever so slightly off balance—waiting for Kael to either come back...

Or not.

A twitch—

I flinched—

His voice was unrecognizable, a choked croak scraped raw from his throat. But the lightness remained. Dim. Mocking. Still Kael.

"What do you call a king..." he rasped, breath

hitching between syllables, "...who can't count to ten?" 3

My heart stuttered. Cain froze beneath him, ears twitching.

Kael's lips barely moved, but I leaned in, every atom of me straining to catch the rest.

"A... royal pain in the math."

It was awful.

It was stupid.

It was so him.

I let out a sound I didn't recognize—half sob, half laugh, entirely shattered.

Cain exhaled sharply through his nose, the closest thing to a chuckle he'd allow under these godsdamned circumstances.

"You bastard," I muttered, pressing a trembling hand to Kael's cheek. "You absolute bastard."

Kael's smile twitched. Barely there. But it was there.

"Was... that one of the good ones?" he croaked



again, eyes fluttering under bruised lids.

Cain let out a low growl of disbelief—affection wrapped in exhaustion. "You sound like death and you're still fishing for a laugh?"

Kael's shoulder moved with the ghost of a shrug. "Dying's... bad for my confidence."

I huffed through my nose, brushing damp hair off his forehead. "You're not dying."

"Could've fooled me."

"You're not," I growled. "I didn't carry your half-dead ass out of that hellhole just for you to make puns and die on me anyway."

Kael blinked slowly, eyes glassy but locked on mine. "You were worried."

"I was homicidal," I corrected. "Still am."

He smiled again—lopsided, delirious, bleeding.

Cain pressed closer, his larger frame still curled protectively behind Kael, heat radiating in steady waves.

He closed his eyes, feeling Kael's vitals through his fur.

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When he opened them, my stomach flipped at the sorrow in their depths.

The silence engulfed the space—

Until Kael broke it himself.

"I know I am dying, Lucien. It's okay." 6

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