



377 The Cowards We Are

Hades 1

The ground beneath me tilted, the tension
returning with unrelenting vengeance.

My mouth fell open, hands dropping uselessly at
my sides as my eyes clashed with his warm
green ones.

There was no humor. No twinkle. Nothing.

Just swirls of pain and fear—ones he still refused
to let show.

"No..."

The word sounded foreign, my voice as distant
as though it came from someone else entirely.

Slowly, my chest grew too tight—too constricted
for my heart.

The world should have stopped then. It had no
right to continue spinning.

How dare it simply carry on...

As my friend—

No.

As my best friend lay here dying.

Telling me he knew...

While I could only kneel here and do nothing.

I had power at my fingertips—buzzing,
simmering, begging to be used.

But they were only meant for destruction.

Nothing inside the husk of my body could heal
him.

I could only watch...

As the light in his eyes—that had always burned
so bright—began to dim. 1

He smiled.

Leprided. Genuine. Just like every other smile
he'd ever flashed me.

"Lucien," he whispered.

His voice was coarse, but impossibly soft.

Even now—now—he wanted to console me.

Even though he was the one dying.

"Yes, Kael," I replied, slowly—like if I spoke too fast, it would all become real.

This had to be a nightmare.

It had to be.

"You're crying," he murmured. His voice was light as a feather. 1

I touched my face.

Wet.

Useless. Useless. More things I couldn't stop.

I gritted my teeth, trying to bury the helplessness clawing its way up my throat.

"What if I am crying..." I bit out, harsher than I meant.

"You're—"

"No..." he groaned with a short, painful laugh.

"Your tears, they're clear. There's no blood." He managed. "Your eyes... I can see specks of blue."

I blinked, his words making sense—but too



unbelievable to fully comprehend.

"It's true," Cain's voice pulled me out of my astonished haze. "Your tears are clear. They're normal." The awe in his tone was palpable. "Your eyes... the blues... are—" His voice trailed off as it slowly dawned on him, but it still didn't matter.

"You... you're just trying to distract me," I snarled, not meaning to sound hostile, but unable to help myself.

Still, Kael only laughed. "I get to see your blues before your wife..." he chuckled. "I knew you loved me. Too bad I can't wipe your tears. Pretty sure they broke all my fingers..." He grimaced through his own laughter, a tear managing to escape. His façade crumpled, his lips giving way to trembling. 1

"It hurts so much, Lucien," he finally admitted. "Make... it stop."

The words weren't a plea.

They were a surrender.

And I shattered.

I leaned closer, forehead to his, hands shaking as



I cupped his jaw like it was the only thing anchoring me to this world.

"I can't," I whispered. "Gods, Kael—I can't."

His fingers twitched against the dirt, curling weakly like they were clawing for relief in the soil. His jaw clenched as another wave of pain raked through him, and he gave a strangled noise—half a breath, half a sob.

"I'm tired," he rasped. "My bones... they burn."

"I know."

"I feel everything fading. My wolf... he's slipping."

I swallowed hard, fighting the roar in my ears. "Then hold on. You hear me? You hold on until I find a way."

But he gave the softest, saddest smile I'd ever seen. "Always the hero. Even now."

"I'm not trying to be a hero," I choked. "I'm trying to save you."

Kael let out a breath that sounded far too close to goodbye.

"If this is the end," he said, voice barely audible,

"promise me something."

I shook my head. "Don't talk like that—"

"Lucien."

The way he said my name. Not Hades. Just Lucien. Like we were boys again, in the tower play yard, sharing stolen apples and scraped knees.

"I need to spend... what time I have... with my brother. Not my Alpha. Just my brother." 1

I felt my whole body stiffen—because gods help me, I was not ready for this.

He continued, blinking slow as if each lash carried weight. "No speeches. No orders. No mission. Just you and me. For a little while. Can we have that?"

The lump in my throat felt like jagged stone.

I nodded, eyes stinging.

"I promise."

Kael exhaled shakily and gave a small nod.
"Good."

Then he winced again, fingers spasming.

"Kael—"

"Don't," he cut in. "Don't fuss. If you start crying again, I'll try to sit up and smack you."

A broken laugh escaped me.

"I'd like to see you try."

He grinned, teeth stained red. "You always were a smug bastard."

"You always were a reckless idiot."

"Still am."

I eased down beside him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders, letting his weight press into mine. I could feel how fragile he'd become. Like a thread stretched too thin, ready to snap.

But for now—just now—he was still here.

And I was still holding him.

Cain didn't speak. He just turned away and stood guard, silently giving us the time Kael had asked for.



The darkness outside deepened.

And inside this fading moment, two brothers waited—neither ready to say goodbye.

"Do it," he murmured softly, almost hissing from the pain that refused to relent.

"What?" I asked, dreading what he would say.

"End the pain, Lucien. Put me out of my misery."

My body went cold—ice cold. My blood froze in my veins. "What?"

"You know I won't survive this..." he ground out.

"My body is betraying me. I'm... too much of a coward to endure it."

"Don't you fucking dare call yourself that." My voice was saturated with desperation. There was no hiding it.

The fear was crippling.

The end to all this...

It wasn't supposed to come like this.

Kael's jaw tensed, and blood beaded from the corner of his mouth. He exhaled sharply,

shoulders twitching like his wolf was trying—
desperately—to rise one last time.

But it couldn't.

It was broken.

He was broken.

"I'm not afraid to die," he said, each word clipped
and ragged. "But this? This slow peeling? This
waiting for the light to flicker out—this is
torture."

"You've survived worse."

"I didn't survive," he rasped. "I endured. Big
difference."

I shook my head, furious and useless. "No. No,
we don't give up. Not like this. Not you."

Kael let out a low sound—half laugh, half cry.

"You think I don't want to live? You think I'm not
fighting? Lucien, my soul is blistering." His voice
cracked, folding under the weight of unrelenting
agony. "I would rather you end it than let them
have the final say over what's left of me."

"I can't," I breathed.



"You can."

"I won't."

His hand found mine—cold and trembling—and clutched it with surprising strength. "You have to."

I shook my head again, harder this time, vision blurring. "Don't you put that on me. You don't get to die and leave me holding that kind of guilt." I was trying to guilt him into not forcing me to do this. 2

He laughed again, weaker now. "You already carry worse."

"Kael—"

"I don't want to die screaming, Lucien," he whispered. "I want to die... with someone who loved me next to me. Someone who won't let me be a weapon, or a lab rat, or a loose end. I want to die as your brother. Please."

My chest cracked down the center.

Then he let out a peal of laughter that spooked me into freezing—and so did everyone else.



But even the laughter sounded fake.

"Do you really think I would let you shut me up... permanently?" he asked, trying to force out some humor.

But I could see it—the hurt in his eyes that I wasn't willing to kill him myself.

I shot to my feet, the movement jerky and wild. My hands curled into fists.

"Don't you die on me," I growled, barely recognizing my voice. "Do you hear me, Kael? Don't you fucking die. I'll be back." 1

And then I turned away—because if I looked at him a second longer, I'd shatter into dust. 1