

55 Of Laughter and Secrets

Eve~ 1

I slept for what felt like five days. If I had Rhea, I would have been able to heal faster but now I was stuck in bed. The first time that I had tried to get out of bed, I had fallen. I had to crawl my way back onto the bed to spare my pride. The last thing I wanted was Hades picking me up and giving me that look that made me wish that the ground would open up and just swallow me whole.

This afternoon, I was particularly drowsy. Hades had not come back, and I was glad but I knew it would not last. He would come back and have to sleep in this bed with me, however large, I could not fathom the awkwardness and painfully unspoken words.

Right then, the door creaked open and my heart lurched in my chest. Then instead of dark hair, I saw blond. Kael peeped in, "Your highness," he murmured, "How are you doing?"

I found myself smiling, "Better," I lied.

"That's a relief," his expression was warm. "There is someone else here to see you."

I raised a brow, trying to calm my heart. "Who?" I asked.

Kael finally entered fully and he brought with him, someone else. Green eyes and curls of mahogany, a small frame.

"Ellie," I half gasped, half muttered. I caught myself off guard by the sudden nickname and by the way that their eyes widened, I knew that felt the same. I managed a shaky, nervous smile. "I hope it's okay?" My voice was small.

Kael's eyes softened as he turned to Elliot. "Tell me, Ellie," he said, using the nickname. "Do you like it? Cause I know I do."

The boy looked from Kael to me and nodded.

"Ellie it is," Kael smiled warmly and crouched beside Elliot, his hand gently resting on the boy's shoulder. "Ellie wanted to see you because he has something special to give you," Kael said softly. "He's been working on it all morning."

Elliot fidgeted with the piece of paper in his hands, his eyes downcast, cheeks flushing red. Kael gave him an encouraging nudge.

Elliot finally padded towards me, his steps unsure, holding out a folded piece of paper

Elliot finally padded towards me, his steps unsure, holding out a folded piece of paper toward me, his green eyes peeking up hesitantly. I reached out, my fingers brushing against the paper before I took it carefully from his small hands.

"What's this?" I asked gently, my heart warming at the shy, earnest look in his eyes.

He watched intently as I unfolded the paper. My breath caught in my throat when I saw the drawing. It was a crude, childlike depiction of me, but I had a cape and was soaring through the sky like a superhero. There were little sparkles and stars surrounding me, and at the bottom, Elliot had scrawled two words in messy handwriting: Thank you. 2

I swallowed the lump in my throat, my heart swelling with a mixture of gratitude and an overwhelming sense of tenderness. "Elliot... this is beautiful," I said, my voice thick with emotion, and I was on the verge of crying. I reached out to ruffle his curly hair, but he ducked his head and flinched a little. The action hit me, only children that were hit would flinch like that. I pushed the sinking thoughts away.

Kael grinned easily, sitting on the edge of my bed.

Kael grinned easily, sitting on the edge of my bed. "I think he sees you as his personal hero," he teased, leaning in to get a better look at the drawing. "And, you know, I have to agree with him. You did save the day after all."

I shook my head, though a small smile tugged at my lips. "I don't feel like much of a hero."

Kael raised a brow, his voice light and teasing. "Oh, come on now. Don't be modest. You swooped in, saved the kid, survived an explosion... I think you've earned that cape. But I think a blue cape would suit you much better. The red kinda washes you out." I knew he was just trying to make me feel better.

But I couldn't help but laugh softly, the sound surprised even me. Despite the ache in my body and the weight of everything that had happened, Kael's easy humour was a helping.

He winked at me. "See? You're already healing. Laughter is the best medicine, after all."

I smiled, shaking my head, but I felt lighter at that moment. "I didn't know you moonlighted as a comedian."

Kael put a hand dramatically to his chest. "Ah, you wound me, your highness. I like to think of myself

I couldn't help but roll my eyes at his exaggerated tone, but the smile on my face stayed. "I don't know if I'd call you a hero just yet. The league of heroes of which I am part would not agree."

"Hey, hey, let's not get picky. I'm clearly the unsung hero of this tale," Kael said with a playful grin. "I know Batman is keeping tabs on me."

I chuckled, as Ellie stared intently at me and even tilted his head. I was growing more concerned. Children his age should be unruly and laugh a lot but his expression barely changed.

Kael's grin only widened at my chuckle. "See? I can work miracles. Batman's just waiting for me to make my grand debut. Hades would have met his match."

At the mention of his name, my smile faltered and my mood soured

Kael noticed instantly. His teasing demeanour softened as he sat up straighter, concern flashing across his face. "Hey, what's wrong? Did I say something? Was it the bat joke?"

I forced a small smile, but it didn't reach my eyes. "No, it's just... Hades."

Kael leaned back, crossing his arms, his expression thoughtful. "Ah, the big guy. Yeah, I figured as much."

There was a long pause, the silence hanging between us. I stared at the drawing in my lap, running my fingers over the crayon lines, trying to focus on the warmth it had given me earlier. But thoughts of Hades—his cold gaze, his sharp words—kept creeping in.

Kael sighed softly, then scooted closer to me on the bed. "You know, Hades... he's not an easy guy to read. Trust me, I've known him longer than anyone, and even I can't tell what's going on in that thick skull of his half the time."

I snorted softly, surprising myself again. "You're his Beta, though. You know him better than anyone."

Kael gave a half-shrug. "Sure, I know him. But Hades... well, he's like a fortress. The guy's built walls so high, even I can't scale them sometimes. But," he leaned in, dropping his voice conspiratorially, "I will say this: if you're stuck in his room, sharing a bed with him, that's more than just 'protection.' It might be Hades' way of showing he cares."

My cheeks heated but I raised an eyebrow. "By forcing me to stay here?"

Kael grinned. "Hey, no one said the guy was romantic. If Hades has a love language, it's probably 'acts of intimidation.' But I promise you, he doesn't let people into his space unless they matter." 5

I wanted to roll my eyes at Kael's attempt to cheer me up, but a small part of me wondered if he was right. Maybe there was more to Hades' cold exterior than I realised. Maybe he did care... in his own twisted way.

"You're trying too hard to make him sound less terrifying," I muttered, though the corners of my mouth twitched.

Kael chuckled. "Well, he is terrifying. But you, my lady, terrify him right back. And that's saying something."

I blinked, caught off guard. "I terrify him?"

Kael nodded solemnly. "Absolutely. You challenge him. You're not afraid to stand up to him, and he's not used to that. It rattles him." He gave me a cheeky smile. "Plus, you're way too beautiful for him. That's gotta mess with his head."



I blushed, flattered, but snorted again, but this time it was a real laugh. "You're ridiculous."

"Ridiculously charming, you mean." Kael winked. "But seriously, don't let him get to you. He's just trying to figure things out in his own way. And in the meantime, I'll be here to remind you that you're a superhero—cape and all."

I smiled, feeling the heaviness in my chest lift just a little. Kael had a way of lightening the mood, even when things felt overwhelming. For a brief moment, the tension I'd been carrying eased, and I allowed myself to enjoy the banter, the distraction.

"Thanks, Kael," I said quietly, meeting his eyes.

He gave me a soft smile, his usual playfulness tempered with sincerity. "Anytime, your highness. Anytime."

"Thank you too, Ellie," I told the boy.

He looked confused but nodded all the same. We laughed again.

Hades~

I heard the groan of the mouse as my grip tightened on it. I watched the footage in real

"And?" I raised a brow. "You came to tell me that?"

"It's something else, Your majesty," he came forward and flipped to a page on the sketch pad open. "I thought you might want to see this. This is her highness' property."

He placed the sketch pad on the table and I was ready to dismiss it but that was until I saw it. Saw her. Those eyes, the birthmark on the side of her mouth, even the earring on her ears. I touched the same one that now hung on my left ear. It was unmistakably her.

Danielle

The princess has never seen Danielle before. There was not a single picture of her in the tower anywhere that was located anywhere that she could see. So how had the princess drawn Danielle without having met or seen her? 4