



122 In Code

Before I could retort, his gaze flickered, something unreadable passing over his features as I steadied myself. The inhibitor was working—I could see it in the faint strain around his eyes, the subtle lag in his reflexes. **1**

But I was not foolish enough to believe that he was not extremely dangerous.

I shifted my weight, readying myself for his next move, when he blurred forward—still too fast. His hand snapped out, knuckles brushing the side of my neck in a swift, calculated strike.

I barely registered the impact before my legs buckled beneath me.

The world tilted, shadows bleeding into my vision. My breath hitched as numbness spread like ice through my veins, muscles refusing to cooperate.

"Wha..." The word caught in my throat, slurred and sluggish.

Before I could hit the ground, Hades caught me, one arm curling around my back while the other swept beneath my knees.



"Easy," he murmured, holding me effortlessly against his chest. His voice was a low vibration, distant and heavy, as though filtering through water. What had he done to me?

I blinked, struggling to focus, but his face blurred and shifted in the haze.

"You needed rest," he said, quieter now, as if he was the reasonable one. "You won't learn anything if you collapse halfway through training."

I tried to summon a glare, to shove him away, but even lifting my arm felt impossible.

"You cheated," I managed, the accusation breathless against his collarbone.

Hades' smirk ghosted across my skin, lips brushing my temple as he adjusted his grip. "I call it giving you fighting chance. There was no way you were going to ever win with how exhausted you were. You were on adrenaline."

I tried to open my mouth to disagree but my lips felt like lead.

The steps were soft as he carried my out of the ring, the darkness slowly laying claim to me.



My eyes fluttered open to the soft light of the morning filtering through the curtains

The smell of food drifted through the air—something warm and savory, like roasted meat and herbs. My stomach growled in response, and I groaned softly, shifting beneath the thick blanket someone had thrown over me.

I pushed myself upright, wincing as stiffness protested in my limbs. My memory was still hazy but one thing was sure... Hades. I could still feel his arms around me and his scent still lingered.

Movement near the far corner caught my attention.

Jules stood by the dresser, folding laundry with a look of deep concentration, her brow furrowed as if the fate of the world depended on perfectly creased towels.

"You know, you fold those any tighter, they might start bleeding," I rasped, voice hoarse from sleep. 1

Jules startled, spinning around so fast.

I bit my lip realizing what I had done. We had had a falling out and me joking with her was no longer expected or appropriate. She had

returned after Kael's interception asking what I wanted to say but when I had told her that I was not ready to spill, thing had changed.

If we were still friends in mind, we did not act like it. She did what she was hired for and nothing more. It was awkward and painful.

Jules' hands tightened around the towel she was folding, her knuckles whitening before she quickly smoothed the fabric out, regaining her composure. 2

For a second, the room felt too quiet, the air thick with the weight of unspoken things.

I forced a faint smile, even though it felt out of place now. "I didn't mean to—"

"You should eat," she interrupted gently, turning back to the dresser. "It's still warm."

And just like that, the conversation was over.

The distance between us wasn't something I could fix with a few careless jokes. Not anymore. 2

I sighed softly and swung my legs over the edge of the bed, the cool floor grounding me as I padded over to the table. The plate of food was simple—roasted meat, bread, and fruit—but it smelled like heaven, and I hadn't realized how



hungry I was until now.

Jules continued folding clothes, her movements brisk and precise, as if pretending I wasn't there made things easier.

It probably did.

I took a bite of the bread, chewing slowly as my gaze drifted to the window. The sun was already high, and I wondered how much of the day I'd lost.

"How long has Hades been gone?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

Jules hesitated just long enough for me to notice.

"He left as soon as I came."

I nodded, pushing a piece of fruit around my plate with my fork. "And Kael?"

"Out with him." But her voice strained with the reply.

I wondered why.

The silence stretched again, filling the room like thick fog.

I hated it.

"How are you feeling, your highness?" She asked.



Your highness

"I am well," I lied. I was spiralling and afraid. The early training sessions would be the only thing that kept me on check. Something that I could pour all my negative emotions into. Hades threats resonated in the forefront of my mind, heavy and deadly. I knew he meant every word. I would doom Silverpine and it would be all my fault.

Despite that, I had speak to Jules about what happened.

"Jules," I began carefully, glancing over my shoulder at her. "About the other day... I didn't mean to shut you out."

She didn't stop folding, but I saw the slight tension in her shoulders.

"I get it," she said after a moment. "You weren't ready to talk. I shouldn't have pushed." 1

"You didn't push," I countered, but she did. I don't know why I couldn't admit it to myself. I was afraid of what it meant. Maybe I was being paranoid. "You were just... there. And I appreciate that. I just—" 1

My voice caught, the words tangling before I

could untangle them.

Jules finally turned to face me, arms crossed loosely over her chest. "You don't have to explain. I know what it's like to need space. I just..." Her gaze dropped to the floor. "I guess I thought we'd moved past that."

So did I. 1

Her expression was carefully neutral but I could see the undertones of hurt she tried to hide.

I ran a hand through my hair, frustrated with myself more than anything.

"It's not you," I said quietly. "It's... everything else." It was so many things, so many people, lives, fates all cradled in the hands of this elaborate lie. All of it was dangling by the thread of this grand secret 1

As much as I wanted to let Jules in, the weight of the truth felt like a cage I couldn't escape.

Jules' eyes softened as I spoke, and for the first time in what felt like weeks, the tension in her expression eased.

"I get it," she said, her voice quieter now. "You've been carrying everything by yourself for too long." 3

She offered a small, genuine smile—not the polite, distant one she'd been wearing like armor. This one was softer, familiar.

It felt like sunlight breaking through the cracks.

I felt my chest loosen, and the weight of her understanding settled over me in the most unexpected way. Maybe she didn't need the full truth—just the assurance that I wasn't trying to push her away.

Jules grabbed the laundry basket, balancing it on her hip as she moved toward the door. "I'm here when you're ready. Even if you're not."

I almost thanked her, but the words caught in my throat as something tumbled free from the basket.

A book.

It hit the marble floor with a soft thud, flipping open as a thin stack of folded papers slipped from between its pages.

My breath caught instantly. *Skating On Thin Ice*.

I knew that book.

A hockey romance novel. One Jules had given me a while ago as a joke, after I made an offhand comment about needing something light to read.

But it wasn't the book that froze me.

It was the papers that slid from between the creased pages—old, but painfully familiar

My hand gripped the bed's head rest as I stared at them.

No.

Jules stilled, her eyes following my gaze before realization dawned.

She carefully set the laundry basket down, crouching to retrieve the papers, but I was faster.

I crossed the room in two strides and knelt, snatching them up before she could touch them.

Jules blinked in surprise, lips parting as if she was about to say something. But she didn't.

She didn't need to.

I unfolded the papers with trembling fingers, scanning the handwriting I hadn't seen in years.

My handwriting.

Old journal entries, hastily torn from a notebook. They were crinkled, worn from being read over and over. They detailed my nightmares, my fears and most horribly slivers of my trauma. My cell,



my imprisonment and my torture.

I had hidden them. Buried them beneath stacks of books and clothes.

But now... they were here.

Jules shifted beside me, hesitant. "I didn't mean to—"

"Where did you find this?" My voice was sharp, laced with something I couldn't quite hide.

Jules frowned, brushing a stray curl behind her ear. "I didn't find it. It was in your laundry weeks ago. I thought it was just an old bookmark you forgot about."

My pulse pounded in my ears.

"You kept it?"

Her expression flickered with uncertainty, but she met my gaze evenly. "I didn't know it was important. I just tucked it into the book so it wouldn't get lost." 1

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry.

This wasn't Jules' fault. She had no idea what those papers meant to me. 4

But seeing them again—the raw, unfiltered thoughts I had once written in the dead of night

—felt like staring at something I'd buried six feet deep, only to have it dragged into the light. My nightmares had reduced so stopped writing them and also because I could not afford anything being picked out from them. But I could not for the life of me destroy them. So I hide them.

"I'm sorry," Jules said softly, sensing the shift in my mood. "I didn't realize."

I shook my head, forcing myself to fold the papers carefully and slip them into the pocket of my sweatpants. "It's not your fault." My voice was shaky. 3

But I didn't meet her eyes.

Jules lingered for a moment, then stood, lifting the basket once more.

She hesitated at the doorway. "You can talk to me about whatever's in those pages, you know. I couldn't read them---and I would never have. You know---" 4

Of course she could never read them. I could be a dim wit, that much was sure, I was horrendously trusting but I was not careless in that way.



Jules was talking but I was not listening as my mind drifted back to the scrawled handwriting—lines and phrases that, to anyone else, would look like fragmented thoughts. Nonsensical. Disjointed.

But I knew better.

Because they weren't written in plain language.

They were written in code. ●

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