

24 Infuriating

Hades~ 1

The papers had been delivered for corresponding signing, and even with the pen in hand and the document before me, my mind wandered back to the princess.

Those damn eyes were seared into my memory like a brand, the open refusal to submit to me maddening. She should have accepted by now, yet she attempts to end herself instead.

Her laugh echoed in my head, the memory of that sound making my skin prickle. That smug bastard was right—she had managed to get under my thick skin. Nothing and no one should have been able to incite such a visceral reaction from me. I knew myself to be level-headed and calm, no matter the situation. But that damn woman...

She was too much of a coward to endure a little while of hardship. Yet the way she had put the gun to her head would not leave me. Her eyes had been filled with defiance, daring me to embrace my disdain and end her myself.

I ran my hand through my hair, my vision darkening. I had to keep myself in check before I lost it. My left eye began to sting. I pulled out the

third drawer and retrieved my pills. I swallowed the pills dry, feeling the bitterness coat my tongue.

I slammed the drawer closed, my hand flexing as if to crush something. I felt my fountain pen give way beneath the force of my grip. I threw the pen; it hit the wall, piercing it.

Damn her.

I got up from my seat, unable to remain sitting in the chaos that my mind had become. I pulled out a cigarette and lit it. I took a long drag and felt some tension leave me with a single breath.

It had been a while since I'd laughed like she had yesterday. Hollow, filled with nothing but anguish as I had held her bloodied body to myself. No tears had come—my body had none to provide—only laughter as her body grew colder and colder beneath my touch.

My jaw locked, the tension returning. I took another drag, letting my broad shoulders slump. I had been so damn close to pulling the trigger. So close to letting her head burst open from the impact of my bullet at point-blank range. But in the end, she would have won. In turn, Darius Valmont would have won too.

I puffed out a cloud of smoke, watching it swirl and dissipate into the air. The nicotine helped,

but only slightly. It couldn't quiet the storm inside me—the raging conflict between what I wanted to do and what I needed to do.

And that fight—her damn refusal to bend, to submit—made me want to break her all the more. Not just physically, but in every way that mattered. I wanted her to understand that resistance was futile. That there was no escape, no salvation. 1

"Your Majesty," a voice came over the intercom. I returned to my seat, pressing the button.

"Yes?"

"Her Highness, Lady Felicia, has arrived. She will be with you shortly."

"Of course."

She had not informed me of any visit she was going to make. After my brother's murder, now bereaved and with a new child he never got to see, she had completely relinquished her title and moved to another city. Now, she lived in the most expensive...

She did not knock before she entered, her eyes falling on me. She strutted up to my desk, her heels clicking on my marble floor.

"Welcome back, Felicia," I greeted, leaning back in my leather seat. "How has Eclipsion Bay been treating you?"

"It's been as you would expect," she replied, her tone indicating that wasn't what she was here for. "You found yourself a queen already." She was looking down at me, her green eyes assessing. Eyes like her sister's.

"Queen?" I took another drag, the word tasting like bile in my mouth. "I wouldn't go that far," I muttered, stubbing out the cigarette in the ashtray.

"Yet she lives in the Obsidian Tower," her voice thick with disdain. I didn't relate to her, but that was the front we had all agreed on. "Is this alliance really worth it?"

"Yes," I lied. "Peace is always worth it," I echoed the words of another man.

Felicia's eyes flashed as if she recalled who used to say those words. Then her lips curled into a humorless smile as she perched herself on the edge of my desk, leaning in slightly, her sharp green eyes never leaving mine. They narrowed, as though searching for the truth behind my words.

"Peace?" she scoffed, her voice a smooth, poisonous drawl. "Is that what you call this arrangement? I never thought I'd see the day when you, of all people, would resort to such... diplomacy."

I clenched my jaw, feeling the tension returning to my shoulders. "It's necessary," I replied, though even I could hear the hollowness in my tone.

Felicia chuckled darkly, pushing a strand of dark hair behind her ear. "Necessary, perhaps. But it's not in your nature, is it, Hades? You don't bend for anyone, least of all a Valmont. I know you too well. Not after what he did to us."

Her words should have stung, but they had no effect on me. Not when I was dead set on how this was going to unravel. As much as I hated having to go through this route, I needed the infuriating woman in my plans. But not everyone needed to know the truth. Especially not the former queen-turned-social-media-influencer.

"I hope she's locked in the room you have her in. I would not want to run into the mutt in my own home."

As if on cue, the door was pushed open, revealing a cascade of red hair.

"Honeymuffin," she pouted, running up to me like a child, her arms outstretched.

I blinked, not entirely sure what the hell was going on. Before I could react, she plopped herself onto my lap, grabbed my face, kissed me on the cheek, and wrapped her arms around my

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neck. "I missed you all day, babe. Do I have to wear Veronica's Secret lingerie before you spend time with me?" 3

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