



311 Fifteen Doses

Eve ¹

Elliot sat idle in the bath as I washed him. I'd added extra soap—enough to fill the room with bubbles so thick they could almost float—but he didn't react. Not even when one landed gently on his nose and popped.

He just stared into space.

His shoulders were hunched, eyes distant, lips parted ever so slightly like he was listening to something I couldn't hear. Or trying not to.

I knew what this was.

I knew what that monster said had done to him.

The Flux's voice didn't need to touch skin to leave a scar.

I gently splashed some water toward his chest. Just a little ripple to stir him.

Nothing.

So I scooped a handful of bubbles and slapped



them softly onto his shoulder. Then another—
onto his chin this time. Slowly shaping a frothy
white beard that curved around his small,
solemn face.

He blinked, startled, and looked at me like I'd
just done something... wrong.

His lips moved wordlessly, brows knitting, and
for a second I thought he was about to cry. The
air tightened in my lungs.

He's not used to this.

Not to play. Not to softness.

He tried to reach up to wipe the bubbles away,
but as his fingers fumbled against the foam, a
strange, choked noise escaped him—one that
made me freeze.

Not a cry.

Not a whimper.

It was—

A sound. Broken, wheezy—but sharp.

A laugh.



I blinked at him, startled.

He made it again. Brighter. Shorter. A clipped rush of air that might've been nothing to anyone else, but to me?

It was everything.

"Elliot..." I whispered.

He was laughing. 4

My chest stuttered, tears threatening for a whole new reason.

A real, honest-to-gods laugh—his laugh—burst out of him in another puff as he flung his hands through the water. Suds surged around him as he whirled his arms, bubbles catching the light and swirling like little moons.

Then he scooped a thick mass of bubbles, eyes gleaming now, and shaped them on top of his head—forming a lopsided hat.

He looked ridiculous.

And perfect.

I gasped. "Sir Elliot of the Bathtub Kingdom," I said dramatically, wiping fake tears from my



eyes. "You look positively regal." 2

He giggled silently and scooped up more bubbles, motioning toward me.

"You want me to wear one too?"

He nodded and leaned forward to crown me with a matching bubble hat and beard combo. I stayed very still as he shaped it, his tongue peeking out slightly in concentration.

When he was satisfied, he reached back and gave a sharp nod, like a general inspecting a soldier.

"You've got skills, little man."

He puffed his cheeks proudly.

I grabbed my phone from the sink with one hand, angling it carefully. "Alright, hold still."

Click.

The screen lit up with an image I hadn't known I needed.

Him. In a bath. Smiling.

Like the world hadn't broken him.



Like, for one moment, he could just be... a child.

I lowered the phone and met his gaze again, and in that moment, I silently vowed—

He would have more of these.

Little moments where he could be a child.

His hands began to move as he communicated with me.

"Photo with you," he signed, pointing to my phone.

My smile widened as I kindly obliged. We posed together, my hand coming up in a peace sign—it felt like a lifetime since I'd brought my hand up in that gesture.

He mimicked me, positioning himself shyly behind me as the camera clicked and captured the moment. 2

I went back to bathing him and rinsing him off before drying him up.

Dressing him for the day had just been completed when a knock on the door interrupted me—just as I helped him slip on his



sandals.

I rose with a sigh and made my way to the door.

"Who is it?" I asked, hoping it wasn't Hades coming to shatter the tranquil peace with the Flux.

"It's Kael," the voice at the other end was instantly alarming. It rang with dread—sharp, high, panicked.

I braced myself as I turned the knob and pulled the door back to let him in. But he did not step in, and one glance at his face—etched in fright—told me my fears were very warranted.

His eyes had grown to the size of saucers.

Kael's lips parted like he was about to speak, but instead—

He spat blood.

A thick splatter of crimson hit the floorboards, trailing from the corner of his mouth like a split wound. He swayed on his feet, body jerking with the effort to stay upright.

"Kael—!" I darted forward just as his knees



buckled.

Elliot cried out behind me, a strangled gasp more breath than sound, and I caught Kael before he could hit the ground.

His weight hit me like dead stone. His skin was ice.

"Hey—hey, breathe, breathe, I've got you," I murmured, lowering him slowly to the floor, bracing his shoulders. "What happened? What the hell happened?"

His eyes were unfocused, red-rimmed and glassy. "H-Hades..." he choked, clutching weakly at my forearm. "He's in the lower sector... the restricted lab..."

"What for?" My voice was already shaking. But I knew.

Gods, I knew.

"To inject more of it," Kael rasped. "The Vassir's Vein—he wants to take more."

"No." My heart slammed into my ribs. "No, no, no —after what just happened, after what the Flux did to Elliot, to me—he can't—"



"He's not him anymore," Kael cut in hoarsely. "I tried to stop him. I tried, Eve. But... it wasn't Hades who looked back at me."

I could feel myself shaking now. "How much?"

Kael opened his mouth, and for a moment I thought he'd lost consciousness—but then he whispered:

"All of it."

I stared.

"Fifteen doses."

The words echoed through me like a detonation.

My mind stalled.

"No," I said again, this time barely more than breath. "That's... that's suicide."

Kael gave a weak shake of his head, bloodied lips curling in something too bitter to be a smile. "It's worse than suicide, Eve. You don't understand."

Kael coughed again, and I felt the tremor in his frame. He was fighting to stay conscious, not for his sake—but mine.



"Hades won't survive it," he said, voice ragged. "Not his body. Not his mind. The Flux... it feeds on what Vassir's Vein weakens. If he takes all fifteen doses, it won't just burn through his nervous system or rot his organs."

"What then?" I demanded, already knowing the answer and praying I was wrong.

Kael's eyes met mine.

"It'll fuse with him. Fully. Permanently. There'll be no Hades left to exorcise. No mind to bring back. No soul to salvage. Just the Flux wearing his skin." 5