



463 Hollow Apologies

Kael 1

"You have to." Her blue eyes met mine, desperate and determined. "We both have to. Because the alternative—"

She didn't finish. She didn't have to.

The alternative was letting ourselves feel this, letting ourselves want this, only to have it ripped away when one or both of us died in the coming war.

I was being a selfish fuck.

I wanted it even if it had no future, even if one of us died and left the other aching for a life time. I watched how Danielle's death tortured Hades... yet the possibility of something was too much to ignore.

I wanted someone to hold as the world dimmed to an end.

I wanted it.

I wanted her.

I was being selfish. I knew it. But watching her struggle against the same pull I felt, seeing the



war between desire and self-preservation in her eyes—I couldn't walk away.

"I want it," I whispered, my voice rough. "Even knowing it might destroy us both. I want you." 1

Her breath caught, and for just a second, her resolve wavered. I could see it in the way her fingers curled against my chest, in how her body leaned infinitesimally closer despite everything she'd just said.

The space between us had shrunk to nothing. I could feel her breath on my lips, see the exact moment she stopped fighting.

I lowered my head, and she tilted her face up, and—

"KISS! KISS! KISS!" 1

The high-pitched chant echoed through the elevator shaft, and we both jerked apart like we'd been electrocuted.

My head whipped toward the open elevator doors—when had they opened?—and my brain tried to process the scene in front of me.

A little girl with honey-colored hair and caramel skin stood in the hallway, jumping up and down while pumping her fists in the air. "KISS! KISS!



KISS!" 1

Behind her, Hades stood frozen, his expression caught somewhere between absolute shock and horrified disbelief. His blue eyes were wide, mouth slightly open like he couldn't quite believe what he was witnessing.

And next to him, Eve had her hand pressed over her mouth, but I could see the knowing gleam in her turquoise eyes, the way the corners crinkled with barely suppressed laughter.

"Sophie, no—" Hades started, but the little girl was already running forward.

"You have to kiss her!" Sophie announced with the absolute certainty only a child could possess. She pointed at Thea, then at me. "Papa says when two people look at each other like that, they have to kiss! It's the rules!" 2

Thea had gone completely rigid against the elevator wall, her face cycling through about seventeen different shades of red. I was pretty sure I wasn't doing much better.

"Sophie," Hades tried again, finally finding his voice. "That's not—we don't just—" He ran a hand through his hair, looking completely out of his depth. "Eve, help me out here." 3



But Eve was grinning now, not even trying to hide it. "I don't know, Hades. The child makes a valid point." Her eyes met mine, sparkling with mischief. "They were looking at each other a certain way."

"You... are back," I muttered lamely.

Eve raised a brow. "You didn't notice?" She turned her attention to Thea, "Hello there..." walking in, she grabbed her hand easily.

Despite not wanted to let her go, I had to concede and watch Eve pull her away. 1

Ajax howled like he had been shot.

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath.

Eve

I watched her get cleaned up, Sophie still looking curious at her.

Her shoulders stood tense against her frame, as she made sure not to make I contact with me through the mirror.

I understood her, in a strange pack, behind her stood the woman her sister had been killed in replacement of. Looking at me must have been



unnerving and painful for her, knowing I was not her Lily.

"Thank you," she murmured, limping back towards the door.

"Wait," I called after all and watched her freeze.

I took quiet steps towards her and rounded her so I could stand directly in front of her.

"I never got the chance," I said. "To give my condolences."

She didn't raise her head, her neck stiff as she stared hard at the ground.

I took a tentative step towards hers. "I am sorry..." The words were hollow, meaningless in the face of everything she had lost.

"I am no different from the thousands who have lost everything thanks to your fa---" she caught herself. "I am no different, I just happen to be alive to live the aftermath of the loss. And I plan to keep it that way." Her words came out monotone. "Thank you for your grace."

Guilt doused me like cold water. "You have no need for that. Do not minimize your pain by generalizing it."



Her jaw clenched, and for just a moment, I saw the fracture lines appear in her careful composure. Her hands shook, her breath caught, and her eyes—those blue eyes filled with a grief so raw it made my chest ache.

But then she straightened, and the walls slammed back into place with almost audible force.

"The memo," she said, her voice flat and professional. "Dr. Maya sent it an hour ago. The presentation is scheduled for eight o'clock in the conference hall. We'll need your blood samples beforehand—both yours and the Alpha's. The composite requires fresh material for the final demonstration."

"Thea—"

"The council members have been notified. Montague, Silas, Gallinti—they'll all be there. We have preliminary results that should address most of their concerns about structural integrity and—"

"Thea, stop."

She did, but she still wouldn't look at me. Sophie had gone quiet in the corner, watching with a child's uncanny ability to sense when adults



were struggling with something heavy.

I stepped closer, close enough that she'd have to acknowledge me. "You don't have to do this. You don't have to be strong every second. Not here. Not with me."

"I'm fine," she whispered, but her voice cracked on the word.

"You're not. And that's okay."

For a long moment, she said nothing. Then, so quietly I almost missed it: "If I stop being fine, if I let myself feel it all... I won't be able to function. And people need me to function. The composite, the domes, the civilians who might actually survive because of what we're building—they need me to keep going."

"They need you alive and whole," I corrected gently. "Not running on empty until you break."

Her laugh was bitter, broken. "I've been running on empty since the day they killed her. This is just... more of the same."

My heart clenched. This woman—this brilliant, broken woman—had been holding herself together with spit and determination, and now the universe had thrown her a mate bond she



couldn't accept because she was too afraid of losing one more thing.

"The moon," she whispered suddenly, and her eyes finally met mine. There were tears there, threatening to spill. "They say when the moon takes something away, she gives us something else. A balance. A mercy."

"Thea..."

"She took my sister." Her voice was barely audible. "Took my family, my home, everything I knew. And then she—" Her breath hitched. "She gave me him. Kael. This... this bond that I can't—that we can't—"

The tears finally fell, tracking down her cheeks in silent streams.

"How is that mercy?" she asked, and the question was directed at me but also at the universe itself. "How is it fair to give me something I want so desperately when I know—when we both know—it's going to be ripped away in six weeks? When he's probably going to die and leave me with nothing but another grave to mourn?"

I reached out slowly, carefully, and took her hand. She didn't pull away this time.



"Maybe," I said softly, "the mercy isn't in the guarantee of forever. Maybe it's in the choice. You can choose to have nothing and feel nothing and survive alone. Or you can choose to have something—even if it's brief, even if it hurts—and know that for however long you had it, it was real."

"I can't lose him," she whispered. "I can't survive losing someone else I—" She stopped, unable to say the word.

"Want," I finished for her, and watched her face crumple. "You want him. Even though you've only known him days. Even though it's impossible and complicated and terrifying. The moon doesn't ask permission, Thea. She just... gives."

Thea's knees buckled slightly, and I guided her to sit on the edge of the bathroom counter. Sophie, bless her, quietly slipped out of the room, somehow knowing this was a moment that needed privacy.

"What do I do?" Thea asked, and she sounded so young, so lost. "How do I choose between protecting myself and... and..."

"Living," I said. "That's what you're really asking."



How do you choose between existing safely in numbness or living fully and risking everything."

She nodded, tears still streaming.

"I can't answer that for you," I admitted. "But I can tell you this—I almost lost Hades. Multiple times. And every single time, my only regret was the moments I wasted being afraid instead of loving him." I squeezed her hand. "Six weeks might be all you get. Or you might both survive and have fifty years. But either way, don't you want to know what it feels like? To be loved by your mate? To love him back?"

"It's going to destroy me," she whispered.

"Maybe," I agreed. "But maybe being destroyed by love is better than being destroyed by regret."

She was quiet for a long moment, processing. Then, in a voice barely above a whisper: "He almost kissed me. In the elevator. And I wanted —" Her breath caught. "I wanted him to. So much it scared me."

"So let him," I said simply. "After the presentation, after the work is done for the day—let him kiss you. Let yourself have one moment of something good before the world ends."



She looked at me then, really looked at me, and I saw Lily in her expression—the same fierce determination mixed with desperate hope.

"One moment," she repeated, testing the words. "And then what?"

"Then you figure it out together," I said. "One moment at a time. That's all any of us can do."

Thea nodded slowly, wiping at her tears with shaking hands. "The presentation is in thirty minutes. I should—I need to—"

"Go," I said gently. "But Thea? After it's done, after you've saved the world with your brilliant mind—go find him. Let the moon's gift be a gift, even if it's temporary."

She stood, straightening her lab coat, and for just a second, I saw a flash of something in her eyes that looked like hope.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Luna."

"Eve," I corrected. "Just Eve."

She nodded and limped toward the door. 4

