

53 "Sorry."

Eve~ 1

I painted all day, trying to drown out the dull ache in my chest. Each stroke of the brush was an attempt to forget the heaviness, but it clung to me, relentless. Yesterday, after the kiss, I had painted to escape too. A rough, hurried work—emerald green eyes that had haunted me throughout the night.

Now, I stood in front of another canvas, letting my emotions spill onto it. My brush moved in wide arcs, creating a stormy sky—dark clouds clashing against one another, lightning threatening to split them apart. As I stepped back to examine it, a chill ran down my spine. The painting wasn't just a reflection of my feelings; it reminded me of him. Of Hades.

The stormy sky mirrored his brooding nature, the cold distance that always hung between us. His silver eyes often shifted like that, from a calm gray to the stormy hue of a sky about to unleash chaos. They had that look today when he'd reminded me where we stood—trapped in this hollow marriage, bound by an alliance but separated by a vast emotional gulf. He didn't have to say anything. His eyes said it all. It gutted me again.

I clenched the brush tighter, my agitation rising. I didn't want to think about him, didn't want him creeping into my thoughts even when I was trying to escape. I tossed the brush, frustrated. I love painting, but this was beginning to drive me mad.

At least, he would stop torturing me for a crime my father committed. He had promised, and he had been true to his word by giving me a canvas and letting me visit an art gallery. Yet, I felt like I had been whipped all the same. I needed to get myself together.

Those dark, dreary years behind bars had made me crave kindness and warmth. And he had given me that, but we were not friends. We could never be friends—or more...

But his words as we danced at the gala echoed in my head. *Let's just say I am a bit intrigued by you.*

I shook my head to toss away the memory. He had been teasing me, to put me at ease. That was all it had been. Now, I feel like ending things all the time, and my nightmares had been plagued by something other than horror. Him...

Suddenly, I heard a soft sound, like paper being slipped across the floor. I turned toward the door, my brows crinkling. A folded piece of paper had been passed through the gap at the

bottom of the door.

I hesitated but eventually made my way to the paper and picked it up. Unfolding it with a bit of trepidation, my breath caught in my throat.

It was a drawing... of me. My turquoise eyes stared back at me from the page, created by mixing shades of blue and green, imperfect but tenderly drawn. The lines were shaky, uneven, as if sketched by a small hand. In the corner, written in wobbly, childlike handwriting, was a single word:

"Sorry."

I opened the door to see no one. He couldn't have gotten far, especially if he was alone. I walked down the hall; I hadn't heard the elevator's ding, so it meant he was using the stairs.

When I got to the stairs and looked down, I caught him. His small form was walking as fast as he could, almost waddling like a penguin. My mood lightened immediately.

"Elliot," I called.

He froze like he had been caught breaking into a bank safe. He didn't look up at me. I smiled and went down the stairs toward him, where he still stood frozen in place. I heard beeping, and it got louder the closer I got to him. I finally reached

him, trying not to scare him.

"Elliot?" I said gently.

I didn't want to force him, so I would give him a chance. "Hello?"

He slowly turned to face me, the beeping growing louder. When he looked up, my smile widened—then it faded fast, and my heart seized in my chest. Around his neck was a beeping device, and the beeping and flashing red light increased in frequency.

On instinct, I tore it from his neck, breaking a nail, but the pain didn't register. I tossed it down the stairs, not sure if anything would happen. Immediately, I pulled him to the ground and shielded his small body with mine. My heart was in my throat, my blood frozen in my veins.

One beat.

Two beats.

Three beats.

There was nothing. I hesitantly got up just as the explosion hit.

The blast thundered through the stairwell, a violent force that sent a hailstorm of debris crashing down around us. My ears rang as the ground shook beneath me, and I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder as something heavy slammed

into me. I collapsed to my knees, gasping, my head pounding and blood trickling down into my eyes, blurring my vision.

"Elliot!" I cried, turning to find him sprawled on the ground, unconscious, his small body lifeless under the rubble. My heart seized in my chest. He wasn't moving.

Ignoring the pain radiating through my body, I pushed myself up, adrenaline surging through my veins. I stumbled over to him, my limbs trembling as I reached out and cradled him in my arms. My head throbbed, and every breath felt like fire, but I couldn't stop. I couldn't leave him here.

"Come on, Elliot," I whispered, more to myself than to him, as I hoisted his limp form against my chest. My muscles screamed in protest, and my vision wavered as the blood dripped down, but I gritted my teeth and forced myself to keep moving. Each step up the stairs felt like an eternity, every breath labored, but I couldn't stop.

Through the thickening smoke and dust, I finally reached the landing. My legs were shaking violently, my mind barely holding on to consciousness. I staggered forward, dragging Elliot's weight with me, when suddenly I heard a soft ding—the elevator. 3

I froze, my heart hammering as I saw the doors slide open. Figures stepped out, silhouettes obscured by the haze of smoke. My instincts screamed at me to move, to run, but I was too exhausted, too battered. My legs gave way beneath me, and I collapsed to the ground, clutching Elliot to me.

Before everything went dark, I heard voices—sharp and urgent—rushing toward us. Then the world faded into blackness.

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