

149 Intertwined

Hades 1

Screams tore from the researchers all around the lab like this was nothing they had ever seen before—it was probably worse. 1

The movement of the black fluid was coordinated and precise as it all but lunged forward. Towards me. I always knew that the corruption had a mind of its own, but I did not think that it had reached this extent; it was aware of me.

The researchers scattered, including Dr. Cohen, beakers and distillers falling and breaking as they clamored for safety. The lab was suddenly a cacophony, but I stayed rooted in place as it crept closer and closer.

The tips of my fingers tingled, the hair rising on my neck. I felt a vibration pass through me, confused at first until I finally broke eye contact with the approaching black fluid and raised the isolated Fenrir's Marker.

The pinkish substance was bubbling, vibrating with such intensity that, just like the black blood, its reinforced glass containment was fractured.

The pink fluid thrashed, webs of cracks spreading throughout the glass as the vibration turned almost violent.

I raised my eyes; black blood was less than a yard away. Suddenly, there was another crack, and the glass broke, causing some of the researchers to yelp.

My eyes widened into saucers as the Fenrir's Marker poured out of the wounded containment and did not spread, but instead rose into the air, straight for the incoming black blood.

"What in the Tenth Pantheon..." a researcher whispered, as if speaking louder would draw the fluid to her.

The fluids did not crash or mix. No, it was more bizarre than that.

They seemed to wind around each other, intertwining like they were embracing each other in midair. I clutched my chest as I watched in awe.

My heart pounded. This wasn't chaos. This was deliberate. Calculated.

And yet, for all my logic, I couldn't look away.

This wasn't natural. The two substances should



have annihilated each other on contact—or merged into something far worse. But they didn't. They moved with purpose, deliberate and coordinated. Like predators circling, or worse... like old lovers reunited.

I blinked, forcing myself to look away from the hypnotic display. My heart slammed against my ribs, but I shoved the awe down, burying it beneath instinct and control. 2

Focus.

"Container. Now." My voice snapped through the chaos, sharper than the breaking glass around us.

A researcher flinched, her wide eyes darting to me before she stumbled back into motion. "Y-yes, sir!" She fumbled through the cluttered workstation, shoving aside shards of glass and shattered equipment.

The fluids remained suspended, coiled around each other in midair, moving in slow, deliberate motions. They didn't fight. They didn't merge. They simply... existed together.

Strange.

The researcher returned, breathless, clutching a

reinforced containment unit. I snatched it from her hands without a word.

I moved carefully, but I didn't need to.

As I brought the container closer, the entwined fluids drifted toward it on their own, as if they wanted to be contained. No resistance. No erratic movements. Just a slow, almost reverent descent.

They settled at the bottom of the unit, still swirling around each other like a quiet storm, content.

My grip tightened on the container.

They didn't fear being sealed away.

They welcomed it.

I didn't like that.

"Seal it. Triple lock." My tone left no room for argument.

The researcher hesitated. "Sir, should we—"

"Do it."

She scrambled to obey.

I stared at the fluids, still spiraling lazily inside the container, and for the first time in a long

while, a cold weight settled in my gut. 3

Dr. Cohen finally came out of his hiding place. When I turned to him, we exchanged a knowing look.

"I might have a hypothesis..." There was a tremor in his voice, and his hand shook as he adjusted his glasses.

"Me as well," I murmured.

"Another LSI test will be underway as soon as possible," he said, wiping his forehead.

"But this time, with my black flux blood and Ellen's blood," I gave words to what we both were thinking.

"Exactly." He let out a sigh, his skin was still pale from the fright. "This... this could be the answer we have been looking for. The Fenrir's Marker was reactive, but for it to..." He trailed off, still in so much awe that he did not know what to say.

"In my fifty decades, I have never witnessed something so... so impossibly alive," Dr. Cohen finished, his voice barely above a whisper. 3

The word hung in the air, heavier than the broken glass at our feet.

Alive.



I stared at the containment unit in my hands. The two fluids continued their slow, deliberate spiral, neither fusing nor repelling, locked in a delicate dance. There was intelligence in their movement—an unspoken agreement between them.

No. Not intelligence. Instinct.

And instinct had drawn them to each other. Instinct so strong that they broke through the safety of their containment. No hesitation, no fear that they would not be able to meet each other. They leapt for each other.

Something cold and sharp pressed against my ribs.

Dr. Cohen's hand trembled as he adjusted his glasses again, smearing them with sweat.

"Hades... if this is what I think it is... if the Marker is bonding with the corruption—"

"It's not just bonding," I cut in, my voice low but firm. "It's recognizing."

Cohen's breath hitched. "Recognizing?"

I set the container down on the nearest reinforced platform, careful and deliberate.

"They're not fighting. They're not merging.



They're circling each other. Testing. Understanding." I leaned in slightly, narrowing my eyes. "Like two halves of the same whole." Like they have known each other once before.

Cohen paled. "You think the corruption and the Marker... were meant to coexist?"

I didn't answer. Because the truth was—I didn't know. I might be wrong.

But something inside me churned at the thought.

"If this is true..." Cohen trailed off, swallowing hard. "Then Fenrir's Marker isn't just a stabilizer. It's a missing piece. That should not be possible. There is no relation between them, Vampiric Essence of Vassir and the blessed twin's Fenrir's Marker." 1

Of course, it was outlandish, but here they were interacting. It was dawning on me that there was still much more to be unraveled about the substances. What I had been injected with and the Marker that Ellen possessed. Much, much more. 2

She could be the key.

And the wrong key in the wrong lock could break more than it opens.

"Prepare the LSI test," I said, sharper now. "Use my black flux blood and Ellen's. But this time, I want full environmental control. No more surprises."

"Yes, sir." Cohen's voice was faint but resolute.

I turned my gaze back to the container. The swirling fluids seemed to slow, as if they were listening. Watching.

Waiting.

My jaw tightened.

Whatever this was, we had just opened a door.

And something on the other side had noticed.

Suddenly, the door of the laboratory was slammed open, and in walked the last person I would have expected at this time.

"Ambassador Montegue," I greeted.

He was a slight man. It had not always been that way until Danielle's death. Yet despite his frame, his eyes remained sharp and filled with a hostility that was perpetually cast at me. This time was no different. 1

To any other person, his expression would have been unreadable, but I could see right through



his calm exterior. He was not the type to ever make a scene in a bid to humiliate a person, including the person he hated.

"Your Majesty," I could hear the hiss in his voice. "We need to have a discussion."

I eyed my former father-in-law before nodding. "Of course."

One could have heard a pin drop in my office as he showed me the image on his device. "What is this, Hades?"

I looked stared down at the image of me, on my knees in front of Ellen, it had obviously been taken during our date. I signed deeply. "I am kneeling it would seem," I murmured.

"Before a werewolf, before the daughter of the bastard that took my child." He seethed. "Or have you conveniently forgotten?" 4

Not everything is as it seems.

I tilted my head, studying the image again. Me, on my knees before Ellen. To anyone else, it was damning. Weakness. Submission. To him, it was betrayal.

But that was the point.

"Tell me, Ambassador," I said slowly, voice smooth as ice, "do you truly believe I would kneel without purpose?"

Montegue's eyes narrowed, a flicker of hesitation breaking through his mask of fury.

"You think me a fool?" he hissed. "That I would not see this for what it is? You kneel before the daughter of Darius the very man who destroyed my family. My daughter. My grandson. And now you parade around with his spawn as if it means nothing!"

I let his words hang in the air, heavy and venomous.

"Nothing is ever without purpose," I murmured, steepling my fingers. "What you see in that image... is exactly what I wanted to be seen."

Montegue's lip curled. "Cryptic words from a man too cowardly to admit his disgrace."

"No," I corrected, my voice sharpening like a blade. "Calculated words. You know me better than to think I'd fall victim to sentimentality. That woman—" I let the word drag, "—is far more than Darius' daughter. She's the key to ending him." 1

His eyes burned, a silver of doubt. "I know you loved Dany. But if you fail her, if you betray her for the blood of her killer. You will never know where her body is. I will take that right from you." 5

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Hades 1

I blew out a puff of smoke as she entered. For the first time, she did not look nervous as she bowed slightly.

"Good afternoon, Your Majesty," she greeted. Her hair was held in a severe bun, and in her hand was a stack of papers and oddly---a mirror?

I raised my brow, wondering what that was all about. "Jules, are you ready for the report?" I asked. I normally did not ask such unnecessary questions. But today would be her last day as Ellen's maid and my spy. Everything I needed would soon fall into my hands anyway. She had been successful in her mission, and it was time to cut her loose.

She nodded. "Of course, Your Majesty," she replied evenly. Her expression was taut but composed as she came forward and opened the first file in front of me.

They appeared to be photocopied diary entries. But the words were not distinguishable, nor did they make much sense. They were an array of jargon written in an intelligent manner. 1

"Codes," I mused.

Jules inclined her head. "Hidden entries, written by Princess Ellen. I attempted to decode them, but the cipher was beyond me. That is... until I did this."

She lifted the mirror and carefully angled it against the page.

The distorted text wavered, reshaping itself in the glass. Yet only one word emerged, clear and deliberate.

Ellen.

The name stared back at me, stark against the chaos of symbols.

Ellen.

Ellen.

Ellen.

I leaned forward, studying it in silence.

Why would she write like this?

My mind turned over the possibilities. Trauma could fracture the mind, yes—but this? Referring to herself in the third person, hiding her own thoughts behind layers of code?

Was this just the Hollowing eating away at her sanity? Or something more?

I said nothing. Let Jules talk.

She straightened, sensing my quiet command.

"My assumption is that she's hiding something monumental. Something that required... this level of complexity." Jules hesitated for half a breath.

"Something she couldn't risk anyone finding."

Interesting.

I sat back slowly, fingers tapping against the armrest.

If Ellen had buried something this deeply, it wasn't mere paranoia. It was fear.

Fear of what?

Or worse—fear of who?

I didn't let any of that show.

"Continue," I said.

Let's see how deep this hole goes.

Jules didn't falter. She carefully turned the next page, revealing another photocopied entry. The same indecipherable scrawl stared back at me—



jagged lines of chaotic symbols that meant nothing.

She lifted the mirror again, angling it slowly against the page.

Ellen.

The name bled through the reflection, stark and deliberate.

Another page.

Ellen.

And again.

Ellen.

No other words revealed themselves. No hidden messages. Just that single name. Over and over.

I leaned forward, the weight of it settling in my chest.

Only her name.

"This isn't just some cryptic journal," Jules murmured, her tone measured. "I've examined every page. No matter how I mirror it, shift it, or analyze the structure... only this word appears. Ellen."

I said nothing, letting the silence press down on

her.

She tapped lightly on the page, careful but deliberate. "It's... strange. The way it's used. It's scattered, but intentional. Almost like she's writing about someone else entirely. Not herself."

I didn't react, but her words stirred something in me.

Jules glanced up briefly, gauging my expression before continuing, her voice cautious. "It could be a coping mechanism. A way to separate from her trauma. Or..." She hesitated, choosing her next words with care. "Or it might suggest that Ellen... isn't exactly who she appears to be."

I stilled, the cigar burning low between my fingers.

Dangerous ground.

Yet she was smart enough not to overstep.

Jules straightened slightly, smoothing the papers. "Of course, that's only speculation. It could be nothing more than a fractured mind. Stress. The Hollowing."

Diplomatic. Careful. But the suggestion was planted.

Not who she appears to be.

I leaned back slowly, exhaling smoke into the still air.

If Ellen was hiding something, it wasn't just fear.

It was identity. At least, that was what Jules was claiming.

"Continue," I said, my voice low.

Jules's fingers tightened slightly on the edge of the papers, her composure firm but not unshaken. She hesitated for a moment before speaking, her tone carefully measured.

"There was something else," she began, eyes briefly flicking to mine. "An incident I didn't think much of at the time, but now... it feels relevant."

I said nothing, watching her carefully.

"Sometime ago," she continued, slower now, "I found Princess Ellen collapsed in her room. Alone. Unconscious." She paused, her gaze distant, her lips thinning—probably recalling what happened to her when I caught her hovering over Ellen. "At first, I thought it was a panic attack. But then... she started murmuring."

I raised a brow, just slightly.

"And?"

Jules's grip on the papers tightened. "She was crying, barely coherent, and she kept whispering one name."

Her eyes met mine.

"Ellen."

Silence.

I stared at her, waiting for more.

"You're saying she was calling for herself?" My tone was flat, unimpressed.

"I thought so too." Jules's voice remained steady. "But it didn't make sense. Not in that state. Not like that."

I leaned back, exhaling a slow breath of smoke.

"So now you think she was calling for someone else," I mused, letting a hint of skepticism lace my words.

Jules didn't waver. "It's possible."

I let the silence stretch, studying her carefully.

Possible.

Or convenient.

I turned my attention back to the mirrored text

on the pages.

Ellen.

Over and over.

Interesting, yes. But not conclusive.

"Speculation doesn't serve me, Jules," I said coolly, tapping ash into the tray. "People whisper nonsense in their sleep. Trauma, fever, exhaustion. The mind is fragile."

Jules didn't flinch. "Of course, Your Majesty. But combined with the coded entries, it could mean —"

"It could mean nothing," I cut in smoothly, though not unkindly. "Or it could mean she's losing her grip. You said it yourself—could." 2

Her lips pressed into a thin line. Not defiance. Restraint.

I leaned forward slightly, just enough to let my next words settle.

"You're paid for facts, Jules. Not theories."

A pause.

But still...

It was curious.

I leaned back again, smoke curling between us.

Jules's gaze didn't waver, but there was something sharper in it now, like she was holding back a final piece of the puzzle.

"When I confronted her about it," she continued, voice steady but quieter, "I deliberately used the wrong name. I called her Ellie instead of Ellen." 1

That caught my attention.

"And?" I prompted, leaning forward slightly.

Jules hesitated, then pressed on. "Her entire demeanor shifted. Instantly. The tension in her shoulders eased, her breathing steadied. It was like... relief washed over her."

Relief.

Not confusion. Not correction.

Relief.

That was interesting.

But not proof. 3

I leaned back, letting the smoke from my cigar trail upward.

"A convenient reaction. Perhaps she was too tired to correct you. Or maybe she didn't care

to."

Jules shook her head, subtle but firm. "No. It was instinctive. Reflexive. Not the kind of relief you show when someone forgets your name."

I didn't speak, letting her words settle.

Her eyes hardened slightly, as if weighing whether to speak the thought aloud.

Then she did.

"She's not Ellen Valmont." 4

The statement hung in the air, heavier than anything she had said before.

I let the silence stretch.

And then I chuckled—low, quiet, and humorless.

Bold.

"That's a dangerous claim, Jules," I said smoothly, though the edge in my voice was unmistakable.

Jules didn't back down. "It's the only one that makes sense."

I studied her carefully, weighing her conviction.

Not Ellen Valmont.

It was absurd. Ridiculous.

And yet...

The codes. The mirror. The name repeated over and over. The relief at a different name.

It gnawed at me, threading its way through my thoughts.

Still, I wasn't ready to give weight to baseless theories. Not when I was so damn close to the power I could taste. Her blood bore the Fenrir's Marker, so it made no sense that she wasn't the blessed twin—Ellen Valmont. No other werewolf or Lycan that had been sent had a doppelgänger with such properties, and the other twin, the cursed one, Eve Valmont, was long dead and buried. She was the only other whose blood could hold such power. 2

Shield or sword.

"Speculation is a poor substitute for evidence," I said, flicking ash into the tray. "I don't deal in suspicions. Especially with something like this."

Jules's jaw tightened for the briefest moment, but she schooled her expression before it could betray her. Her grip on the edge of the papers remained steady, though her knuckles whitened slightly. She was holding herself back.

But not for long.

"Your Majesty," she began carefully, her tone calm but threaded with quiet urgency, "you know better than anyone what Princess Ellen Valmont was like."

I didn't respond. I wanted to see where she was going with this.

Jules pressed on, her voice steady despite the tension in her shoulders. "The real Ellen was a tyrant. Ruthless. She shed blood as easily as one spills milk. Servants feared her. Soldiers followed her because they had to, not because they respected her. She was cruelty itself, killing without hesitation." 5

She leaned forward just slightly, her eyes locked onto mine.

"But the woman wearing her face now?" Jules's voice softened, though it carried more weight. "She would take a bullet for someone else. She's the epitome of kindness. She flinches at raised voices. She helps the staff without being asked. She protected me. A common runt." 1

Her eyes narrowed, sharp but not disrespectful. "Does that sound like Ellen Valmont to you?"



I didn't move.

Her words scratched at something deep in my mind.

Ellen Valmont. The tyrant. The spoiled, cruel heir.

Yet the woman standing in her place now was... soft. Compassionate. Weak.

No, not weak.

Kind.

Too kind.

But kindness wasn't evidence.

"People change," I said slowly, my voice cool.

"Trauma makes them softer. Or harder. Fear can mold anyone into something unrecognizable."

Jules didn't flinch. "Not this much. Not this drastically."

She was walking a fine line, but she wasn't wrong.

Still, it wasn't enough.

"You're basing this on personality shifts and coded diary entries," I said flatly. "That's thin reasoning, Jules. Dangerously thin."

Her lips parted, frustration flickering behind her composed expression.

But she caught herself.

"Then consider this," she said, softer now but more cutting. "If she's truly Ellen Valmont, why does she need to hide behind coded messages no one can read? Why does she call for herself in her sleep?"

The room felt heavier.

"And if I'm wrong," she added carefully, "then it costs us nothing to look deeper."

I leaned back, letting the smoke curl between us.

"You're willing to gamble your life on this theory?" I asked, my voice like steel.

Jules didn't blink.

"I already am."

Bold.

But conviction wasn't proof.

I studied her for a long moment.

A slow smirk tugged at the corner of my mouth.

Bold, indeed.

For the first time I saw something beyond the

obedient informant in Jules. Something sharper.

"You've got teeth after all," I murmured, my tone carrying a rare edge of approval.

Jules didn't react, but the flicker in her eyes told me she caught it.

I leaned forward, extinguishing the cigar in the ashtray with a soft hiss.

"But boldness isn't enough," I continued, reaching into the drawer beside me. The wood creaked as I pulled out a slim black folder. I placed it on the desk with deliberate care, sliding it across the polished surface toward her.

"Do you know what this is?"

Jules's gaze dropped to the folder, cautious but curious.

She didn't answer.

I tapped the folder once with a single finger. 2

"Proof," I said simply.

She hesitated, then opened it.

Inside, crisp white sheets bore the cold, clinical markings of a genetic report.

Her eyes scanned the page, and I watched as she

pieced it together.

SUBJECT: Ellen Valmont

PATERNITY MATCH: Darius Valmont – 99.9%

Jules's breath caught for a moment.

I leaned back, watching her carefully.

"That test was conducted weeks ago," I said smoothly. "Blood doesn't lie. Ellen Valmont is the legitimate daughter of Darius Valmont. The only surviving heir." ●

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