267 A Sound?

Hades 1

Elliot had fallen asleep before I even realized it.

Somewhere between the cautious silence and the low hum of the ceiling vent, his little body had slumped against my chest, the tension in his spine slowly uncoiling until he was just... still.

Peaceful.

Like a child again.

I hadn't meant to stay so long. But when I'd lifted him to wash his face, he'd clung tighter, nestling against me with that same quiet insistence I'd seen earlier. A wordless request.

Don't leave.

So I hadn't.

Now I sat on the edge of the sleek, navy-upholstered couch in the room he shared with Felicia, one hand still curled protectively around his small form. His head rested on my shoulder, his breathing soft and even against my neck. My cold skin did not seem to bother him now. The faintest smell of clung to him-pear blossom, probably from whatever had been used to wash his clothes with. It reminded me of a nursery I once built but never filled.

I brushed a hand over the back of his hair and exhaled through my nose.

Something in me had cracked.

Not shattered-but cracked wide enough to bleed.

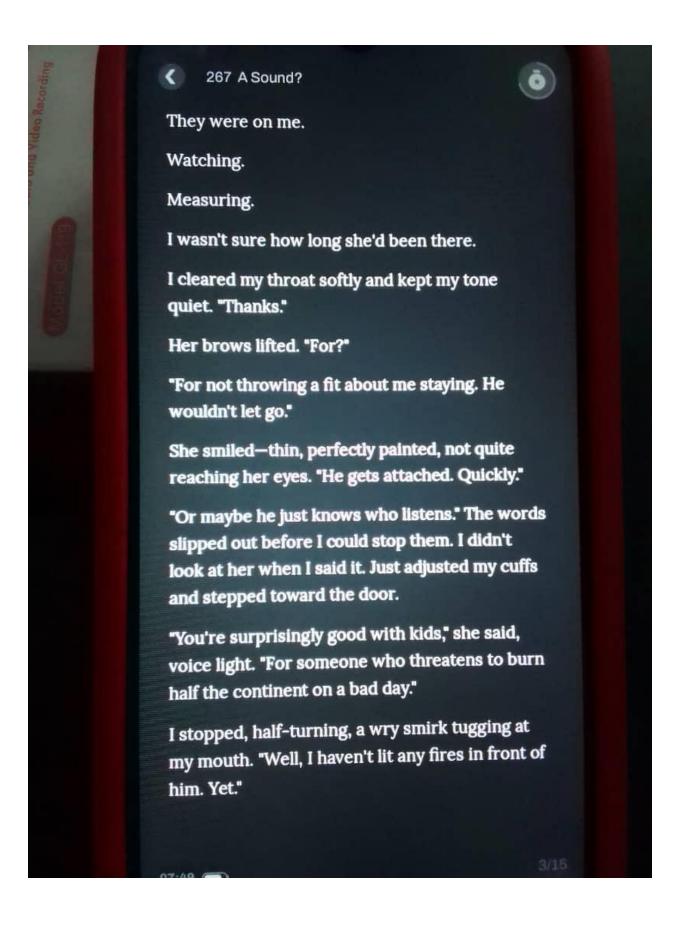
I shifted slightly, careful not to jostle him as I laid him down against the plush mattress. He whimpered once, but I pressed a hand to his chest and murmured something low-nonsense, really—and he settled.

Only when I was sure he was fully asleep did I stand.

Straightened.

And turn.

Felicia sat in the armchair by the door, legs crossed, a tablet balanced loosely on her lap, though her eyes weren't on the screen.



Felicia chuckled, but I could hear the sharpness beneath it. "Let's keep it that way."

I nodded. "He's special." I found myself saying without thought. I had distanced myself from the child that survived the massacre, grief filling my heart too much to feel relief that the child that was not mine had survived.

The situation had been made more complex when it seemed like I was drawn to the child. It had been instinctual, from the moment I heard him cry out for the first time.

I had taken some distance then, guilt and grief melding together, wishing that my brother's son was mine. Wishing he would become what was left of Danielle but it was me being selfish.

When I met the boy again, all he feelings of possessiveness that had seemed to make breathing hard had dissolved, faded away like they had never existed. He was my nephew and I, an uncle.

But maybe Eve's disproven words that made the feelings return, even just a little bit.

Felicia posture stiffened—just slightly. "He's



And she was not wrong.

"I understand," I simply said.

"So...tell me what are your plans for her," Felicia whispered her voice carrying a conspirorial egde.

I let my thoughts settle a little.

There had been a development from the memory card she had found. Some truth that the Silverpine pack or who ever set encryption wanted Eve to know. One that Eve had not unlocked before it was found.

I bit my tongue on that one, keeping it to myself.

"Extracts will be begin soon. In the next 72 hours." I replied. "My team will begin harvesting her markers." (3)

Felicia's lips curled ever so slightly, and for a moment, she looked satisfied. "Good," she said softly. "I assume you'll keep me updated on the progress?"

I didn't answer immediately. I only glanced back at her, my jaw working for a second before I said, "There will be a recovery window between each

