



292 Persuasion

Eve ¹

Cain didn't move.

Didn't blink.

Didn't even breathe.

But for the first time since he entered the room, he looked... stunned. Not impressed. Not amused. Just stunned.

Good.

Because I wasn't done.

"You really thought that was your trump card?" I spat, my breath hot against his cheek. "That dragging Jules' death out like some sick puppet show would somehow twist the knife enough to make me turn?"

I let go of his lapels, shoved him backward, hard enough that he staggered one step.

"You picked the wrong corpse, Stravos," I snapped. "Because that—" I jabbed a finger



toward him, shaking with rage, "—was the stupidest shit you've ever tried. And I've heard you talk before."

His expression tightened. Just a fraction. Enough.

"Your brother put on the same show," I continued, voice rising now. "The cruelty dressed as mercy. The control wrapped in affection. The obsession painted as protection. You all think you're playing some kind of divine chess game."

I stepped forward, fire licking beneath my skin, Rhea pulsing right beneath my ribs.

"But here's the truth, Cain. Just because your father was supposed wear a fucking rubber but didn't doesn't make you any less of a Stravos." 5

That silenced him. 2

Rook stiffened in the corner, probably trying not to laugh, cough, or die. 1

Cain's mouth opened slightly, but nothing came out. Nothing smug. Nothing poised.

A thin line of blood slid from Cain's nose, stark



against the sharp planes of his face.

He didn't wipe it.

Didn't flinch.

Instead, that goddamned smile crept up like it had been waiting all along—slow, feral, reverent.

"Fuck..." he whispered, breathless. 5

His pupils were blown wide now, a flush blooming across his cheekbones like he'd just been kissed by the very chaos he'd tried to control.

"No wonder," he murmured, gaze fixed on me like I'd just stepped into some sacred myth. "No wonder you had my baby brother twirling around your little finger."

He pulled away, adjusting the lapels of his suit like I hadn't just slapped the taste out of his mouth and dismantled whatever script he'd come in here rehearsing. His fingers moved slow, precise, as though savoring the moment.

His eyes didn't leave me.

Not once.



Up. Down. Up again.

Like he was memorizing this version of me—the one burning alive in front of him.

"You're magnificent," Cain said, almost to himself. "Utterly... ruined. Deadly."

He exhaled a low laugh, running his tongue along his teeth like he could still taste the defiance on the air.

Cain's smile didn't falter as he straightened his suit, fingers brushing over invisible dust, though the blood still trailed lazily from one nostril. He looked every bit the devil in the details—sharp, cold, and unbothered by pain that would make lesser men blink.

"I'm not here to offer a partnership," he said at last, tone silken, low, dangerous.

I blinked. "What?"

"I'm offering allegiance."

The word hit me harder than his presence ever had.

For a moment, I stared, stunned into stillness.



Allegiance?

"That makes no sense," I snapped, stepping back instinctively. "You don't offer allegiance. Not to me. You're Cain Stavros. I'm the exiled daughter of a traitorous bloodline—an accused monster, in case you forgot. If we were to work together, it would be as equals, not under some royal vow. That would be a partnership. A strategy. Mutually beneficial. That's it."

I gestured sharply between us. "You bow to no one. Especially not to the girl from the other side of the damn war." 1

"Perhaps," he said, voice smooth but not mocking. "But not all thrones are made of marble. And not all rulers wear crowns."

I froze.

He stepped forward—not to intimidate, not this time—but with a strange reverence in his eyes, a weight that felt... raw. Unfiltered.

"You don't see it," Cain said. "But I do. Hell, I've seen it since that dinner table. Since I was told you stared down the Hand of Death."



My breath caught. I didn't like where this was going. Too soft. Too real.

"You're not just a threat, princess," he said quietly. "You're a symbol."

I stiffened.

He raised his hands, placating. "Not in the way they twist in propaganda reels and palace reports. Not some prophesied martyr or pawn to dress the revolution with."

Cain's voice dropped to something almost reverent. "You're someone who survived every way power tried to break you—and still walk into rooms like this and remind us all that you are not for sale. That you don't kneel." 1

He tilted his head, gaze still glued to me.

"And that," he whispered, "is exactly the kind of creature I'd rather kneel beside... than ever try to stand above."

The silence that followed wasn't empty.

It rang.

It reverberated like a struck chord, vibrating in



my bones.

Rhea stirred faintly again, not growling this time
—but watching.

Cain didn't smile now.

He looked serious.

Dead serious.

And for once... I didn't know what to say.

I didn't look away.

I didn't blink.

Because I knew what this was.

His words were wrapped in gold-trimmed
vellum, inked in reverence and revolution—but
beneath it, I could still smell what they were:
strategy, manipulation, sweetly spoken poison
dressed in prophecy and prose. A trap disguised
as devotion. A net made of flattery and flawless
timing.

The kind of thing that might have made my head
swell if I was stupid enough to believe any of it.

But I wasn't stupid.



And I wasn't swayed.

At least... not completely.

Because the truth was—I did need someone.

I wasn't foolish enough to deny it. Not anymore.

I was a beggar, not a chooser, standing at the edge of a storm, with no allies, no army, and nowhere left to go.

And maybe fate—cruel, twisting fate—had brought me here for a reason.

Still, I kept my spine straight, my stare sharp, and let my silence drag long enough to make him uncomfortable.

Then:

"Persuade me," I said finally.

His brow ticked—surprised, perhaps, that I hadn't thrown another punch.

I didn't elaborate. I didn't need to. Because if Cain Stavros really wanted to kneel beside me—and not just plant a knife in my back while he did it—he'd find the words.



And if he couldn't?

Then I'd burn this alliance to ash before it ever had the chance to grow.

Rhea rumbled low and approving somewhere inside me.

We were listening.

He smirked, revealing one of his fangs. "Did Hades ever tell you about the Obsidian Council?"

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