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Hades 1

The chill entered my bones, making every cell and organ prickle with the cold. Wrapping my arms tighter around myself again, I shivered, waiting in the oppressive darkness that seemed capable of swallowing light.

I tried not to open my eyes, scared I would see the faces of the monsters. Cain always checked under my bed for them but never found them. I understood why now—it was because this was where they really were all along. 1

I swallowed, but it was painful. My throat was dry, my stomach growled. I let myself wonder about food. My tummy had not stopped rumbling. I wanted pie and pudding. My mouth watered thinking of the big platter of food I would get if I passed this test that Dad gave me. 3

I would sleep in my soft bed again—the floor was too uncomfortable; it made my bones ache. I would play with Nox again. I hoped someone fed him while I was away.



I turned, folding into myself, hoping the pain would go quickly.

Then footfall—and light—filtered through my eyelids.

I snapped up just as the heavy metal door slammed. My heart jumped into my throat because I knew it was Dad.

It was in the way his footsteps were intentional. Like he counted each step the way I did when I was playing that game with Cain.

I opened my eyes, the light harsh, making them water. "Daddy," I greeted, like I did when I was younger.

He held a lamp in one hand and something else I couldn't see in the other. He looked a little big—but not too big.

"Hades," he finally spoke, but his voice was scary. The hairs on my body rose.

Confusion came first before fear. "Who is Hades?" I asked.

"It has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?" he replied, in a way that told me it wasn't really a question. It



had a nice ring to Dad, so it had to.

My stomach rumbled again as I nodded. "Yes, it does, Dad. It's a nice name."

I couldn't see his face, but I knew Dad was smiling the way he did—only one side of his mouth, which made it a little frightening.

I sat there, waiting, eyes up. But he said nothing, and it was becoming too hard to breathe. "Dad... did I pass the test? Am I strong now?"

Dad didn't say anything. But I knew he was watching.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, ignoring my question.

It hurt when he did that, but at the mention of food, I perked up. "Yes, Dad," I told him, a little too quickly.

"I brought you food," he said.

My head leapt for joy. Maybe that was what he was holding in his other hand—the thing I couldn't see.

"Really?" I asked, trying to get up, but my legs



buckled. I was too weak. I had been here for a while.

"Yes," he said, smiling wider now. "It's your favorite."

Dread crawled up my spine. Peach pie was not shaped like the thing in his hand. And I knew the smell of Chef Hildegard's peach pie. It didn't smell like this.

Dad took a step closer.

"Don't you want to see what I brought?"

I hesitated despite my hunger but nodded all the same. "Yes, Dad."

He came closer now, taking all the space between us with his long legs. He crouched down, dropping the thing he was holding. Then he took a step back.

I gasped when I took in the lump on the ground. Fur. Legs. Floppy ears. Sad, tired eyes that made my stomach sink.

My voice was weak, trembling. "Nox?" I whispered his name.



In response, he let out a little bark that didn't sound like him. I moved toward my favorite friend, picked him up, petting him the way he liked. He whimpered in response, snuggling closer to my chest.

Tears filled my eyes.

Then a clank spooked me. My eyes followed the sound only to find a little knife on the ground.

My eyes snapped to my father—something horrible dawning on me.

But the light was already receding. Dad was leaving.

And his parting words chilled me not just to my bones, but straight to my marrow. Words colder than the black room.

"Enjoy your meal, son." 3

The darkness returned. This time, I knew where the monsters lived—and why Cain never found them.

Eve



The council was quiet, the room saturated in a thick cloud of tension.

When it seemed like the silence would never dissipate, I finally spoke up.

"He will be incapacitated until we can find something that can be done."

Silas's eyes met mine—burning, scalding.

"You cannot be that delusional, Princess," he said, his voice venom.

"That thing has killed every man, every child, every animal that it has infected. I guess Hades wasn't as invincible as Lucas would have liked."

Gallinti, emboldened, spoke next.

"It was a matter of time. A delayed fate—sped up by you."

Under the scorn was something worse.
Resignation.

"So this pack has no Alpha."

He laughed to himself.

Montegue spoke up.



He didn't raise his voice.

But when he spoke, the temperature dropped.

"The Alpha is not dead," Montegue said coldly.

"Not yet."

The laughter stopped.

Even Gallinti's sneer froze.

Montegue's eyes—like forged iron—swept across the room, landing on Silas last.

"Hades has carried the Flux longer than any of us realized. Carried it. Fought it. Contained it. That monster you saw wasn't the first time it tried to break free."

He tapped the side of his head.

"It's been whispering to him for years."

Silas scoffed.

"So we're applauding him now? For delaying his own damnation? For letting it take him?"

"No," Montegue said flatly. "We're preparing to take him back."



A stunned silence followed.

"You don't pull someone back from that," Gallinti said after a beat. "Not when the soul's that far gone. That cocoon isn't some coma—it's a tomb."

Montegue's jaw flexed.

"Then we tear the tomb open. We get him out."

I could feel every eye shift to me. Like they were waiting for me to deny it. To admit defeat. To say the quiet, hopeless truth.

But I didn't.

Because Montegue wasn't finished.

"But first," he said, voice deepening, hardening,

"we remove Vassir." 4
