335 Dying Hope

Eve 1

I jumped off Cerberus before he'd even stopped moving.

The stone beneath my paws was wet—slick with something thick and metallic—and the air stank of blood, scorched magic, and raw grief. My chest heaved as I stumbled forward, half-shifted, limbs jerking between wolf and woman as I pushed through the dark.

> "Hades—"

My voice broke.

Another sound answered me. A groan. Ragged. Human. Choked with pain.

He was alive.

I didn't wait. I didn't think.

I ran.

The Black Room pulsed around me like a dying heart. The walls bled memory—old and recent,

layered in cracks and screaming sigils that twisted when I passed. The air grew colder. Heavy with anguish, soaked with suffering.

And louder.

The Marker was coming.

Not just in tremors now.

Not just in hums.

It howled.

Like something ancient being reborn through fire and fury.

Like a promise made by the gods—fulfilled in ruin.

The walls behind me split with white-hot veins, spilling light that wasn't light. A howl tore through the corridor—Cerberus, snarling back at the surge. Holding it off.

For me.

> "Hold on," I whispered, half to him, half to Hades, sprinting toward the sound that had no path—only instinct.

His scent hit me first.

Burned leather. Ash. Salt. Blood. So much blood.

I turned a corner and saw him.

Collapsed in the center of the chamber, writhing on the floor like something caught between deaths. Veins blackened with Flux still marred his arms, twisting through skin like poison roots. His eyes were shut, his face gaunt, mouth clenched.

But it was him.

"Hades!"

I shifted mid-stride, fur retreating into skin, claws receding. My knees hit the stone hard as I skidded beside him, grabbing his face.

His skin burned beneath my hands.

> "I'm here. I'm here, I found you—"

His eyes fluttered open. Red. Glazed. But focused. On me.

But not with relief.

Not even confusion.

With threat.

With pure, sharpened suspicion.

> "You're not one of mine," he said, voice cold as iron.

His gaze swept over my face—mechanical, assessing, like he was cataloguing the shape of my skull for weakness. Then it dropped to my neck. My mouth. He leaned in, nostrils flaring.

> "No fangs," he muttered. "You're not Lycan."

He recoiled slightly, and his lips curled back—not in pain. In disgust.

> "You're werewolf." His hand twitched. "Valmont sent you."

I blinked, stunned.

> "No—Hades, it's me. It's Eve. I—"

But he was already moving.

His fist slammed into my ribcage, knocking the air from my lungs before I could shift or brace. My body flew back, crashing into the wall with a dull crack. I barely had time to groan before his weight followed. He was on me in an instant, a

knee pressed to my sternum, pinning me like prey. 2

> "Tell me the truth," he hissed, his claws hovering just above my eye. "How deep are you in their ranks? Who taught you how to mimic her voice?"

I gasped, blood in my mouth.

> "I'm not a spy—"

> "Don't lie to me!"

His hand closed around my throat. The pressure wasn't hesitant. It was practiced.

He'd done this before.

> "You think I don't know what they're doing? Sending ghosts. Faces I used to love. You think I haven't seen it?"

His voice cracked.

And still, he didn't loosen his grip.

I clawed at his wrist, not to hurt him—but to hold on. The air thinned. My vision doubled.

> "You're not real," he whispered, more to

himself than to me. "She's dead. You're another trick."

Then came the claws.

Drawn. Aimed. Ready to end me.

But I caught him.

Barely.

My hand shot up, curling around the side of his face. Warm skin. Familiar bones. I leaned in, gasping.

> "I'm real," I croaked. "I am not Elysia. I am Eve. And I came back for you."

Something flickered.

Brief. A crack in his expression.

But the Marker's roar interrupted before it could bloom.

It screamed through the Black Room like judgment incarnate, and Hades snapped his head toward the sound, breathing hard, trembling now—not with rage. With fear.

> "What is that?" he muttered, eyes wide, the

madness flickering into clarity.

> "The end," I whispered. "Unless you remember me. Unless you let me bring you out."

He hesitated.

But the claws stayed where they were.

And time was running out.

Hades' claws didn't lower.

Instead, his expression shifted—slowly, unnervingly.

The suspicion in his eyes gave way to something darker. Colder. A quiet, awful resolve.

> "So this is it," he said lowly, more to himself than to me. "The first test. After the infection."

His eyes gleamed red, like burning coals deep in a collapsed hearth.

> "You're not a spy." His tone flattened. "You're a trial."

Before I could speak, he shoved me back and rose.

Not staggered.

Not broken.

Steady. Controlled.

But something about his movements was wrong. Like his mind was splintering with each step— flashes of someone else bleeding into him. His arms flexed as if remembering shackles. His mouth twitched as if tasting blood that wasn't his.

And then—he changed.

Not fully, not a shift, but a rupture.

Veins darkened again, spreading like lightning under skin. A surge of corrupted power burst from him, slamming into the walls and splitting the stone. I barely shielded myself in time.

>"Come on, then," he barked. "You're not here to save me. You're here to break me. So break me!"

He launched forward.

I didn't move.

The hit landed across my jaw, sharp and jarring, and I hit the floor hard.

But I didn't retaliate.

> "Hades," I said through blood and grit. "You're sick. You've been sick a long time."

Another hit—this time to my side. I cried out but didn't block it.

> "Fight me!" he roared. "Stop talking to me like I'm still yours!"

His voice cracked. Not from strain. From something buried too deep to hold.

> "I'm not weak," he snarled, lifting me by the throat again. "I don't need your mercy. I don't need anyone's mercy. Let my father send his ghosts. I'll kill them all!"

> "I'm not here to kill you," I rasped. "I'm not here to test you—"

He slammed me back into the wall.

> "Then why are you here?"

> "Because I love you!" 1

It slipped out.

Too raw. Too real.

His entire body jerked.

The claws loosened. 1

Only for a breath. His face contorted into pure hatred. "Liar!" He lunged at me.

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