



364 Rendezvous

Hades 1

We hit the clearing outside the sub-bays, scent trails tangled in the chaos of burnt oil, blood, and ash—but then...

Nothing.

The trail stopped.

Dead.

I dropped to one knee, dragging claws across the concrete where the blood ended. A few more splatters... a scuff mark... then silence. Emptiness.

Like they vanished into air.

"Scan the perimeter again," I growled, voice low and lethal. "Drones. Thermal. Energy displacement. I want the entire sector mapped."

"Yes, Alpha!" the Gamma team scrambled into motion.

I stood slowly, breath catching in my throat as I



stared into the tree line beyond the wall. They were gone. But not far. They couldn't be.

Unless...

Unless they planned this long ago.

And this was a route we never knew existed.

My hand slammed into the nearest wall with a crack of splintering stone.

They had Kael.

And I had nothing.

I turned back to the Gammas. "We widen the net. I want every mole tunnel, every spillway, every old trade duct sealed and checked. Silverpine operatives don't just disappear."

"Sir—"

"NOW!" I roared.

"Right away!"

But then—

"Easy, luci,"

That voice.



I turned slowly.

Cain.

He was leaning casually against the wall just beyond the guard post, arms folded, expression unreadable. His cloak fluttered slightly in the breeze, but he hadn't even broken a sweat.

"What are you doing here?" I snarled.

"I've been waiting for you," Cain replied, pushing off the wall. "Took you long enough. I expected you'd be faster."

"I don't have time for your games."

"Good. Because this isn't one."

He stepped forward, eyes hard now. "You think they just waltzed out through a hallway and vanished? No. This was orchestrated. And you'll need more than brute force and a half-panicked command team if you want to find Felicia. Or Kael. If they're even still within the borders."

I clenched my jaw.

Cain leaned in just slightly, lowering his voice. "I have men stationed underground. Places even



your Gamma eyes can't see. Smugglers. Couriers. Runners. They know the arteries of Obsidian better than anyone—because they built them. Used them."

"You're admitting you've been running illegal ops under my watch?"

"I'm saying," Cain said with a smirk, "that you should thank the gods I did. How else do you think we got medical stock, Flux suppressants, and intel out without your glorious Council pissing themselves every time a crate crossed the gate?"

I stared at him, every instinct telling me to shove him into the dirt and run alone.

But Kael was out there.

And Cain...

Cain had always been good at finding the rot in the walls.

I exhaled sharply. "What do you want?"

"Nothing. I want Kael back too."

He paused. "He's my friend." Then another pause



before the bastard began to chuckle.

My face darkened, jaw ticking.

"Too much?" He asked, unapologetic. Not like his contrition would mean shit to me. "Stop frowning you look constipated." Some of his humor fell. "It's Kael. Eve's brother from another mother. And we have a deal. I am still her ally. Her problem is my brother."

The way he said her name made my stomach turn.

Cain straightened. "Let me help. My men are already moving. We'll sweep the veins beneath the capital. If they're still in Obsidian, we'll find them."

I didn't nod.

Didn't thank him.

Just looked at him.

"Then go," I said. "But if this is a trick—"

Cain scoffed. "You'll gut me? Burn me? Please, brother. Save it. If I wanted your throne, I would've taken it when you were still sleeping



beside her."

Cain smirked as he started to turn, but then paused, glancing at me sideways.

"We're brothers, after all," he said, voice lighter. "Even if you keep pretending we're not."

I didn't answer.

Didn't flinch.

Didn't blink.

His gaze lingered for a beat. The grin twitched back onto his lips, this time with something wry beneath it.

"You know," he added, strolling a few steps ahead, "if you stop acting like a jackass for five whole minutes and help me coordinate this sweep, I'll even swipe some of that honey fig pudding from the kitchen for you."

My jaw tightened.

Cain kept walking, clearly amused with himself. "Just like old times. Before you grew fangs for breakfast and forgot how to laugh."

"I didn't forget," I muttered under my breath,



already signaling the nearest Gamma Captain to reroute forces toward the city's sub-vein exits.

Cain's ear twitched. He heard that.

He grinned wider, hands in his coat pockets as he fell into step beside me.

"Good," he said. "Means I don't have to start spoon-feeding you pudding to remember you're still human underneath all that brooding Lycantitan rage."

I gave him a glare so sharp it could cleave a continent.

He didn't care.

Didn't blink.

Just walked beside me like we hadn't nearly ripped each other's throats out a dozen times before.

And I let him.

Because Kael was still out there.

And Cain, for all his sins, had always known how to find ghosts in the dark.



Even if he left a trail of hell behind him doing it.

We pressed deeper into the tunnels.

We searched until there was nothing left to search.

Ducts that hadn't seen daylight in decades.
Storage rooms sealed before my reign. Routes
only whispered about by the old guards.

Still nothing.

The trail had evaporated—like breath on glass.
Like Kael, Felicia, and whoever else aided them
had never existed in the first place.

I stood at the edge of the central split in the
tunnel system, the stone beneath my claws slick
with condensation, the air thick with frustration
and failure. My Gammas lingered behind me—
silent, disciplined, waiting for orders that never
came. Their armor was scratched, soaked, their
brows low with exhaustion. Still, they waited.

Across the way, another echo rose—a new
rhythm.



Cain's.

He emerged like he always did—unhurried, confident, shadowed by his men who bore no insignia but moved with lethal purpose. Rogues, smugglers, former operatives from the underbelly of Obsidian's darkest days. They flanked him in silence, and when Cain stopped, so did they—just beyond the break where our units didn't quite meet.

Two Alphas.

Two armies.

And no answers.

Cain leaned a shoulder against the wall and tossed something—maybe a crushed stim cap—into the dust. His eyes met mine across the divide.

"They're gone," he said flatly. "No trace. No heat. No noise. No debris. Nothing in the eastern veins, the bone tunnels, or the flux line caches. I even checked the crawlspace under Sector Thirteen—the one that isn't supposed to exist."

My silence was answer enough.



He stepped forward. "This wasn't a retreat."

I tilted my head, eyes narrowing. "Then what was it?" 2

Cain's jaw worked for a second. Then he looked at me—not as a rival. Not as the bastard who nearly fractured our bloodline.

But as someone who had seen this before.

"It's what we used to call an Apology," he said, voice quiet but weighted. "From the old days. When an underworld op went too perfect—when everything was wiped so clean it made no sense... that's what we called it."

I frowned. "A code?"

He nodded. "An Apology is when someone—inside—sets the board. Seals the pieces. And folds the entire operation into a shadow so seamless it feels like a vanishing act. No wreckage. No pattern. No trail. Just an absence so perfect it has to be intentional."

I stared at him.

And something in my gut turned.



"That's why it's called an Apology," he added, voice low. "Because the traitor always regrets it... but too late. It's a message to the ones left behind: I had to do this. Forgive me."

I turned from him, my breath slowing.

An Apology.

Something orchestrated from the inside.

A traitor with the keys to the kingdom.

Not just any traitor.

I swallowed.

My Gammas stood behind me in formation—
silent, steady, loyal.

Cain's rogues stood behind him, looser, but no
less dangerous. Some leaned against walls.
Others adjusted weapons I didn't recognize. But
all watched me.

Both forces were waiting—for a command. A
direction. A purpose.

I stared down at the stone between us.

And then I said it.



"Felicia."

Cain didn't move. Just nodded once, slow and certain.

I took a breath, the realization crashing through me in pieces.

She knew the Tower better than most. Had the access. The blood. The trust. She'd walked these halls with her head bowed and her secrets sealed, and we—I—had let her.

"She had help," I muttered.

"More than help," Cain said. "She had a base."

I looked up at him, dread churning behind my sternum. "Where?"

Cain hesitated, then gave a half-shrug, like he couldn't believe it either.

"She's a Montegue."

My stomach sank.

"She still has their estate."

I turned fully now. "The manor?"



Cain nodded. "It's old. Half-forgotten. Remote enough to be discreet, fortified enough to be dangerous. And big enough to hide an entire war council in its cellar. It's not listed in the Obsidian records because Montegue was too arrogant to register his holdings. He wanted his home to be his, not the Council's. I bet Felicia kept it that way."

A slow, searing rage rose in my chest.

How many times had I walked that path?

How many times had I stood at that manor's edge, thinking it was nothing more than a relic?

She had been ten steps ahead the whole time.

I looked over my shoulder—first to my Gammas, then to Cain's men.

Two flanks of warriors.

Opposite loyalties.

Same blood-soaked purpose.

"Then we ride," I said.

Cain gave a crooked grin. "Thought you'd never say it." 2

