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Hades 1

"It was Lucinda," Kael's voice reached me. It hit like a thunderclap. The ground beneath seemed to hold me still. 1

I didn't turn. My chaos-ridden mind was already churning with the implication of his statement. I didn't want to ask what he meant. That it was Montegue's wife.

"It wasn't a man that tried to take Elliot. It wasn't anybody from Silverpine, or that Goddess-forsaken facility." His words came out in a rush, as if slowing down would make him lose the nerve to speak. "It was Lucinda. I ripped off her mask."

Laughter bubbled up from my throat. It felt foreign. And so, so wrong. Just when I had started to believe the sky had already fallen, the stars decided to implode as well. Every nerve lit up with a simmering fury that made the fine hairs on my neck stand up. Every breath burned, scalding my insides, until all that remained was a



shapeless mass of wrath and disbelief.

Lucinda.

Like daughter, like mother, it seemed. I had let her hold my child. Embrace my wife. But in the end...

We had let an enemy into our ranks. And it had been during a high-stakes battle of wills and centuries-old animosity.

Something cracked. Maybe it was the dirt beneath my boots. Maybe it was my ribs, after my heart crashed against them. Or maybe...

It was the last delicate thread tying me to sanity.

I didn't glance back. I simply walked away, even as I felt their eyes boring into me.

Each step felt heavy. I moved like I weighed a ton. The hiding place was deeper than I expected, and before long, the others' voices faded into a distant hum.

My jaw ticked as I clenched my fist. I slammed it into the wall. Rocks and dirt came loose. It didn't stop me. My second fist followed.



Then a third.

Then a fourth.

Pain bloomed, sharp and immediate. Skin split. Knuckles tore open. The sting grounded me, but it wasn't enough.

I needed it to hurt more.

I needed something to break that wasn't already inside me.

The wall trembled, but I didn't. I shattered.

My breath came in ragged bursts. Every inhale scraped down my throat like broken glass. The darkness of the tunnel wrapped itself around me. Silent. Watching. Listening.

Kael was dying, and I was too much of a coward to watch my oldest friend rot into an empty shell. No more of his loud laughter. No more sly humor. No more of the kind of loyalty only Kael could offer.

Even after all these years, I don't regret taking his place in my father's twisted plan. I would do it again. Every cruel word I ever threw at him played on a loop in my head like a haunted



record. Every unjustified insult slid another dagger through my ribs.

Agony and anger curled around my throat. It was a noose, a vice tightening with every breath.

I slammed my head against the jagged wall of the cave, again and again, letting the blinding pain drown out the torment that wanted to eat me whole.

I willed it to take everything away. The suffocating feeling of hopelessness, as time slipped through my fingers like oil.

The scream stayed locked in my throat. It refused to come out, no matter how hard I bit my tongue or clenched my jaw.

Blood dripped down my temple, joining the crimson trails on my knuckles. My pulse throbbed at the base of my skull. Pain radiated, hot and bright. But even that couldn't reach the hollow place swelling in my chest.

Kael. The world, in its cruel wisdom, had decided to take him.

He was too good for it anyway. Still, that didn't



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make it any less wrong. It was injustice. He had given his blood, sweat, and tears to his position. To be by my side. He had no time for himself. No time to finally become the comedian he always wanted to be. No time to love. To adopt four kids with the woman he adored. To grow old. To bury me like he always joked he would, just to have the final word.

I had taken his time and energy. Possessed them like I deserved it. Even he saw Eve's innocence long before I could begin to fathom it. And now... that same noble man was the one dying.

A growl escaped me, the vibration shattering the space, threading its chaotic tendrils through the stone and earth.

My stomach clenched as I stilled.

Was that?

My eyes darted around the place I found myself in. Goosebumps spread across my skin. Cerberus crooked his heads because he felt it too. It was distinct. Unmistakable.

The echo from the cave was...



I let out another growl, tentative, experimental...

And the result was the same.

The cave was hollow. Deeply. Like only a thin layer of earth divided us from a massive chasm beneath.

A low rumble crawled up the walls.

My breath caught.

Cerberus let out a sharp growl, three heads rising in unison, ears pivoting. He felt it. The shift. The pulse beneath the stone.

I took a step forward, and the ground sighed under my boot.

"Kael," I whispered, shutting my eyes.

The chaos in my chest quieted for a single breath. I reached—not with my hands—but with the tether between us. It was faint, like the final note of a dying song, but it was there.

A heartbeat.

Kael's.

Slow. Weak. But alive.



"He's still breathing."

Cerberus snarled again, snapping at shadows that hadn't moved. The rumble deepened, a groan from the earth's throat.

The distant tumble reached a crescendo, and I was already mid-run, shifting as the sound of snapping bones melted into the growl of the earth. Something was coming. The cave was either collapsing with my injured best friend in its belly, or...

We were not alone.

Either of those odds would be disastrous.

In a snap, I was back where the men were. Back where Kael still lay. All eyes turned to me, wide and expectant. Apprehension flickered in many, if not all.

My voice came in a single, panicked command.

"We have to leave. Now."

Cain's expression turned ghostly, but no one had the time to move a muscle before the mouth of the cavern slammed shut with a deafening, earth-splitting roar.

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We were sealed in.

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