



## 386 Survivors

HADES 1

I let her feed me—because she would not give me any other chance. Or maybe it was because I had a soft spot for her... because she reminded me of Elliot.

He was still waiting at home for me to bring back his uncle Kael.

The plate was empty in no time, and I had to admit—it had been more than just a little palatable.

As soon as the last piece of bread was gone, the door swung open and I let Cerberus take over immediately, ready to pounce.

Sage's reaction was nothing but annoyance, laced with a scolding.

"You shouldn't shift so quickly after eating. You'll end up with an upset tummy."

A woman stepped in. She was middle-aged, brown eyes glinting with amusement.



"Sage, thanks for the good work, but aren't you being too hard on the Alpha of Obsidian?"

Sage leapt off the bed and straight into her waiting arms.

"He was nice enough." The little girl tapped her chest, pride blooming through her smile. "My heart is still in my chest."

The older woman laughed. The scar that ran from her cheek to her jaw and extended to her throat left a jagged trail like lightning frozen in flesh. It twisted when she smiled, but there was warmth in it.

The kind that said she'd seen hell and still chose to be kind.

"You must be starving if you let a child feed you," she said, setting Sage down gently. "Either that, or desperate." 1

I didn't respond immediately. Cerberus was still beneath the surface, teeth just shy of showing, breath slow and calculating.

But he receded as Sage wrapped her arms around the woman's waist and whispered



something in her ear.

The woman turned back to me.

"I'm called Maera. I'm sure you want to see your friends... especially the one Wolfsbane almost killed." 1

That made my shoulders stiffen.

"Yes..."

I didn't get to finish before she smiled and turned toward the door.

"Follow me."

And with that, she simply stepped out.

"But you might want to shift back. Not everyone here is as open as Sage to interacting with a Lycan." Her voice turned serious, just before it could have drifted out of earshot.

"Some were conscripted. They do not take kindly to your kind."

I glanced down at myself.

Regret bubbled up despite the more urgent issues at hand.



I had a full belly. No poison in the food. I was alive. And I was being promised that my men were too.

Maybe a leap of faith...

Maybe a leap of faith was overdue.

With a deep breath, I let Cerberus slip beneath the surface.

The blackened claws retracted, bones shifting and sinew snapping in reverse as I took my human form once more.

The cold of the cell kissed bare skin, but I didn't shiver.

I wasn't sure I could anymore.

I followed Maera and Sage through a series of tight, winding corridors.

The stronghold had none of the grandeur of Obsidian Tower, nor the clinical aura of the fortress Sage had called the Cauterium. No runes etched into silver to trap me or weaken me into submission.

Just stone. Shadows. And silence.





It was well built—that was sure.

The way my footsteps echoed back to me told me the structure had integrity.

It smelled of salt, blood, and old war.

Sage walked ahead with a skip in her step, humming something off-key.

Maera walked beside her with slow purpose.

Me? I walked like a man preparing for judgment.

The corridor opened into a vast stone chamber, and the first thing that hit me was the noise.

Not noise like battle or chaos—

Life.

Laughter. Chatter. Murmured conversations. Clinking spoons. The rustle of cloth as people moved between makeshift homes.

The space looked like a hollowed-out canyon beneath the earth, and every inch had been claimed and repurposed.

Old wood, stone, and rusted sheet metal had been stitched into tiny homes and pods. No two



looked alike, yet somehow... there was order.

It was a whole new world beneath the surface.

It looked like some kind of medieval camp.

Clothes hung on lines. Potatoes simmered in communal pots.

A boy tossed a cracked rubber ball between his hands while an older woman braided a girl's hair beside a half-mended crate.

I watched as a man leaned down to kiss a toddler on the forehead, brushing soot from her cheeks with the back of a trembling hand.

And I noticed something else.

The fabrics they wore—tunics, cloaks, shawls—had all been sewn together from remnants of older garments.

Survivors.

Maera slowed her pace beside me. Sage skipped ahead to one of the homes, vanishing behind a curtain of beads.

"These people," Maera said softly, "either tried to tell their families about the second verse of the



prophecy and were turned away... or we pulled them from Darius' cells before he could finish what he started."

I looked around again, more carefully this time.

The little girl who had been stirring a pot near the fire turned as I passed, revealing that one of her eyes was missing.

Scar tissue ringed the socket like cracked earth.

Another child nearby had only one leg—the other replaced by a crude wooden prosthetic bound with fraying leather straps.

An older boy, barely a teenager, sat silently against a pillar, half of his face melted like wax.

My stomach turned.

"Darius..." I said slowly, my voice a stone being dragged across gravel.

Maera nodded grimly.

"If one member of a family tried to speak out—if they so much as whispered about the Blood Moon or the prophecy's second verse—the whole family was taken.



Parents. Siblings. Children."

I clenched my jaw.

"They were used," she continued. "As experiments. Test subjects. Tools.

He ran trials on them—injecting them with unstable prototypes of the serums his inner circle used for immunity and control.

He wanted his own bloodline safe first, so he tested on the rest. On them." 1

A woman turned to look at me then, her expression unreadable.

Her son, perhaps five who clung to her waist, his skin pale and eyes too wide.

She didn't smile. She didn't scowl.

She just watched me. 1



