



## 387 They Are Not The Enemy

"Some survived," Maera said quietly. "Some didn't. Some..." She exhaled. "Some didn't even get to scream before their lungs burned from the inside." 1

The world tilted slightly beneath my feet.

And for the first time in a long time, I felt ashamed of breathing.

Ashamed of walking through this place as if I hadn't benefited from the time Darius bought himself on the backs of the forgotten. As if my silence hadn't made it easier.

I looked to Maera, trying to speak—but no words came. 3

She shook her head gently. "You can't fix what's been done, Alpha of Obsidian. But you can see it. That's the first step. This is their sanctuary." Her voice softened, a tremor sneaking beneath the calm.

"But for how long?"



The weight of that question hung heavier than any accusation.

A moment passed.

And then she gestured ahead. "Your friend - your beta---is down in the infirmary. We did what we could for him. He's stable... for now."

I nodded, though my chest tightened at the thought. Kael was one of the few I trusted, one of the few I still called brother. Seeing him broken would be just another tally mark on the list of things I had failed to protect.

We continued walking.

But now, eyes followed me.

One by one, people began to look up from their makeshift tables, from their bowls of soup, their games of stone and string, their quiet knitting circles and carved wood projects. Some faces scowled, a low distrust simmering behind narrowed eyes and tight jaws.

Others just looked... confused.

As if trying to reconcile the beast they had been taught to fear with the man standing beside



Maera, clothed in plain pants.

A small boy clutched a woman's skirt, staring at me like I was a bedtime monster that had stepped off the page.

A young man in the corner squinted, muttering something to his companion. Another older, bent slightly from what looked like a healed spinal fracture. He nodded toward me with guarded curiosity, like he wasn't quite ready to hate me until I gave him a reason to.

None of them moved closer.

But none turned away.

I felt like a storm cloud passing through a village that already knew too much rain.

"Don't speak," Maera said under her breath, barely audible. "Not unless someone speaks to you first. Bringing you here was already chaos."

I nodded once. The truth was that I didn't have anything to say anyway.

We passed through another archway, then down a narrower hall carved deeper into the rock. The air grew cooler. Quieter. The life from the open





chamber slowly muffled behind stone walls and time.

Maera paused at the threshold of a carved wooden door. Simple, unadorned, but clean. Her hand rested on the edge of it.

"Your beta is inside," she said, her voice losing some of its firmness. "He hasn't said much. He asked about you... once. Then he passed out again. You can see him. But I won't let you make promises you won't keep."

She opened the door.

The scent of herbs hit me first—lavender, crushed mint, and something metallic beneath. I stepped inside, heart thudding against my ribs.

And there he was.

Kael.

Lying on a cot with bandages wrapped around his chest and neck, his face bruised, lips dry and cracked. One of his arms was strapped to a wooden splint. His dark hair was soaked with sweat, clinging to his forehead.

But he was breathing.



Barely.

His chest rose and fell in slow, careful motions like his body wasn't sure if it wanted to keep trying.

I moved to his side, fingers twitching at my sides.

"I knew you were too stubborn to die, you just wanted to see me cry," I muttered, voice hoarse. "You idiot."

But Kael didn't stir.

Maera remained by the door, watching and waiting.

But her presence was not as uncomfortable as if should have been in this situation.

Sage walked up to me and Kael. "Was it Darius that hurt your friend too?" She asked, still looking at Kael.

I nodded. "Yeah, he did." My jaw ticked, fire filling my veins as I recalled the state that I had met him in that accursed place.

"So we can avenge him together. You can help



me avenge my mummy, I will help you avenge your friend."

I looked at her, I should have laughed but that this was coming from a child only filled me with an hollow type of guilt. "Why?"

"It's will be no fun doing it alone."

Maera stepped forward quietly, placing a hand on Sage's shoulder to guide her back. "Your beta is being monitored closely," she said, her tone shifting back to that calm, measured cadence. "One of our own deltas will be in soon to do another round."

I looked up at her, the question forming before I could voice it.

"He's safe," she added. "But fragile. For now."

She glanced toward the hallway again. "Wouldn't you want to see the rest of your men?"

My fingers curled tighter where they rested at Kael's side. I gave his hand one final squeeze—just enough to feel the warmth still in him. Just enough to make myself believe I hadn't failed him entirely.





"I do," I said. My voice felt like gravel. "Take me."

We left the infirmary behind.

This corridor curved slightly downward, the air growing denser with each step. The stone beneath my feet vibrated faintly, like the entire stronghold was humming just below the surface. A kind of breathless tension, barely contained.

Maera stopped in front of a wide metal door, this one reinforced, but not locked.

She pushed it open.

And the smell hit me first—stale sweat, faint traces of silver, but also life. The thick kind. Heavy and warm.

>Inside was a wide chamber, low cellinged, lined with rows of bunks.

Every single one was full.

Gammas. Cain's men.

There were thirty six. Some sprawled across their bunks, others curled in fetal positions. A few lay doubled up on mats between the beds. Blankets were tossed over most of them. One



was drooling into a pillow, arms twitching with whatever dream claimed him.

They were alive.

It shouldn't have felt like a miracle, but it did.

My eyes scanned the room. Familiar faces. Some bruised. Some pale. But all breathing. A few snored softly.

"They're sleeping off the gas," Maera said, lowering her voice as the door closed behind us. "We had to sedate them to keep them from attacking our rangers in the cave. It was protocol. I apologise for scaring you."

Then someone shifted, his head snapping up and hitting the bunk above him with a hard clang that made Sage grimace for him.

I did not need to see his face through the shadowed room to know who it was.

His head snapped around, rather disoriented by the place he found himself.

"Cain," I called.

His head whipped straight to my direction,





where I stood with the commander and Sage.

For a moment, his mouth hung open unable to recognise those he found beside. As though he had come to a realization, his eyes flared wide and he was out of the bed and racing in our direction, as his nose morphed into a snout, his hands ripping into law claw tipped claws.

I stood between him and them just in time and watched his ears droop in confusion. He tilted his head, looking at me for some type of explanation.

"We are fine. They are not the enemy." But we would see how long that would last. I still had my guard up but I needed to be on my beat behaviour. She did save Kael.

