



388 Maera

Hades 1

Cain shifted back, breathing hard as we stared at each other.

His chest rose and fell in sharp bursts, brows knitted, as though confirming I was real took more effort than it should have. Then, before I could say anything else, he lunged.

"Hey—what the h—"

I didn't get the full sentence out.

Cain grabbed me in a bone-crushing hug, arms locking around my torso like steel bands, and lifted me clean off the ground. 1

My feet left the stone floor. Just like that.

For a heartbeat, I stiffened—genuinely startled. My arms were pinned at my sides, my back arched awkwardly, and I tried to wiggle out of his grip like a scowling child caught in public affection.

"Put me down, Cain."



He didn't.

He just let out a deep laugh, half-choked and heavy with something that sounded almost like relief. Or maybe disbelief. Then he thudded his hand twice against my back like he needed to confirm I was solid.

I gave up struggling and just sighed.

"Good to see you too, brother."

Cain grunted. "Wasn't sure I'd get the chance."

Another heartbeat passed before he set me down gently and took a small step back.

His eyes, still rimmed in red from the shift, studied me with something close to longing—probably for the brotherhood we once had, when hugging me like that wouldn't have felt so... awkward.

He looked like someone who'd clawed his way through death only to find the one person he thought he'd lost standing there, too proud to admit how close it had all come.

I looked him over. "You alright?" I asked, voice low.



Cain smirked. "Now that you're here? Yeah. I am."

Maera gave us both a side glance—unreadable and silent. Sage, standing between her and the bunk wall, folded her arms and nodded like she'd somehow orchestrated this reunion herself.

Cain turned his gaze to her. "Who's the peanut?"

"I'm not a peanut," Sage huffed, sticking out her chin. "I'm the one who fed your Alpha and stopped him from dying of starvation."

Cain blinked. Then looked at me. "You let a child feed you?"

"She didn't give me much of a choice."

Sage nodded firmly, as if this proved her efficiency.

Cain chuckled again, then his tone sobered. "Where's Kael?"

"Infirmary," I replied. "He's stable."

A flash of pain crossed his face, but he masked it quickly with a sharp breath. "Then we've still got a shot."



I looked around the room again, scanning over every body that still slept—every breath that hadn't yet stopped.

Then I turned to Cain.

"Cain," I said, nodding toward Maera, "this is Commander Maera. She's the one running this place. She's also the commander of the Eclipse Rebellion."

Cain's posture shifted instantly.

His spine straightened. The humor that had lingered in his eyes vanished like smoke snuffed by wind. He looked at Maera again.

"You're the one they called the Ghost General," Cain said slowly. "The one Darius couldn't kill, no matter how many bounty squads he sent."

Maera's lip twitched, though not into a smile. "He tried hard enough." She grazed her own scar with her fingertips. "Though he was close. Very close."

Cain crossed his arms, jaw tightening. "You led the ambush at Shale Creek. Rescued over a hundred in one night. They said your forces



vanished like mist before sunrise."

"They exaggerate," Maera replied. "It was only eighty-three. And we didn't vanish—we ran until our feet bled."

Sage beamed like she'd heard the story before. "Maera's the best. She has maps in her head."

Cain let out a low whistle, his gaze sharpening. "So it's real. The rebellion exists."

"You're standing in it," Maera said simply. "My husband built the foundation. I took up the spine."

Sadness lingered in her eyes.

I watched her.

Just for a second.

The sadness in her eyes was sharp, but restrained. Well-worn. Like it hadn't scarred over. Like the grief was still raw.

The silence stretched, just long enough to start pulling the air too tight.

So I broke it.



"How do you know all that?" I asked Cain, turning slightly. "Shale Creek. The Ghost General. A rebellion I didn't know existed?"

More like I didn't bother to investigate. There had been others in the past, whispered about—rioted, demanded change, resisted conscription. But the outcome had always been the same.

They always disappeared, until another came to replace them. And then the cycle continued.

Cain glanced at me, brows raised like the question amused him more than it should have.

"Same way you probably know what's going on in the Feral Market before it hits the trade logs," he said, voice even. "Underground always knows first. We may not wear crowns, but we listen better than anyone who does."

I tilted my head, waiting.

Cain shrugged. "I keep my ears open. Always have. Business like mine... Information leaks in from every direction. Smugglers, old traders, exiles running from conscription. Silverpine and Obsidian might have centuries of bad blood, but all it takes is one border and one fool to talk at



the wrong fire."

He looked back at Maera. "And the Eclipse Rebellion? It wasn't just a rumor. It was more like... a bedtime myth for people on the fringe."

Maera said nothing, but Sage beamed with pride, her small arms folded like a soldier on standby.

"Half the things I've heard sounded made-up," Cain continued. "Blood-run tunnels under the Fangroot Range. Rebels with mirrored armor. Sanctuaries that vanish at sunrise. But I've seen enough in this life to know... when the story keeps getting passed around, there's usually a sliver of truth buried in the middle."

He looked at me again. Eyes steady.

"Guess this place is that sliver."

I nodded, slowly. "Guess so."

"It is so," Sage said, beaming.

But Maera was quiet. Almost too quiet.

"Anything the matter?" I asked.

Her mouth twisted like she'd tasted lemon before she took a calming breath.



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"The rapport I hoped to form is taking shape," she revealed.

I exchanged glances with Cain.

"But before this continues, there is something you should know."

A tentative beat.

"I am the mother of Beta James of Silverpine, Darius' right hand." 

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