



## 392 The Underspine

I stumbled back a step, barely catching myself on the edge of her desk. 1

The room felt colder now. Smaller. As if the walls themselves recoiled from what they had just revealed.

My mind struggled to piece it together, to justify, to categorize, to deny. But the images would not leave. Not the creatures I had burned through with rage. Not the stench of blood in that godforsaken forest. Not the eyes that had looked at me—feral, yes—but beneath it all, human. People. But I had refused to see them as anything other than monsters.

I had gutted them, the ones that managed to survive Eve's rescue of Elliot.

I had then burned them to ash and kept some for examination. It had been a mother or her child.

And I had done it with conviction, ordered it without thought. They had been completely innocent.



Cain remained quiet beside me, jaw set in granite. His eye twitched once, but he did not speak.

Maera gently rolled the scroll back up, her fingers trembling just enough to betray her steadiness.

"There are more," she said. "Hundreds more. Every month, another wave. And no one speaks of it. Even here, we try to forget it."

"Because no one survives," I rasped, my voice barely above a whisper. "There is no hope, no point in discussing it." It would hurt. It would not bring closure. It would only twist the knife.

Maera nodded.

"They're test subjects, not prisoners. He uses them to refine obedience. To refine brutality. Every failed experiment is buried in mass pits deep within the woods behind Faculty Fourteen. The earth back there is black with ash and rot."

The lump in my throat was too hard to swallow.

"The ones you see here are the ones we rescued during transportation. That is the only chance



we get to save them because once they are taken into that place," her mouth twisted in disdain.

"The Cauterium," I supplied. "Once the doors are closed, you cannot get to them."

Again, Maera bowed her head, gritting her teeth. "We have tried every possible way to get in. But the Cauterium is airtight. Even if we enter, every entrance requires biological scanning as a key. If that place catches a whiff that something is amiss, they send ferals after them."

The same creatures who were deployed automatically after our infiltration. They had been the same creatures who were killed for attempting to kidnap Elliot. Though it had been a command by the mark. It seemed that Darius had twisted his own people to be simply anything he wanted them to be—agents, defense, anything.

"If it is not the ferals, it is the Gammas themselves. And getting caught by those cruel agents is a fate worse than death." Her expression turned grave. "Those werewolves have no feelings. They have been indoctrinated utterly and completely. They believe they are





part of a noble ploy. And what makes it worse..."

"Is that the survivors of conscription who made it past the border join them, join the fold. They are brainwashed to either cope with what they are doing or to believe in this utopia of strong werewolves and a world where caviar rains from the skies if their mission is accomplished. They accept the doctrine," Cain said, his tone dry.

"Yes," Maera replied. "Our boys and girls are becoming the enemies. And when the time comes, we know we have to face them and..." she refused to continue.

"I am sorry," Cain whispered.

Maera sniffled before her face hardened. "I promised my Louis," she muttered. "I promised him we would survive this, but... I lied." Her voice was less than a whisper as she pulled a book open. On it were words and numbers, seemingly written in a rush. It looked like jargon. Her voice grew desperate. "I have made the calculations. Weighed every hopeless possibility... and they all end the same. We lose." Her voice cracked, brittle as glass. "Every model. Every route. Every reinforcement projection. No matter what we



do, we are outmatched. We are outnumbered. And the worst part?"

She lifted her gaze to mine, and I saw in them a kind of madness only grief could nurture.

"The worst part is... they believe they're winning something noble. That this is evolution. The people believe there is still hope for us. But what they don't know is that not only are our children joining the enemy's army, the people who believe they have minimal skin in the game—people in the cities, not the slums—are leaning towards seeing their Alpha as the one that will lead them to greatness. They believe the Lycans are truly their greatest enemy, and that people like us are the ones standing between them and the utopia the monarch whispers about."

Cain leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, voice low. "That's always the story, isn't it? Every tyrant thinks they're a sculptor carving out utopia. But they use bodies for clay."

Maera exhaled a bitter laugh that never touched her eyes. "Bodies and belief. Here he twists both beyond recognition."

I looked down at the open book. Pages of chaotic



script, mathematical equations, biological notations, field patterns, predictions—prayers disguised as science. One page had been torn through by a pen, the pressure having bled ink into the ones beneath it.

I swallowed hard.

"How were you able to infiltrate the Cauterium?" she asked after gathering her composure, though her hands still trembled. "And even escape it. We heard it opened, and the Gammas were spread out in a search. We heard explosives, and our bots counted about sixty-five Gammas deployed for the search. That means they meant business."

Cain and I exchanged puzzled looks.

Cain spoke first. "We may still require more answers. If you don't mind," Cain's voice was light.

Maera seemed to study us before she shrugged. "Ask away."

"What are bots?" Cain asked.

"Our cameras. Embedded in the back of trees,





undetectable and triggered by movement. It is our surveillance," she replied without hesitation.

"How come the Gammas cannot detect the cave and, by extension, this underground bunker? You are not too far from their base of operations to have gone unnoticed. How come? It seems like they completely skipped over this place."

Maera did not answer right away. Instead, she stood, walked over to the wall, and pressed her palm to a panel carved into the rock. It hissed open, revealing a narrow compartment lined with glowing crystal filaments. The energy pulsing within it had an odd hue, neither magic nor tech. Something else. Something older.

"We did not build this place," she said. "We found it."

Cain's brow furrowed. "You mean this entire bunker?"

"This entire mountain," she corrected. "We stumbled across it while tracking survivors two years ago. A group of Omegas who had escaped conscription ran into these tunnels. Only one survived long enough to speak." She chuckled faintly. "She spoke about vampires too. She was



out of it. But it was safe, she said."

I did not like that. Neither did Cain. I could feel the tension behind his stillness.

Maera continued, brushing her fingers along the crystal lines. "This is not just a bunker. It is a relic, pre-Obsidian even. Something was built here long before either of our civilizations rose. We do not know who or what. But whatever power runs through this place, it interferes with their tracking systems—both magical and technological. We have tested it. Inside here, we are ghosts."

I stared at the filaments, watching them pulse faintly with our breath, like they were alive.

"You are hiding under something ancient," I said.

She nodded. "We call it the Underspine. And we are not the first to use it as a refuge."

"Oh really?" Cain asked, a bit unconvinced. "A relic, aye?"

"Yes."

"But then how did we find it if they can't?"





392 The Underspine



She looked between us. "Who exactly found the cave?"

We looked at each other before deciding to be truthful.

"I did," I said. 2

**Comment** <sup>5</sup>

**View All**



Post your first comment!



**Vote**



**Pandom**



**Send Gift**

**Swipe left to continue**

