



## 394 Evie

Hades 1

"I did," I confessed, watching her expression morph.

Her surprise was clear.

"How did you think we found the cave then, since you don't seem convinced?" Cain asked, his voice betraying his wariness.

"I thought you would have used some type of technology to detect it," she replied carefully.

I exchanged a look with Cain before we both turned to her. "But you just said..."

"That it is undetectable, that the Gamma have not been able to find you because of some type of relic," Cain took over.

"I said the Cauterium Gamma, Silverpine soldiers," she countered. "Silverpine's technology is limited to what is engineered by Silverpine since we do not really have a great relationship with our neighbours," she gestured to us. "So just

because Silverpine does not have the tracking resources to find this place, does not—"

"That we can't. You believe that we just happen to have some state-of-the-art tracking device and we used it to find this place."

Maera actually shrugged. "Pretty much," she replied.

Cain's face split into an easy, smug smile. "Yeah, we are pretty cool."

For the first time, I found myself exchanging an odd look with Maera. I rolled my eyes and she flashed me a pitying, knowing smile before I promptly elbowed him in the ribs.

Cain bent over. "Hey! What did I do?"

"Definitely brothers," Maera observed. 1

"So back to the topic of discussion, you believe that we would have the technology to detect this undetectable hideout?" I asked.

"That was my thought, but if you did use technology—" She took a step in my direction. "How did you find this place?"

Silence. I had no idea either.

"You said something about the omega who mentioned something about vampires," Cain tried to clarify.

Maera turned to him, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. "It was a while ago. I did not really take note. She was dying. I thought it was that thing when you have so much to say but not enough time."

"She was dying?"

"Yes, she was tossed out after a failed experiment like so many before her." Her voice turned somber. "But she was not as dead as they thought. She had been the commander of a battalion for two decades, she took whatever they injected in her better than others." She grimaced as if the thought itself hurt to recall. "Whatever that thing was, she withstood it better." She closed her eyes, jaw locking. "I saw the other dead bodies that were implanted with the same. It was like a plague, a black mass that devoured them from the inside. They were nothing but husks."

I felt the world tilt beneath my feet. "What?" My



question came out breathless.

But Maera was so pulled into her thoughts and memories, she did not notice my change.

"But Commander Katniss led us to this haven, black veins mapping her skin."

Black veins...

"Blood filled her, turning the whites of her eyes red," she whispered. "It was like she was battling with some invasive infection under her skin." A tear slipped. "My husband was the one to kill her. The pain was too much and she had been slipping. We had no choice."

My ears were ringing, my mind screaming, Cerberus up and pacing in my subconsciousness. "Maera," my voice was hoarse. "She was the one that could detect it."

"Yes, she even said it sang to her," Maera spoke like she was dubious of the words coming out of her own mouth. "But it was probably the infection speaking."

I doubted that, but there was no need to speak on something that I had no proof of. From the



symptoms that she mentioned, it was obvious what Darius had been trying to accomplish by infecting her. I could have laughed at how similar my father and Darius were, but the dread that only coiled tighter disallowed that.

"Okay, we know that," Cain cut in. "But you said that you are only able to rescue prisoners during transport and cannot enter the Cauterium. Then how do you know so much of what happens there?"

Maera sighed. "We take prisoners. The Gammas doing the transports are either killed by our rangers or subdued and brought here for questioning."

Again, Cain and I exchanged looks.

But Maera knew before we spoke. "Yes, we torture them for information." Her gaze flickered between us, her shoulders squaring as if she could brace against the weight of her own words.

"They're not innocents," she said firmly, a faint edge to her voice. "These are soldiers who've dragged children by their hair into the Cauterium. Who've invaded towns on orders and



laughed about it. We don't hurt them for sport, we do it because the information they carry saves lives. If that makes us—"

I raised a hand, palm outward, the smallest tilt of my head cutting her off without force.

"You don't need to explain yourself to us." My tone was even, almost quiet, but it pulled her attention in like a hook. "Trust me, Maera, we are the last people who would ever judge you for doing what you must."

Her brows knit, the certainty in her expression faltering as she studied me. There was no moral high ground here, no pretence of righteousness between any of us. Only an unspoken recognition. Blood had been on all our hands long before we'd stepped into this room. Some more than others.

Cain leaned back in his chair, smirking faintly, though the look in his eyes was heavier. "Yeah," he added, voice deceptively light. "If there's a moral line to cross, we've probably danced on it already."

That earned the ghost of a smile from her, but her fingers were still curled tight on the edge of





the table, like she wasn't quite ready to let herself believe we meant it.

If only she knew what I had planned for her people, she would not care about my judgment.

If only...

"But you are not the only ones who escaped the Cauterium. Surprisingly, not too long ago a woman did and we rescued her," she announced.

"But she is strange. She refused to speak. We found the same mark on her, the one imprinted on the Feral, but it was on a part of her we could amputate. Her arm."

I blinked. "Does cutting it off help?"

"Yes, it seems to. She is docile now and asking for someone. She does not engage or answer our questions. She keeps saying one word, one name, probably of someone she lost. But the Deltas cannot decipher what could be wrong. We believe her mind is broken."

"She does not speak? She could not give you information on what is going on in there?"

"She speaks but says only one thing, a name."



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"What name?"

"Evie." 8

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