



395 Undermined

The name hit me like a jolt to the chest. 1

Evie.

A woman had escaped the Cauterium with the mark. Refusing to speak. Asking for Evie.

It was a long shot... but could it be—?

No.

Ellen was on Darius's side. She'd framed Eve, painted her as the person that tried to murder her, fed the lies that almost tore everything apart. Fueled the conspiracies that send Eve to a cell and put her through torture

. I'd heard of her loyalty shift like a blade slipping between ribs, and I'd felt the sting of it personally through Eve's pain.

But the possibility, that it had been the mark of Malrik all along, that maybe she hadn't been entirely free in her choices, slithered through my mind before I could stop it.

No.



What she had done was unforgivable. And what if this wasn't even Ellen at all? What if this woman wasn't calling for my Eve, but for some other 'Evie' altogether?

Yet... if she was Ellen... she would know all of Darius's plans. Every maneuver. Every shadowed corner of his intentions. The information she could give—

Right now, she was a locked treasure chest, overflowing with gold, but the key was missing.

"Take me to her," I said finally, my voice even but leaving no room for argument.

Maera blinked at me. "Why?"

"It's a long story," I replied, holding her gaze. "But I need to see her."

Her eyes narrowed, weighing my request like it was a blade in her hand. The silence stretched long enough for Cain to shift in his seat, his focus darting between us.

I didn't breathe.

Finally, Maera gave a single, short nod. "Fine. Follow me."

She stood, gesturing for us to move. I rose, my pulse steady on the surface but a current of anticipation running deep beneath it.

Maera led the way through a narrow, dim corridor that seemed to stretch deeper into the Underspine's belly. Cain trailed behind her, hands in his pockets, eyes moving like a predator mapping every escape route.

It wasn't long before the space opened into a wide chamber. The air was heavier here—thicker with dust and the faint metallic tang of weapons kept too close.

Men and women in matching grey stepped out from the shadows, crowding the passage. Their clothes weren't uniforms in the strictest sense, but the cut and color were identical enough to mark them as a unit. Their eyes locked on Maera—sharp, questioning—and slid right past me and Cain as if we didn't exist.

Or rather... as if they'd decided not to acknowledge we existed.

"Why here, Maera?" one woman demanded, her voice clipped. "And why with Lycans?"



Another spoke over her, his tone sharper. "You bring them into this part of the Underspines?"

The crowd was closing in, not physically, but in presence alone.

Seems some disdain doesn't fade. Not for our kind. Not that we ever gave them a reason to let it.

"I'm making the call," Maera said, her voice steady, firm without being confrontational. She met their eyes one by one, grounding the room with her presence.

A few exchanged uneasy looks.

"You're sure?" a man in the back asked, his tone more cautious than confrontational.

Before Maera could answer, a bald man stepped forward, arms crossed over a chest built like a barricade. "This is what we get for letting a woman lead us. Louis would never have allowed this."

The hit was subtle in tone, but it landed like a brick.

Maera didn't flinch. She didn't bristle or fire

back. She just stood there, spine straight, expression unreadable but the slightest slope of her shoulders gave her away.

That was enough for me.

"Funny," I said, stepping forward just enough to draw every eye, my voice low but carrying.

"From where I'm standing, I don't see anyone else leading you out of the hole you're in. Just her."

The crowd shifted uneasily, a ripple of movement through the grey.

I let the silence stretch, gaze steady on the bald man. "If you've got someone better, by all means... speak up. But until then, maybe keep your mouth shut and let the person actually holding this place together do her job."

The silence deafening. Before the bald man faced me. "'My Majesty," the bald man spat the title like it was something bitter, "you know nothing, nothing, of our operations, or how much we have had to sacrifice to keep this place standing."

I let him speak, watching the way his jaw worked, the twitch in his temple, the flicker of



approval in the eyes around him.

"And yet," I said slowly, my tone measured, "you seem very comfortable lecturing the only person here who actually stepped forward to lead. The same person keeping all of you alive while you stand here, wasting time on posturing."

His mouth tightened.

"You think I don't understand sacrifice?" My voice didn't rise, but it cut, and the temperature in the room shifted. "I have buried brothers, burned my own flesh to stop an enemy advance, and clawed my way through blood and ash to keep my people breathing. I know sacrifice. What I don't know—" I tilted my head, my eyes narrowing just enough to make him shift his weight— "is why you think undermining your leader in front of strangers makes you anything but a fucking liability."

The ripple through the grey-clad crowd was palpable.

Cain gave a quiet huff, amused, but his gaze was sharp on the bald man. "You done, or do you want to make this more embarrassing for yourself?"



The man's lips pressed into a hard line. He didn't speak again.

Maera exhaled, a barely-there sound, then moved past him. "We're going through," she said. No challenge came.

As the crowd split to let us pass, I caught the way her shoulders stayed square this time—not from pride, but from a stubborn refusal to let them see the weight she carried.

Seems some disdain doesn't fade. Not for us. Not for her.

So I guess the rangers here, don't really respect their commander. That was a crack in their armour that would need to be reviewed soon or it would be to their detriment.