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Hades 1

We walked in silence for a few paces, the tension of the last exchange still humming in the air. The narrow tunnel curved left, its walls lined with more of those faintly glowing crystal veins, the light catching in Maera's hair.

She didn't look back at me or Cain. Her gaze stayed fixed ahead, but I saw the way her jaw worked, how her shoulders dipped just a fraction when she thought no one was watching.

She was trying to collect herself.

"Being the mother of the Beta who is the tyrant's right hand..." she muttered, almost to herself. It was too soft to be a declaration, too bitter to be nothing. "It doesn't exactly inspire loyalty in the ranks."

I let the words hang for a moment, measuring them, measuring her.

"I know what it is," I said finally, my voice even.

That made her glance at me, the smallest flicker of surprise breaking through the stoicism.

"You can spend your whole life building your name," I went on, "and one person, one decision can burn it all down for you. And suddenly, you're wearing their crimes like a second skin. Doesn't matter what you've done. People stop seeing you... and start seeing them."

Her mouth twitched, half bitter smile, half grimace. "And you think that's meant to make me feel better?"

"No," I said simply. "It is meant to remind you that you're still the one holding this place together, whether they want to admit it or not. They can hate you all they like, but they're still breathing because of you."

She didn't answer right away, but I caught the way her posture shifted, the subtle straightening of her spine.

Cain snorted behind us. "If that's your idea of encouragement, brother, remind me never to come to you for a pep talk." 1

"The thing is---" she muttered. "I am not sure I

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believe you are the Alpha of Obsidan," her voice turned almost upbeat. "They call you the hand of---"

"Of Death. The fucking Hand of Death," Cain told her, elbowing me harder than he needed to. I was sure it was payback for my assault on his ribs earlier.

She actually chuckled. "You should have seen the way you death gripped your beta, we had to rip your fingers away, and now you morph into my what... motivational speaker."

"He is a big softie... courtesy of his wife," I shrugged his hand off my shoulder. 2

She kept walking and then she stopped dead as though it had just sunk in who my 'wife' was. A silverpine princess, a lycan. I was sure that they were still under the impression that Eve was Ellen but whatever this... was it was too early to be laying down all my cards.

It seemed to take a minute for it sink in.

Maera's eyes lingered on me for a fraction longer than was comfortable, her expression unreadable. Then, as if shaking herself free from



whatever thought had snagged her, she inhaled and turned sharply on her heel.

"Come on," she said, voice clipped again, the commander sliding back into place over the woman.

We followed her through another branching tunnel. The glow from the crystal veins began to fade, replaced by deeper pockets of shadow. The air here felt different; cooler, heavier, as though the rock itself was pressing in closer.

"This way," she murmured, lowering her voice without explanation. "We keep her away from the others."

Cain's brows drew together. "Why?"

Maera didn't slow. "Because noise doesn't sit well with her. Not anymore. The sound, any sound sets her on edge. Makes her... lash out."

The tunnel narrowed further before opening into a long, dim hallway. It was darker here, lit only by a few lanterns fixed low to the walls. The shadows pooled thick in the corners, and the faint smell of antiseptic threaded through the stale air.



"She needs rest," Maera continued, her tone softening almost imperceptibly. "Especially with the arm."

I glanced at her. "the amputated one."

"The stump is still healing."

We reached the end of the hallway, where a reinforced wooden door stood under a heavy crossbar. It looked more like the entrance to a vault than a living space. Maera lifted the bar with a low grunt, the wood groaning under its own weight, and set it aside.

"She's resting now," she said, her voice dropping again. "I suggest you keep yours low, too. Sudden noises... don't go well."

She pulled the latch. The door opened inward with a muted creak, revealing a shadowed room beyond.

The air inside was thick with the faint, metallic scent of blood that hadn't entirely washed away. A single bed was pushed against the far wall, its occupant turned toward the bare stone, her frame motionless under a thin blanket. Even from here, I could see the space where her right



arm should have been, an absence that made the rest of her seem smaller somehow.

Maera stepped aside, gesturing us in. "You can see her," she said quietly, "but don't expect much. She hasn't spoken much we brought her here."

Her words hung in the dim air, heavy as the shadows themselves.

Then the bed creaked...

She moved.

Cain looked at me, wondering where I was going with this.

The woman stirred, raising.

The bed creaked again, the sound carrying in the thick, stale air.

She shifted under the blanket, slow, deliberate movements that spoke of either pain or caution or both.

I waited, every muscle taut, my gaze fixed on that thin, bent shape.

A part of me was bracing. For red hair. For eyes like Eve's. For the kind of resemblance that



would cut through me like a blade and drag all those memories I'd been burying straight to the surface. Maybe she'd look a little different, older, worn down.

The blanket slipped further.

A hand emerged first. My breath caught but not for the reason I'd expected.

It wasn't smooth, or pale, or anything like hers. It was wrinkled, the skin thin and spotted with faded freckles. The knuckles jutted sharply, the veins roped and raised. Fingers trembled as they clutched the fabric, nails yellowed at the edges.

Then her head lifted.

And everything I'd been anticipating disintegrated.

This wasn't Ellen. ¹

Her hair wasn't a vibrant red but a washed-out grey, scanty in patches, shedding so much that loose strands clung to the blanket like cobwebs. The skin of her face was drawn tight in some places, sagging in others, deep creases carved by years and suffering. Her cheeks were hollow,



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her lips thin and cracked, and her eyes; whatever colour they might have once been, were clouded now, rimmed in shadows.

An old woman.

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