



397 Malrik's Slave

Hades 1

For a second, I just stared. My mind tried to reconcile the reality in front of me with every suspicion, every theory I'd carried into this place.

This... was not the reunion I had braced for.

Her eyes shifted, slow and unsteady, as though searching for shapes she could no longer fully see. They landed somewhere near me, and for a fleeting heartbeat, there was a flicker; recognition, confusion, fear, it was impossible to tell.

"Evie?" Her voice scraped out of her throat like dry leaves dragged over stone.

The longing as she spoke the name felt familiar. My gut twisted.

I looked at the stump. It stopped right above where the elbow would have been. The arm the Cauterium Gammas had found had started right above the elbow. How many people just suddenly



lost their arms? It made no sense that this was not Ellen. Everything pointed at her being the owner of the arm I had seen, therefore this should have been Ellen, not an old woman who looked to be approaching eighty.

Maera stepped forward, her tone gentler than I'd ever heard it. "It's all right. You're safe."

The old woman's gaze swept again, the cloudy whites trembling faintly as they passed over me, then Cain. Her left arm twitched as though to lift, but the stump where her right should have been lay still against the blanket.

"Evie..." she repeated, but the word sounded hollow. Like something she didn't believe anymore. She was losing hope that she would find this 'Evie.'

I moved closer, slow enough not to startle her, the boards groaning under my boots. Every step felt heavier. My instincts screamed that there was more here that age and frailty were only the surface of whatever hell she'd been through.

Cain hung back, but I felt his unease like a pulse at my shoulder.



The air between us pressed close. "What happened to you?" I asked, my voice low.

Her eyes shifted again, the way a person turns their head toward a sound in the dark. The tremble in her fingers stilled, and for a moment she was perfectly still—too still.

She rose slowly, swaying a bit, but steadied herself just in time. Her eyes did not leave mine as she stalked toward us, her expression a little vacant but carrying a strange light in her aged grey eyes. She looked like she was... curious, like she needed another look.

Every muscle in my body went rigid as the distance between us seemed to distort with each step.

Then she stopped right in front of me, tilting her head slightly. Her eyes narrowed before they widened.

The silence was as thick and suffocating as a heavy fog.

Her smile lit up. "Evie..." she whispered, almost conspiratorially to me.

I blinked, confused. "Evie?"

She nodded—it was childlike. "Where... is Evie?"

Maera gasped softly. "Who is Evie?" she asked her.

But the woman didn't even glance in her direction. "Where is Evie," she said again, her voice clearer now, as if she had been in a trance before.

"You must have the wrong person," I replied politely, taking a step back.

She was quiet, but her eyes still lingered on me.

"Seems she is really... what of it," Cain whispered. "Whatever he did to her must have been bloody awful."

"Yeah..." But my uneasiness grew the more she stared. Then her mouth began to move again, wide, almost as if she was practicing. Then it seemed like she found her tongue.

"Hades... Stravos."

Everyone froze.

The air felt like it had been sucked out of the

room. Cain's head turned sharply toward me, his brows pulling low. Maera's lips parted in the faintest gasp, but she didn't speak.

The old woman's gaze never wavered. Those clouded eyes, too sharp for her frail, brittle frame, were locked onto mine, as if nothing else in the world existed.

"How..." Cain's voice trailed off, thick with suspicion. "She shouldn't know that name."

Maera recovered first, though her voice was lower than usual. "That's... the most I've ever heard her say. Ever." Her eyes slid to me. "She's never reacted to anyone like this before. It's you. She knows you."

"She thinks she knows me," I muttered, though my pulse was starting to drum harder in my ears.

"No." Maera shook her head. "This isn't just recognition. It's engagement. She's lucid with you in a way I haven't seen. If there's something she remembers... use it. Probe her."

Cain stepped up beside me, his tone edged. "You heard her, brother. If she knows your name, she



might know more. Don't waste it."

I hesitated, searching the woman's face, weighing the cost of pushing her too hard. "Who's Evie?"

For a moment, her whole body went still. It was like watching someone scroll through the inside of their own mind, sifting through memories buried under too many years and too much pain. Her lips moved silently at first, forming a shape over and over without sound.

And then, finally, her voice came—thin, deliberate.

"She... is my sister."

The room seemed to contract around us.

"My twin sister."

I swallowed thickly. This was all too bizarre to be a mere case of coincidence.

"What is your name?" I probed further.

I watched as a brittle smile lifted her thin, chapped, cracked lips.

"I have many. My father gave them to me—or at



least, the man I thought he was." Her voice was suddenly so clear, it could be terrifying.

"What are they?"

"His heir, his pride," she whispered, voice cracking. "The Blessed Twin..."

My breath fractured.

But this time, she continued without any prompting. "Silverpine's salvation, Malrik's slave... Ellen Valmont." 3

Her pronouncement was edged with too much conviction to be the rambling of an old woman. For a moment, as she spoke, the shaky cadence of her voice fell away, and I could have sworn I heard a younger, far more self-assured woman within the frame I now stared at. 1

Maera was the first to speak. "That is impossible. Ellen Valmont was given away to be married to the Alpha of Obsidian."

She had no idea...

But I stepped forward. "Ellen," I called. "You are looking for Eve Valmont."



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A twinkle entered her eyes, and for a moment, I noticed a single fleck of blue-green in the clouded grey.

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