



## 402 Alliances?

Hades 1

The world spun around, every single thing losing colour in an instant. I reached for the wretched mark. Every other sound dull against the roaring of my own pulse against my ears.

I traced the jagged incomplete letter, my fingers twitching from the strength it took not to try and rip it off his body. But I knew well it could never be that simple, it would do no good.

I was less of a mark and more of an indentation scribbled into the skin. My breath caught, as I look in the cruel symbol. Its pigment was darker, more arcane than simple ink. It could have been my paranoia and shock but I could hear it speak. 2

Ice carved its way up my finger tips, to my arms. I could feel its daunting coolness rake its way through my chest to my heart and lungs--- squeezing and tightening until my breathing thinned and turned shallow.

Though it was incomplete, horror gripped me like a wicked tendrils that refused to relent. When I spoke, my voice was not mine, not fully. It sounded distant to my still ringing ears.



Kael turned around to face me, I could see the way he tried to push down his own worry in order not to aggravate mine. He gulped but even that singular action looked painful. "I got far enough that I started to hear voices in my head. It not just some mind control, it is pressure."

Someone behind me gasped.

Kael continues, ensuring that he held my gaze, trying to steady me even though he was the one that had been marked. "It pushes against your own thoughts, sieves through your memory like a hand through a file of documents. Then it puts in commands using your memory, aspirations and self has a ...as a disguise," he finished, his voice rasping. "So when you follow the order, you think it's your own idea. You believe it. You'll fight to defend it because you can't separate it from who you are anymore."

His words landed like stones in my gut. I'd seen mind control before—feral rage, compulsions, psychic manipulation—but this... this was worse. This was the theft of self dressed as free will.

I forced myself to take a slow breath, though it scraped ice through my lungs. "How long until it... takes hold?"



"He was close, but I continued to refuse. So they tried to weaken me physically. They beat me." 4

The flames of anger were stoked at he continued to speak, fighting my hardest not to launch something into the wall.

"But it didn't work, I refused but then they..." Kael cringed, his face contorting into something in between disgust and horror as though he was still at their mercy.

"They brought the wolfbane," Cain supplied, his voice clipped. Long gone was the playfulness of before.

"They injected it little by little," Kael bit his lip, hard. "Troy tried to take it, but it really did a number on me. And then it hit him hard enough to knock him out and without my wolf..."

I took over from him "...you were nothing but a man for them to break," I finished, my jaw tight enough to ache.

Kael's silence was answer enough. His eyes were still rimmed red, still fighting not to shake, dropped to the floor.

The image clawed into my mind: Kael, bound and bleeding, wolfsbane running like poison fire





through his veins, his wolf's presence ripped away until he was left bare in a place where being human meant being prey. I felt it in my bones, the vulnerability, the cold, the taste of iron in the mouth that never quite goes away.

Little hurried footsteps permeated the fog of rage that had held my mind captive, Sage ran past me and to Kael.

Her shoulders were quaking, her little frame trembling as she patted Kael head, rubbing. "He... hurt you," I wept. "I am... sorry... you got hurt." 1

Kael blinked, caught off guard by this child trying her best to console him, even when she didn't bother trying to console herself. "I am... sorry that... our king hurt... you."

Kael's mouth opened, but no words came—just a tremor in his throat, like her apology had struck someplace deeper than any blade could reach. His gaze flicked to me, as if to ask whether she understood what she was saying... or whether I did.

I did. And it was worse for it.

Her words weren't just about the bruises or the wolfsbane. They carried something heavier,



unspoken—the echo of all the things I had done in the name of war, in the name of control. And somehow, without knowing the full scope, she'd laid them bare in a handful of trembling syllables.

Kael lowered himself, slow and stiff, until he was eye-level with her. "Not your fault," he murmured, voice hoarse. "You didn't do anything wrong," he whispered.

She sniffled as Cain walked passed me to her, crouching down to her level as well. "You are the queen, remember, you will defeat the naughty king?" 1

She wiped her tears clumsily with that black of her hands. "I want... to." She sniffled again, spreading tears more than she was wiping then. "But we need... help." She turned to Maeve who was now white as a sheet.

"You have to ask them... commander. We can't let... him win." Desperation coloured her voice as more tears spilt.

The Deltas who had been holding Kael back were still watching. Maera glanced at them, a silent command that made them leave closing the door behind them.

All eyes were on her now, the room seemed to

have held its breath as she exhaled as though bracing herself for what she would say next. "We are lycans and werewolves, from the beginning, since the inception of your specie; it has bloodshed." Her wrung her finger together, the action betraying her nerves. "We are nature's sharpened edge," Maera went on, her voice taut but unwavering. "Our survival has always been written in blood. But the war we face now..." She glanced at Kael's mark, her jaw tightening. "...this is not the kind our ancestors prepared us for."

Her fingers twisted together, betraying nerves even as her tone stayed steady. "The Crimson Rebellion was born from that truth. We are not loyal to thrones, crowns, or bloodlines, we are loyal to survival. And right now, survival means joining forces with those we would never have stood beside before."

Her gaze moved from Sage to me, lingering, weighing. "We need an alliance with the Obsidian Pack." 3