

403 You Were There?

Hades 1

I watched Cain feed Sage, each time making a train whistle sound just before she took a bite. The mess hall that Maera had provided for our now-awakened men to eat dinner was filled with the chatter and light rowdiness of a group of men sitting together. Kael laughed at a joke I didn't tune in to hear before his eyes slid over to me.

I knew I was worlds away from all this. Lavender and honey scents danced around me, red hair slicing through the current reality. Her smile—kind eyes looking down at me as she cradled my face, Elliot in her arms, green eyes twinkling like gems in sunlight.

I was a world away because I was back home with Eve and Elliot. The war would not be in the background, playing over our lives and peace. Eve's wish for a divorce once all this was over was a ticking clock. It was painfully bizarre—the way I wanted time to slow down so we wouldn't get to the inevitable, but still wanted it to hurry, because every second in this war was a second they were in danger. I was torn between wanting



to freeze us in a moment that didn't exist and wanting to fast-forward to the end just to make sure they survived to see it.

The laughter in the mess hall blurred into a low, indistinct hum. My hand rested on the table, knuckles white, nails digging into the grain. I could almost feel the warmth of her fingers brushing mine—not in memory, but in the way longing could turn into something so vivid it might as well be real.

It was a dangerous thing—how longing could build its own world, complete with the weight of her hand in mine, the faint tremor in her breathing when she was half-asleep, the soft sound Elliot made when he buried his face against her neck. I could live there forever if I let myself.

But forever wasn't on the table. Not for me. Not for us.

Cain's laugh, sharp and too close, cracked the illusion like glass. I blinked, and the lavender was gone, replaced by the tang of stew and woodsmoke.

He was leaning across the table now, elbow brushing my plate. "You're chewing on

something, and it's not the food," he said low, his gaze quick but pointed.

Kael noticed too. His smile from whatever joke he'd been part of had faded, replaced by that steady, measuring look he gave me when he knew something was festering under my skin.

Then Sage, blissfully unaware of the heaviness between the three of us, tipped her head toward Kael with a smear of sauce bright against her cheek. "Will I have to feed you again?" she asked, like the very idea was both a chore and a royal duty.

A ripple of chuckles went around the table, but Kael's response was softer than the mood. "I think he can manage, Your Majesty," he said, though there was still grit in his voice.

Sage frowned at him in clear suspicion, then pushed his plate closer anyway before returning to her own meal.

And just like that, reality pulled me back again. The war. Maera's proposal. The decisions that could cost all of us more than we could afford.

I turned my head toward her end of the table. She was already watching me.



I hadn't seen her come in. One moment, the end of the table had been empty, and the next, Maera sat there as if she'd been waiting all along.

Her posture was composed, but her eyes... her eyes gave her away. Worry sat there like a shadow, sharpening the edges of her face. It wasn't the calculated concern of a commander delivering strategy—it was the kind that came when the bad news had already settled in your bones.

My stomach twisted into tight, biting knots. I didn't need any more. Not tonight. The incomplete mark on Kael's skin, the way his voice had cracked describing it, her earlier proposition—they were already more than I could process without splitting open.

Still, I pushed back from the table. The bench scraped the floor, loud enough that conversation faltered around us. Kael rose beside me without a word, his expression hard.

Cain was already lifting Sage from her seat, settling her easily on his hip when she made a faint sound of protest at leaving her half-finished plate behind.

We crossed the mess hall together, my pulse



growing louder with every step toward Maera.

If she was here, at this hour, wearing that look... whatever she had to say wasn't going to wait.

"I know I don't have a right to ask—three days ago we could have been enemies—but..." she hesitated, "I need to know the full truth."

I exchanged glances with Cain and Kael, which only made her eyes narrow with even more dread.

I faced her again, bracing myself for another card I would have to lay down for this uneasy temporary alliance to work.

"The old woman we rescued called herself Ellen... Ellen Valmot," she swallowed. "But I wanted to believe it had been some type of psychosis. She didn't seem well to begin with. And she seemed traumatised enough to have believed she was someone she was not."

I knew well where this was going. "Yes, I saw you write her name."

"It was a temporary name." She held eye contact with all of us before her eyes steadied on me.

"But now... tell me. Could it really be Ellen



Valmont in that room?"

"Because I married her?" I asked. "I married Ellen Valmont, so you believe she cannot be the person in that room?"

She nodded. "You married Ellen Valmont. Darius had to come to a compromise so you wouldn't wage an all-out war on Silverpine. You married Ellen Valmont."

"I thought so too," I said. "But alas..."

Her eyes widened into saucers, and she took a step back as if she could put distance between herself and the truth. "But... who... how... you would have called for war. Who did you marry?"

"I married Eve Valmont."

She shook her head immediately. "No, no—it's not possible. I was at the execution. I watched her die, twice. I remember the carnage after..."

"After a member of your rebellion publicly spoke about the Blood Moon's coming and about Darius's tyranny that you continued to be blind to. He was immediately killed, and then the carnage began."

Maera was frozen in place, her hands shaking. "You were there?"

