

404 Only If She trusted you

Hades 1

When I was done laying all the cards of lies and conspiracies on the table, Maera simply slumped into her seat. Her eyes went distant, her mouth agape as the multitude of revelations sank in.

The rest of us let the silence reign, watching her compose herself again, though her gaze still held a faraway focus. It drifted unsteadily, landing on each of us in turn where we now stood in her office.

"She was a decoy... a replacement. Eve Valmont is still alive. The cursed twin is still alive," she muttered, though it wasn't clear who she was speaking to.

I was certain she herself wasn't sure.

She ran her callused hand over her face and took a long breath. "She is alive," she repeated, but this time it sounded as if she were trying to convince herself. "She is alive."

I could tell by the way Sage's eyes lingered on each of us that she was worried for the commander who called her queen.

Maera rose, dragging both hands through her hair. "We really don't know anything about this..." she uttered. "This man—his plans. In all the months, with all the intelligence we gathered, we had no clue. What else are we lacking? Where else?"

I took a step toward her, holding myself back from placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "The information you have most likely came from the answers to the questions you asked the rescued captives and prisoners you captured. I doubt anyone would have thought to ask after the supposedly dead princess you watched die."

She gazed up at me. "Is she okay?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly. "I was at their birthday party—the night it all started. She was so scared when she shifted. I saw red eyes and I just... knew. But I expected her father to be lenient in the way fathers are with their daughters. He made the toast, he was smiling, he told the girls he loved them." Her eyes glazed, as if the night was flashing over in her mind—memories of an incident she still hadn't been able to accept had happened the way it did.

She blinked slowly, as though her mind had to recover from the fog it had found itself in.



"James too—he changed. I didn't recognize him. I begged him to remember that Eve had no control over the prophecy, that she was still innocent, that she could still be steered." She pursed her lips as they quivered. Her fists clenched, as if she were holding herself together by force. "Then he gets engaged to Ellen within the week. He becomes Beta..." Her tears fell, her voice faltering for just a second. "I lost him then. He became Darius' enforcer—his dog." Her words curled with venom.

Sage's small hand reached across the space between them, her voice barely more than a whisper. "Commander..."

Cain, sensing her intent, shifted her gently in his arms until she was close enough for her fingers to brush Maera's sleeve. When Sage's touch lingered, Maera glanced down in surprise, as if snapping out of a daze.

Without hesitation, Sage reached up with her free hand and brushed away the tear that had cut down Maera's cheek. It was a small, almost childlike gesture—unpolished but deeply sincere.

The commander's face softened. She managed a faint, weary smile—the kind born from gratitude rather than happiness. "Thank you, queen," she

murmured.

I stepped forward, my gaze never leaving her.
"Maera... James. Was he marked too? Could this be compulsion, not his will?"

She shook her head slowly, eyes dark with a grief that had long since burned into steel. "No. He made sure I knew. Said it with his own mouth—that he wasn't being controlled—so that I would accept it. So I'd stop hoping."

Her voice wavered, but there was no mistaking the truth in it. "I lost my son that day... and Darius gained a perfect weapon."

When the silence finally broke, it was with my voice. "Why did you want the truth so badly, Maera? The whole story—no half-measures."

She blinked, the question dragging her fully back into the room. Her lips pressed together, her jaw tightening before she answered. "It's Ellen," she said quietly, as if even speaking the name might summon something unwelcome. "She woke up."

I stilled.

Maera's gaze held mine. "When I went to serve her dinner... she spoke. Says she has information. But she wants to talk to you first."



My ears twitched before I could stop them, the faintest tremor running down my spine. My blood heated—half apprehension, half something dangerously close to hope. "What does she want here?" I asked, though I already had a suspicion.

Maera's expression didn't waver, but I caught the hesitation in her eyes. "She says she wants to talk about Eve."

The words landed like a drop of ink in water—spreading through me, staining everything else.

We moved out together, the echo of boots against concrete carrying us down the corridor. Cain adjusted Sage's weight in his arms, keeping her steady. Kael fell into step on my left, his attention flicking between me and Maera.

As we descended toward the bunker, I glanced sideways at the commander. "Why do you look like you're marching to your own execution?"

Her answer was blunt, yet measured. "Because she's only willing to trust you with what she knows... if Eve trusted you."

That earned a ripple of confusion through the group. Kael arched a brow, voicing what we were all thinking. "And how exactly is she going to figure that out?"

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No one spoke.

The air grew colder as we approached the reinforced cell door. The low light pooled in dull copper against the steel, shadows gathering thick in the corners. And then—before anyone could try to answer—

"Because," came the voice from inside, startlingly clear, "she is my twin." 3

It cut through the hall like a blade, and for the briefest heartbeat, the world seemed to still. 1

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