

73 Retribution

Hades~ 1

The light switched on, and my former Theta entered the room and froze. He dropped his bag and went down on one knee. "Your... Majesty," he stuttered. "You are here."

I looked him over, her words echoing in my head. "Rook," I murmured.

He raised his eyes to me hesitantly. The fear in them was as clear as day, but beneath it, something much more defiant simmered.

"You do know why I am here?" I asked, my voice monotone, my eyes narrowed.

He swallowed. "I know, Your Majesty."

I took in Rook's appearance—disheveled, broken, but still standing. Despite everything, he managed to look me in the eye, though barely. His brother lay behind him, kept alive by the hum of machines, a reminder of both his defiance and his failure.

"Do you know the cost of betrayal?" I asked, my voice cutting through the silence. I let the words hang, knowing he felt every bit of their weight.

Rook's jaw tightened, but he didn't look away. "I do, Your Majesty." His voice wavered. "I know very well."

I looked over at the bed where Ryder lay, pale and barely moving. The machines he was hooked up to beeped. I stroked his limp hand, watching as Rook's apprehension grew.

"He is dying," I murmured.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Rook took a step closer.

I reached into my pocket and retrieved the injections. I heard Rook gasp.

It was another 100 ml of Nerexylin. I twirled it on my finger. "I was too merciful the first time." I clenched my jaw.

"Your Majesty..."

"It's because none of you lost your lives that you would be brazen enough to lay a hand on her again."

"The Luna said..."

"That title does not apply to her," I ground out.

"Don't try and save yourself."

"I apologize, Your Majesty." He moved closer on his knees, eyeing the injection, his eyes wary and

"I apologize, Your Majesty." He moved closer on his knees, eyeing the injection, his eyes wary and desperate. "Please..."

I chuckled dryly. "You know things don't work that way." I looked back at Ryder. "He will have to pay for your crime."

Rook's eyes widened. "I am begging you, Your Majesty." Rook's desperation was palpable, a bitter, broken thing as he moved closer on his knees, his hands trembling as he reached out, pleading.

"Your Majesty," his voice cracked, thick with anguish, "please... I beg you. Ryder is all I have. I'll do anything—take the injection myself. Double the dose. Triple it if that's what it takes."

I watched him, his words ringing hollow against the cold stone walls. His body was shaking, and I could see the raw fear that surged beneath the thin veneer of courage he was trying to maintain. Tears streaked down his face, unbidden and unchecked, as he lowered his head to the floor, his fingers brushing the edge of my shoe.

"Your Majesty... he's innocent in this. Punish me as you see fit, but let Ryder live," he sobbed, his face pressed to the ground. "You were right—I betrayed you. But he... he only followed me out

"Your Majesty... he's innocent in this. Punish me as you see fit, but let Ryder live," he sobbed, his face pressed to the ground. "You were right—I betrayed you. But he... he only followed me out of loyalty. He didn't deserve any of this." He was trembling now, his eyes becoming rimmed red.

I studied him, my expression impassive, making no move to reach out or soften my gaze. Instead, I glanced back at Ryder, his still form a haunting reminder of their betrayal. "Innocent?" I murmured, almost to myself. "Did you spare her when she was innocent? Did you think twice?"

Rook's breath hitched, his voice barely a whisper. "It was a mistake. A terrible, terrible mistake. I thought because she was a..."

"A werewolf? She is mine. What gave you the right to torture my captive? She is mine to hurt, to break, to kill. You had no right." I growled.

"I realize that now. I am begging..."

"You think begging can undo that?" I let the syringe glint in the low light, watching as his eyes locked on it, wild with despair. "I gave both of you a chance, even when you didn't deserve it. But instead of learning, you only grew bolder in your defiance. That mercy was the mistake made. And it's time to rectify it."

He reached forward, his hand trembling as he tried to push his sleeve up, baring his arm.

"Please," he choked, his voice broken, "if there's even a sliver of mercy left, give it to him. I'll take the punishment. I'll take whatever you want—just, please... let him live."

I leaned down, my face close to his as I held the syringe between us. "You think you're in a position to barter?" My voice dropped to a chilling whisper. "Your life was spared once, but I will not spare it again."

Rook's head dropped, a fresh wave of sobs racking his body. He was completely, utterly defeated, yet still he pleaded, broken words slipping out as he pressed his forehead against my shoe. "Ryder doesn't deserve this... I'm the one you want. Just... don't let him suffer anymore."

Silence filled the room, broken only by the rhythmic beeping of the machines that tethered Ryder to life. I stared down at Rook, his crumpled, pleading form. I gritted my teeth.

"You are willing to die for your brother?" I asked, playing with the injection. "Tell me, Rook. Are you?"

Rook raised his head, still shaking, salty streams

The edge of my lips twitched slightly upward. "Are you willing to kill yourself for your brother, Rook?"

He swallowed. "Y-yes." He sputtered. "I can."

I reached into my coat, feeling the cold weight of the silver-plated handgun resting there. It gleamed under the dim light as I held it out to him, its dark, polished barrel a brutal contrast to the pale hand that trembled as he reached for it.

"This gun," I murmured, meeting his desperate gaze, "is loaded with the finest silver bullets. If you want your brother spared, Rook, you'll have to do more than beg." I extended it further, my fingers loosening around the grip. "You'll have to prove it."

Rook's hand shook violently as he took the gun from me, his eyes wide, his breaths coming fast and shallow. He glanced over at Ryder, his gaze filled with a pain so raw it seemed to cut through the air. Fresh tears filled his eyes as he gripped his brother's limp hand, squeezing it, his thumb brushing against Ryder's knuckles as if saying a final goodbye.

"Swear to me, Your Majesty," he choked, his voice barely holding steady. "Swear... that if I do this,

"Swear to me, Your Majesty," he choked, his voice barely holding steady. "Swear... that if I do this, he'll be safe. You won't hurt him again."

I tilted my head, my gaze cold and unyielding. "If you pull that trigger, Rook, all your problems will be solved. Ryder's life will no longer be touched by me or anyone else under my rule. Your sins," I gestured to the gun, "will be absolved."

Rook's lip quivered as he closed his eyes, a shuddering breath escaping him. His fingers tightened around the gun, and he pressed it against his own temple, the metallic glint of silver gleaming as he drew in a ragged breath.

Silence stretched between us, thick and unbearable. I could see the terror in his eyes, his hand trembling as he struggled to steady himself. His gaze shifted to his brother one last time, desperation mingling with a profound sorrow.

His voice barely above a whisper, he pleaded one last time, "Forgive me, Ryder..."

Seconds ticked by, the tension so thick it seemed to stifle even the air in the room. His finger hovered over the trigger, eyes clenched shut, the realization of what he was about to do seeping into every part of him.



Rook's eyes clenched tight, his finger pressing down hard on the trigger. There was a hollow, empty click as he pulled it, the silence afterward more deafening than any gunshot could have been.

For a second, he didn't move, frozen in shock as he tried to process what hadn't happened. Slowly, he opened his eyes, staring down at the gun in his hand in disbelief. His breaths came in shallow gasps as realization washed over him—no bullet had fired. He was still alive.

A shudder of relief swept through him, followed by confusion and horror as he looked up, his eyes meeting mine, searching, desperate to understand.

I watched him impassively, the faintest trace of satisfaction lurking in my gaze. "You've proved yourself, Rook," I said, my voice as cold and smooth as steel. "You were willing to sacrifice your life without hesitation for your brother's sake. Since you had the courage to pull that trigger, I consider your sins absolved."

I rose to my feet, never looking away from him as he knelt there, speechless. His face softened, disbelief slowly giving way to a look of deep, unrestrained gratitude. He could barely form

I rose to my feet, never looking away from him as he knelt there, speechless. His face softened, disbelief slowly giving way to a look of deep, unrestrained gratitude. He could barely form words, only managing to mouth a quiet, "Thank you," as he lowered his head, overwhelmed. His forehead was coated in sweat.

I only laughed, hollow and mirthless. "This was not my mercy," I sneered. "It was the princess!"

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