

## 471 Brilliantly Cunning Bastard

Hades 1

We were led down a hatch—a large, sturdy one that opened using an automatic controller. It was a gaping mouth without light, even as the sun from above shone directly on it, as if the darkness inside simply refused to be illuminated.

Freddie went first, instructing us as he did. "No worries, it's spacious and the stairs are easy to follow."

We did as he asked. I let Eve go first, holding her hand as she followed Freddie, adjusting Sophie in my other arm. A light from Freddie's direction bobbed ahead of us—a small flashlight cutting through the black.

The descent was longer than I expected. The stairs were indeed easy to follow, carved smooth and wide into the earth, but they went down, and down, and down. The air grew cooler with each step, carrying a scent I couldn't quite place—something green and alive, impossibly fresh for being so far underground.

Sophie's small hand clutched my shirt. She was quiet, but I felt her breathing quicken as we

descended. This was familiar to her. This path.  
This darkness leading to—

Freddie stopped ahead of us. I heard the sound  
of metal sliding, a lock disengaging, and then the  
creak of hinges that needed oil.

"Brace yourselves," he said quietly. "It's... a lot to  
take in."

The door swung open.

And light exploded into the darkness.

Not harsh. Not blinding. But everywhere.

I froze on the stairs, my breath catching in my  
throat. Eve made a sound that might have been a  
gasp or a sob—I couldn't tell which.

The chamber before us was impossible.

Flowers covered every surface. The ceiling  
bloomed with luminescent blossoms that hung  
like stars—whites and blues and soft purples that  
cast a gentle, otherworldly glow. The walls were  
carpeted in vines that pulsed with  
bioluminescent veins, creating patterns of light  
that seemed to breathe. And scattered  
throughout were flowers I'd seen in the field  
above—roses, orchids, wildflowers—but here  
they glowed, each petal rimmed in soft radiance.

The ground wasn't stone or earth. It was moss. Deep, plush moss that looked soft as velvet, stretching across the entire floor like a living carpet. And growing from it, seemingly at random, were more flowers—some as small as my thumb, others as large as Sophie's head.

The air was fresh. Impossibly fresh. Like standing in a forest after rain, or in a meadow at dawn. There was no mustiness, no damp rot of underground spaces. Just clean, green, alive air that filled my lungs and made me feel like I could breathe properly for the first time in days.

"This shouldn't be possible," Eve whispered, still gripping my hand like a lifeline.

"No," Freddie said quietly, stepping fully into the chamber. "It shouldn't."

I followed him through the doorway, Sophie still in my arms, and the moment my feet touched the moss, I felt it again. That pulse. That heartbeat. But stronger here. So much stronger. Like standing beside someone's chest and feeling their heart beat against your own.

*She's here, I realized with a chill. Not just her body. She's here.*

Sophie stirred in my arms. "You can put me



down, Uncle Luci."

I did, carefully, and watched as she walked across the moss with familiar ease. Her white dress seemed to glow in the luminescent light, making her look almost spectral as she moved deeper into the chamber.

Eve's hand tightened on mine. "Hades," she breathed. "This is more beautiful than the garden above."

She was right. The field above had been overwhelming in its riot of color and impossible combinations. But this—this was ethereal. This was what the garden wanted to be when it grew up. This was beauty so profound it bordered on holy.

And at the center of it all, at the heart of the chamber where the light seemed to converge and intensify, was the grave.

It wasn't ornate. There was no marble or granite or carved angels. Just a simple raised mound of moss, perhaps three feet high and six feet long. And covering it—growing from it—were flowers unlike anything I'd seen above. They were large, almost the size of dinner plates, with petals that shifted through colors as you watched—white to



pink to gold to blue, like they couldn't decide what they wanted to be.

Or like they were trying to be everything at once.

Sophie walked up to the mound and knelt beside it, her small hands reaching out to touch one of the shifting flowers with a tenderness that made my chest ache.

"Hi, Mami," she whispered. "I brought Uncle Luci and Aunty Eve."

The flower under her hand pulsed brighter for just a moment.

I felt Eve's grip on my hand become crushing. She'd seen it too.

Freddie stood at the edge of the grave. "I'm sure you have questions. How flowers grow without sun. How this place beneath the earth is so alive."

"It's Mami," Sophie said softly, running her little fingers over the large flowers. Their glow intensified, the vines writhing in response. 1

Eve stilled. She'd noticed it too—the way the entire chamber seemed to recognize Sophie's presence and respond to her touch.



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+5

Sophie placed her head against the flowers, and Freddie sniffled before his eyes cut to ours, illuminated by the pulsing light. "The tunnels have been off limits and sealed since she... left."

My confusion only grew. They spoke about her in past tense but never said she \*died.\* Was there something I was missing?

But the closed expression on Freddie's face told me not to press. I knew what response I'd get—that it was Cain's story to tell. I respected that. Only Cain could explain this mystery.

"The tunnels connect to a point a few miles from the Cauterium," Freddie said, his voice dropping. "Near the bonefield. Where the bodies are dumped after they're done with them."

Eve's jaw clenched. "That's how she escaped. They thought she died."

Freddie nodded, then gestured toward the far side of the chamber where multiple tunnel entrances branched into darkness. "One of those routes will lead your Gammas straight into Silverpine. Close to the Underspine."

A thought struck me, sharp and accusing. "When we were escaping—when Cain was with us—if he knew about tunnels that could lead us home,

why didn't he tell us?" 1

Freddie's expression didn't change. "It's simple. He had them sealed. You cannot access them from the outside as you can from within. Even if you'd found the entrance hatch buried under soil while Cauterium guards were still hunting you, you wouldn't have been able to open it. The Don made sure of that."

I processed this. It made tactical sense, but—

"He didn't tell you about the tunnels at all, did he?" Freddie asked.

"No. Only a single line about the daughter I didn't know he had."

"He knew Sophie." Freddie's voice softened. "He knew that if you gained her trust, she would want you to visit this place. To meet her mother." His eyes shifted to Sophie, still kneeling by the grave. "Therefore revealing the tunnels naturally, when the time was right."

I looked at the child—Cain's carefully planned revelation. A little information from my brother had gone a long way.

He knew both me and his daughter. He knew that if I had not changed like he'd hoped—if I'd



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failed to become the kind of man who could earn Sophie's trust—then I would never see this place. Never deserve to.

The old Hades would never have gained the trust of a child who was at first scared of him. Not enough for that child to reveal something so sacred and special.

Before Eve, Elliot couldn't trust me enough to reveal what Felicia had been doing to him. I'd closed my heart off so completely, I hadn't recognized my own son's suffering. Hadn't seen the abuse happening right in front of me.

Things had changed. *I* had changed.

But Cain wanted to test just how deep that change went.

And it had worked.

*That brilliantly cunning bastard.* 3

Now, with a hidden path close to the Underspine—closer than we'd ever thought possible—we could rescue the entire Eclipse Rebellion. We could funnel Silverpine civilians through the tunnels, exactly as we'd planned.

But it felt wrong.

Freddie's shoulders carried an unseen weight. "I've done my part and shown you this place, but..." His eyes drifted to Sophie, where Eve had gone to sit beside her, watching, offering comfort without intruding on the moment. "I don't have the authority to decide whether these tunnels will be used. As the Don's heir, only Sophie can give you that right."

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