



478 Hang On

Hades 1

I crouched immediately and picked her up. She sniffled, though her eyes were dry—I doubted they'd stay that way for long.

"Little star," I murmured. "What's wrong?"

I'd noticed her playfulness and lightheartedness diminishing over the past few days. Though we tried to hide it, I suspected the countenance of the adults around her was starting to rub off. She was getting an inkling that something had gone terribly wrong.

With each passing hour, everyone felt the crushing weight of pressure and moral ambiguity. The Gammas were being tortured. Darius might be waiting for the perfect moment to force Ellen to pull the moon closer—playing mind games, knowing he held all the cards.

It was like standing on a precipice where you could neither turn back nor move forward.

Sophie seemed to collect herself before speaking. "I know you're busy..." Her voice wavered, and she didn't meet my eyes. "I see



everyone is doing something..."

She was trying to preface what she needed to say so she wouldn't sound spoiled.

My throat closed with emotion.

She was a child. She was **allowed** to be selfish, allowed to be spoiled. She was the Don's daughter, after all.

I pinched her chin gently so she'd look at me. "Little star, you can let it out. You're still Uncle's favorite niece." My **only** niece, but same difference. "You can talk to me."

Her lips trembled harder as she allowed the tears she'd been holding back to finally well up.

"I miss Papa," she finally said, and began to weep quietly. "I'm scared he'll go to Mami and never come back." 1

I hugged her and let her sob into my shoulder, gripping me like her life depended on it.

"I want—him—to come—home—so he can—meet my—friends. I—promise—I'll be better. I won't—cry." She hiccupped, trying to hold back her sorrow, already making promises to a father who would never want her to change a thing about herself.



This hadn't come from nowhere. She'd been too strong for too long, trying to repress her longing for her father.

Now she could no longer hold it back.

I walked back into the room with her still in my arms, closing the door softly behind me as she continued to cry.

I brought her to my desk, wiping her tears before kissing her warm forehead. Too warm. She had a fever coming on from worry.

"Your Papa is coming," I vowed, though the words tasted like sawdust on my tongue. There was no guarantee. But I couldn't tell her that. I lacked the strength to watch her face crumble. "He's fighting to come back to you. All he's thinking about is you. He will defeat the bad Alpha just to come home to you. He'll walk through that tunnel and run up to you for the biggest hug."

She sniffled, listening, looking at me with those rheumy eyes.

"Papa is very strong," she said quietly, trying to convince herself more than me. Then her face fell, tears streaming faster. "But Mami was strong too. And she still went to the moon,



leaving us."

I fought the tears that threatened to spring up in my own eyes. Biting my lip, I wiped her tears again, rocking her gently.

"I'll tell you a story," I said. "About Elliot."

Her tears momentarily stopped. "Elliot?"

I nodded. "I couldn't find Elliot once."

The image of Danielle's torn abdomen cleaved through my mind, and for the first time, the pain that came with it was duller—leaving only an ebbing ache instead of the usual agony that left me staggering and unable to breathe or think. The grief hadn't left me. It would never leave me. But it no longer consumed me to the point of madness.

"I thought I'd lost him," I continued, finding my voice didn't waver. "So many lies, and enemies—the ones we could see and the ones we couldn't—they all stood between us. The path back to my son was scary. Sometimes I couldn't go on. Sometimes it felt impossible, like climbing a mountain with no hands—"

"That's impossible!" Sophie interrupted. "What would you use to grab the mountain?"



I smiled wryly and nodded. "But I needed to climb this mountain to get to Elliot."

Her eyes widened. "How did you do it?"

I glanced back at Eve, still peacefully sleeping. Sophie looked in her direction too.

"I was thrown a rope from the top of the mountain."

She glanced at Eve again. "Aunty threw you the rope?"

I nodded. "And she pulled me up, even though she herself could fall down with me. She scraped her knees. She bruised her hands pulling me up so I could meet my son."

"Wow. She's strong," Sophie gushed.

"The strongest," I agreed. "And now I have my son, your cousin Elliot, and Eve."

Sophie turned it all over in her head. "So the people you sent into the tunnel are like Aunty Eve. They'll help Papa come home."

"But just like Aunty Eve pulling me up the mountain when I had no hands, it won't be easy. It will be hard and can be very painful. Sometimes you'll feel like giving up hope. But



you have to hang on, like I did when Auntie Eve was pulling me up the mountain."

She nodded, her eyes hesitantly clearing, becoming brighter. "I will hang on," she said, clenching her little hands into fists. "I will hang on." This time with more resolve, brows drawn and all.

Then my comm crackled to life.

The encrypted line. The one connected to— 1

My blood went cold.

"Stay here," I said quietly, setting Sophie down gently. "Don't move."

I grabbed the comm, my hand shaking.

"This is Alpha Stavros," I said, my voice steadier than I felt.

Static, slowly the signal sharpened, warping into a slithering voice somehow still rough, gloating and smug...

My stomach dropped, the world tilting on its axis and I could do nothing but fall into the despair that awaited me.

"So Alpha Stavros, you didn't learn the first time. What a pity." He sneered. 3