



486 Angela

Hades 1

I swooped through the sky, already having lost count of how many times I'd done this. Then I heard the whistle and ducked from the cloud to the ground below where they were waiting.

The Historian, Jonathan, was waving before giving a thumbs up.

Kael stood by his side, hands on his hips as he nodded with a smile. Cain clapped his shoulder, his reaction the most enthusiastic as he yelled from the landing pad. "Damn!"

I landed, my wings folding back as I shifted, feeling the familiar pull of my hybrid form settling. My Primus form—half lycan, half vampire—was still strange to inhabit, but each flight made it feel more natural.

"That was incredible," Jonathan said, approaching with his tablet in hand, eyes gleaming with the fervor of a man who'd spent his entire life studying creatures like me. "Your wing span has increased by another two feet since yesterday. Your control is exceptional for someone who's only been flying for—what, three weeks?"



"About that," I confirmed, rolling my shoulders to ease the tension.

Kael tossed me a bottle, and I caught it reflexively. Blood. Still warm. I uncorked it and drank, and the moment it hit my tongue, energy flooded through me. My muscles relaxed, my vision sharpened, and the exhaustion from the flight evaporated.

"That's the good stuff," Cain observed with a grin.

"Donated from the medical wing," Kael clarified. "We're keeping you stocked."

Jonathan tapped something on his tablet. "Your vitals are excellent. Heart rate, lung capacity, stamina—all improving. But I'd recommend you keep training for at least thirty minutes to an hour daily. Your cardiovascular system needs to continue expanding to handle prolonged exertion during combat. Right now, you're built for short bursts. In war, you'll need endurance."

I nodded, finishing the bottle. "Understood."

Jonathan extended his hand, and I shook it firmly. "It's been an honor, Alpha Stavros. Truly. I never thought I'd see a Primus in my lifetime, let alone help train one."



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"The honor is mine," I said. "Thank you for your guidance."

Kael stepped forward, clasping Jonathan's shoulder. "And remember—"

"Non-disclosure agreement," Jonathan finished with a knowing smile. "I signed it. My lips are sealed. As far as anyone knows, I've been cataloging ancient texts in the archives."

"Good man," Kael said warmly. "We appreciate it."

Jonathan nodded to all of us, gathered his things, and headed toward the transport vehicle waiting at the edge of the training field.

Once he was gone, Cain pulled out his phone, grinning. "Sent the video of you flying to Eve. She's going to lose her mind."

My chest tightened at the mention of her name. "How is she?"

"Busy," Cain said. "But good. Oh—and Ellen's doing better. Stabilized. No more bleeding. The doctors think she'll make a full recovery with time."

The relief on Cain's face was obvious. Physical. His shoulders had been tense for days, and now they finally relaxed.



"That's good," I said quietly. Ellen's collapse had shaken all of us, but especially Eve. She'd spent hours at her sister's bedside, refusing to leave until the doctors assured her Ellen was stable.

Kael checked his watch. "We've got a council meeting in an hour. Video chat. War prep updates, refugee integration reports, dome construction progress—the usual."

I grimaced. Meetings. Necessary, but tedious.

"Beta!" someone called from across the field. Kael turned, waving acknowledgment. "I'll be right back," he said, jogging toward whoever needed him.

That left Cain and me alone on the landing pad.

I glanced at him, noting the tattoos that covered his arms, neck, and the places where his hair was cropped close to his scalp in a fade—intricate, winding patterns of vines and petals. Flowers. I'd seen them before but never really looked.

"The tattoos," I said. "They're flowers."

Cain looked down at his arms, a small smile playing at his lips. "Yeah. Started getting them after Sophie was born. Each one represents a flower from the garden. Angela's garden."



Angela. Sophie's mother. The garden of flowers surrounding the tunnels—vibrant, alive, impossibly beautiful even in the dead of night.

"I've been meaning to ask," I said carefully. "About Angela. About the garden."

Cain's expression shifted. Something heavy settled in his eyes. He looked at me for a long moment, measuring, deciding.

Then he said quietly, "Angela's not dead."

I froze.

"What?"

"She's not dead," Cain repeated, his voice steady but weighted. "She's alive. In a way."

My mind raced. "Then why—Sophie thinks her mother is dead. You let her believe—"

"I had to," Cain interrupted, his tone sharp but not angry. Just... tired. He looked away, jaw working. "Because the truth is worse than death. And Sophie—she's too young to understand what her mother became."

Silence stretched between us.

"The flowers," Cain said finally, his voice low.

"They grow in that climate, in that way, in that



scope—even without sunlight, with barely any water, underground—because Angela is the garden. Her body became the soil, the water, the nutrients. She's the reason they flourish." Doesn't that typically happen when we decompose?

But somehow my blood ran cold. "What are you saying?"

"Darius," Cain said, and the name came out like a curse. "He used his people for agriculture. Experimented on them. Turned them into... resources." He swallowed hard. "Angela—she was one of them. One of the pregnant women they chose because they thought if a body could create life, it could create a different kind of life. With the hormones, the biology of pregnancy—those monsters thought it would be perfect for growing crops."

My stomach twisted.

"They said it was for agriculture," Cain continued, his voice hollow. "But I think they were just sadistic. They enjoyed it. Watching people transform. Watching them suffer." 4

"How—"

"They inserted seeds into her body," Cain said



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flatly. "Grafted plant matter to her organ, injected her with gods know what. Forced her system to nurture vegetation instead of a child. Her fingers turned dark, like soil. She started bleeding sap instead of blood. Vines sprouted from her scalp." He looked at his tattooed arms. "When many of the test subjects died, Darius had them tossed into the bone pit. Left to rot." 2

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