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Hades 1

"But Angela—"

"Angela was thrown there to die," Cain said. "But it rained. And somehow—somehow—she survived. She crawled out of that pit and walked. Kept walking even as her body continued to transform. And then there was a mudslide. It swept her into the tunnels before they were sealed."

I couldn't speak.

"She walked for weeks," Cain said. "Slowly changing. But without the daily experiments, without being prodded and cut open and violated every single day, she managed to hold on to herself. Hold on to her humanity. Just barely. Until the smugglers found her and brought her to me."

He paused, his throat working.

"I found her... interesting," he said softly. "A woman with dark fingers, bleeding sap, vines growing from her scalp like hair. She was the most unique person I'd ever seen. We became

friends. And then—" He stopped, his voice catching. "Somehow, I started to fall in love with her."

My chest ached.

"But she knew," Cain continued. "She knew what was happening to her body. That the plants were eating her alive from the inside out. And she refused me. Made me promise not to fall for a dying woman." He laughed bitterly. "I couldn't keep that promise."

"Cain—"

"I took care of her," he said. "Did everything I could to slow the transformation. But even though she'd lost her baby in the experiments, she wanted another one. She knew she was dying, so she wanted to leave something behind. Wanted to create life one more time before the plants consumed her completely."

He looked up at the sky, blinking rapidly.

"Seeing her belly grow was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen," he whispered. "Green skin and all. She looked like a sunflower—blonde hair, brown eyes, green skin. She was radiant. She had Sophie, and I thought—maybe, maybe we'd beaten it. Maybe she'd survive." 2

"But she didn't," I said quietly.

"No." Cain's voice broke. "No matter how much medical help I gave her, it was no use. Her body continued to grow. The plants ate her alive. She died three months after Sophie was born. But her body—it didn't stop. It kept growing. The vines, the roots, the flowers."

He wiped at his eyes roughly.

"I buried her in the garden," he said. "Where the tunnels open up into that field. And over the years, her vines wove through everything. They spread. They bloomed. The flowers you see—they're her. Growing from where she laid. Still creating life. Still beautiful."

I didn't know what to say.

"Sophie doesn't know," Cain continued. "She thinks her mother died of an illness. She visits the garden and thinks it's just a memorial. But every flower, every vine, every bloom—that's Angela. Still here. Still with us. Still taking care of us in the only way she can. Her flowers respond to Sophie,

He looked at me, his eyes red-rimmed but fierce.

"So when I say she's not dead," Cain said, "I mean

it. She's not gone. She's just... changed. And I'll be damned if I let Darius destroy what's left of her."

The weight of it settled over me like lead.

"Does anyone else know?" I asked.

"Freddie," Cain said. "He helped me bury her. Helped me plant her. And now you."

"Why tell me?"

"Because you're my brother," Cain said simply. "And because if something happens to me, someone needs to know the truth. Someone needs to protect the garden. Protect her."

I nodded slowly. "I will."

"And someday," Cain added, his voice soft, "when Sophie's old enough to understand—when she's ready—I'll tell her. I'll take her to the garden and I'll tell her that every flower she's ever loved, every vine she's ever climbed, every bloom she's ever picked—that was her mother. Loving her. Still here."

My throat tightened.

"That's why the tattoos," I said.

"Yeah." Cain looked at his arms again. "Each

flower is a different memory. A different moment with Angela. A different piece of her I'm carrying with me." He smiled faintly. "She used to say I was a walking garden. But she didn't know it was her."

We stood in silence for a moment, the wind rustling across the landing pad.

"Darius will pay for what he did to her," I said quietly.

"He will," Cain agreed. "For her. For all of them. For everyone he turned into experiments. Into resources. Into things."

He clapped my shoulder once, firmly.

"Come on," he said, his voice steadier now. "We've got a meeting to prep for. And you need to shower. You smell like blood and sky."

I snorted despite the heaviness in my chest.

"Fair."

—
"As we approach the fourth week," Kael said, reading out all the goals on the checklist. All the things we had managed to accomplish in time for the Bloodmoon War. The domes were all that remained now, three of them already having

been installed over the stadium safe houses and ready for lockdown as soon as it was necessary.

As he listed off each item, more and more of the weight on my chest receded. Then he reached the section concerning the fate of Silverpine. Not Darius, but the civilians we couldn't save—the ones from the more populated inner cities where people couldn't just disappear without notice, even if the Eclipse Rebellion spiked the alcohol of Darius's gammas.

And his targets and civilians slipping out from under him would only put him on higher alert. Another rescue wasn't feasible... and where would we put them? If we brought them over the border to Obsidian territory, there wasn't enough space, not enough domes, not enough serum to save them. They would still meet their end, but on our soil.

I could see Eve go pale at the mention of the calculated predicted percentage of casualties for her pack. After what Ellen had exposed to her in detail, the shadow over her features was stark.

She looked helpless. Like drowning and being too tired to save yourself, so you clench your fists and let the water fill your lungs.

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My hand twitched on the table, wishing she was here so I could comfort her. But after her responsibilities, she'd gone to check on Ellen and force-fed her when she had no appetite.

The background of her video displayed the same sterile walls of the infirmary. She'd taken the video chat by her sister's side.

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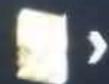


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