

## 405 The Test

Hades 1

The sound of her voice cut through the corridor like a drawn blade, halting us mid-step. For a moment, no one moved. No one breathed.

Cain's arms tightened subtly around Sage as we closed the remaining distance to the cell. Kael and I exchanged a glance—confusion flickering in his eyes, worry in mine.

I gave him a look that promised I would tell him soon.

He nodded, understanding the message I was trying to convey.

From inside came her voice again, this time quieter. "I want him. Only him."

Her meaning was obvious—her eyes were on me, even through the wall.

Maera's jaw ticked, but she signaled to the guard who had not been there before. The locking mechanism released with a sharp click, and the door groaned open on its hinges.

Light bloomed as I stepped in, and for a second

the world shifted at what greeted my return to this place.

Hours ago, when I'd last seen her, Ellen had looked like a woman pressing toward seventy; deep lines etched into her face, grey skin sagging with the weight of decades and hardship beyond comprehension. Back then, she had looked like she could have melted off her own bones. Now, under the flicker of the overhead lamp, the wrinkles had receded. The sallow tone had given way to a faint flush, like the first rush of blood to frozen skin. She looked... younger. Mid-fifties, perhaps.

If this situation hadn't been so eerie—compounded by the high-stakes game our lives had long since become—I might have asked...

"What anti-aging cream do you use?" Cain said, as though reading my mind. 1

Sage's voice slipped from Cain's arms, soft but carrying in the quiet. "You got even younger... than the first two times."

That caught every eye in the room. Kael's brows knit sharply. Maera turned fully toward the girl, but there was no surprise on her face. Of course, she already knew.

"The first two times?" I asked, my tone low but edged.

Sage glanced at me, then back to Ellen's face.

"The night they found her... she looked like she was ninety. Skin like wrinkled paper. Hair nearly white, not even grey. Then, a few days later, she looked maybe ninety, then eighty. And now..."

She gestured helplessly. "Now this."

Maera's voice was tight. "Aging in reverse," she muttered.

Ellen smiled faintly, though it didn't touch her eyes. "Not reverse. Reclamation. Piece by piece. I have given so much for Malrik's plans."

The weight of her gaze settled on me, unblinking. "And the rest of it," she said, "is something only you get to hear. Only if you treated my sister well enough for her to trust you. Or else... your pack will burn without you knowing where the fire was lit. And when you realise, it will already be too late." Her unblinking gaze did not leave me. She looked at me like she was looking through me, attempting to unravel me before the questions came.

But this was far from my first rodeo.

Her eyes narrowed, the tension sharp enough to





slice with a butter knife. "Enter, Alpha Hades."

Maera's shoulders tensed at the exclusion, but she stepped back. Cain's eyes flicked between Ellen and me, calculating. Kael's hand twitched—a sign of his dread and nervousness.

The cell door began to close, the heavy sound reverberating through the air until it sealed us in together.

"You want to know why I'm changing," Ellen said, her voice lower now, threaded with something unreadable.

I didn't answer, because I had a feeling that whatever explanation she gave was going to reach far beyond her.

She came closer, still slouching, until she stood right in front of me. "Hades Stravos," she spoke the name like she tasted it—and didn't particularly like the taste.

The feeling was mutual, despite what she had revealed about herself. Things I still wasn't sure I fully believed.

"Ellen Valmont," I replied, though it was more of a counter.

Her voice was monotone, which somehow made

it hit harder. "Who killed your family, Hades?"

My mind stuttered for a second, but I spoke, even though the answer still had the power to leave me breathless. "Eve killed my family. She killed my father and brother."

The people outside the cell gasped. I could hear Maera distinctly. Maybe I hadn't laid down all my cards.

She had no reaction to that.

"Your wife and child?"

"Felicia Montegue was responsible," I replied.

"But she took my child as hers."

Her brows rose slightly. "Do you forgive Eve for the hand she had in the massacre?" she asked.

"There is nothing to forgive. She did nothing wrong." I crooked a brow. "We both know that."

Something flickered in her eyes—something that looked pathetically close to guilt.

She seemed to collect herself quickly. "What is Eve's favourite hobby?"

"Painting," I replied, barely letting her finish the question. "Especially faces and eyes."

Ellen watched me for a long, measured moment, as if committing the answer to memory.

"How many freckles does she have on her whole person?" she asked.

Again, without hesitation: "Twenty-three on her face. Thirty-seven on her body."

Cain whistled, and I cut him a glare before turning back to Ellen.

Her eyes widened slightly before she pursed her lips. "What were her feelings towards Silverpine—the civilians?"

I almost laughed as the memory formed in my mind. "She loves her people. She tried to kill me with a kiss. She hid her identity to protect them. She lied like her life depended on every woven deception—but it was their lives she was trying to preserve. Each and every decision she made—every lie she spun, every truth she buried—was to shield them from the noose tightening around their throats. Even when it meant branding herself the villain."

Ellen studied me for a long moment, like she was turning my words over in her mind, testing their edges. "And if those same people turned on her?" she asked finally.






"They already have," I said. "She never stopped loving them." She knew exactly who I was talking about.

She looked away. "Final question. What do I call unicorns?"

When she looked at me, she was slightly smug—like she knew there was no way I would get this one.

"Uniform."

Her thin smile withered as she muttered, "She loved you." 

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