



411 Blocked (II)

Hades 1

The room buzzed with the murmur of planning for the journey back, tension heating the air and beading sweat onto the maps.

Maera listened, offering insights and better strategies with her knowledge of the terrain.

But as my head churned with plots for a successful escape, my skin prickled with anticipation and dread in equal measure. Eve's face seemed to dance in my vision. Elliot's voice rang in my ear.

I wiped sweat from my face, swallowing thickly. My vision tunneled slightly, and a hand on my shoulder pulled me back.

I turned to Kael. His face was a mask of worry. "Hades?" My name was a question.

I nodded, even as my vision doubled. "I am fine," I lied.

Cain ruffled my hair, his brow quirked in question. "You have to tell us if something is wrong. We have to be prepared if we're going to attempt an escape like this." He tried to keep his



voice casually sarcastic like normal, but it sounded forced.

He balanced Sage in his arms, rocking her gently.

I smiled at him. "You are not my dad—mind your daughter," I joked, attempting to lighten the weight of worry.

His eyes widened, blood draining from his face. "Did Eve tell you..." His words died on his lips as he noticed my confused expression. His lips pressed into a hard line. 2

It was our turn to question what he could be hiding. "Cain?" Kael's voice was high, his anxiety palpable.

Cain continued rocking Sage, rubbing her back as she stirred in her sleep. He shrugged us off. "This is not the time. If we survive this, I will tell you everything." His gaze was evasive. 1

Kael and I exchanged a look and made a decision. "Alright."

Cain let out a breath of relief. "So, are we talking the Wild Witch of the West?" he asked. 1

Maera spoke now. "Ellen Valmont?"

"Yes. From what I saw, Darius will not leave a



pebble unturned to get his little Blood Moon wielder, and the last thing we need is him finding her and cutting our time window even shorter."

"Well, I see where you're coming from, but it's better she stays here, with the risk of discovery only if they somehow find this place, rather than us taking her out and increasing the danger exponentially."

Kael nodded. "Agreed. We can't increase the risk. She's better off here, under Maera's watch." He gestured to the scarred commander.

"I agree as well. It makes more sense."

Cain tilted his head in thought. "Therefore, it will be the three of us leaving in the next hour—before it strikes midnight—so we can use the cover of darkness to the fullest before we'll have to hide when day breaks."

I forced myself to nod, though my skin prickled with unease. This was a gamble. All I could see was Eve's face if I failed. "That is the plan." I took a gulp of air. "Let's go."

The back door of the Underspines opened in a yawn, the cold air of the outside hitting me



again. I didn't know how it was possible, but even where I stood thousands of miles away from home, I could smell Obsidian. Eve: lavender and honey. Elliot: green eyes filled with hope and a smile that reached them.

For a moment, I lost myself in the possibility of getting home in one piece instead of getting picked off by a king and his men.

"Hades?" Kael pulled me out of my reverie.

I turned around to see we were no longer alone.

About a hundred people—fugitives—stood before us. Their faces unreadable as the tension heightened.

It was Cain, Kael, and I facing the multitude.

The cold air bit deeper as silence stretched between us and the crowd. The fugitives' eyes shimmered in the torchlight—eyes that carried years of loss, exile, and fear. Mothers pressed children against their skirts, men held their families close, and yet... none turned away. 1

An older man stepped forward, his weathered hands trembling as he removed a wolf-shaped pendant from his neck. He pressed it into Kael's palm, bowing low. "May the Blood Moon pass



without devouring you, and may the old gods remember mercy."

Kael froze, his throat tight, unable to respond.

Then a woman holding an infant lifted her voice, soft but steady: "We wish you safe journey, Alpha. Prove us wrong about your kind... prove that Lycans are not only ruin."

The words rippled through the assembly, some nodding, others whispering prayers.

Cain shifted uneasily, his usual smirk absent. For once, he had no quip to offer. Sage stirred in his arms, whimpering as if she too felt the weight of a hundred hopes pressing down on us.

I swallowed hard. For all the nights I had endured alone, drowning in grief and vengeance, this was different. This wasn't just survival anymore. These people weren't pawns in a rebellion—they were witnesses. If we failed, their blood would be on my hands.

"Thank you for your faith in us," I whispered against the lump in my throat.

They nodded hesitantly, warily, as Kael wore the pendant.

They all began to back away.



Cain looked down at the small bundle in his arms. Sage stirred, soft lips smacking in half-sleep, oblivious to the storm around her. His thumb brushed her cheek once—tender, lingering—before he exhaled and turned to Maera.

"Take care of her," he said gruffly, but the edge of command in his tone faltered into something more fragile. "Please." 3

Maera accepted the child with both hands, her scarred face softening only a fraction as she cradled Sage against her chest.

Cain straightened, rolled his shoulders, and then the familiar sound of bones shifting and sinew tearing filled the air. His body contorted, his arms bowing as fur sprouted in silver streaks along his frame. The wolf that emerged was massive, scar-slashed, its breath steaming in the torchlight. He shook once, claws scraping the ground, before raising his muzzle to scent the air.

Kael had shifted already, though slower, his wolf limping for half a heartbeat before it steadied. He shook out his fur with a low growl, tail lashing, before his keen eyes found me. His hackles lifted slightly.



"There's wolfsbane in your system still," I said. "I can smell it burning off you."

Kael's wolf snorted, an unamused sound, as if to say he already knew. But the edge of his stance was tighter, less confident.

I drew in a breath, forcing myself to focus. The air here was raw with cold, the sky overhead a sheet of black ink studded with stars. This was my moment to let the beast loose, to join them, to lead.

I pushed.

But nothing happened.

The shift did not come. 

