



167 On The Ground

Hades 1

My gaze locked onto the crumpled figure of Ellen, drenched in blood, clutching Jules' lifeless body with a desperation that tore through the cold air. I took a hesitant step forward, my breath caught in my throat, an unfamiliar tightness constricting my chest.

"No," I whispered, but the word barely left my lips, swallowed by the unbearable weight of the moment. My hands curled into fists at my sides, my jaw clenching so tightly it threatened to crack. "No, no, no—"

Ellen's head snapped up at the sound of my voice, her eyes swollen shut, her face bruised and battered, streaked with blood and tears, her eyes hollowed out by grief. "She's gone," she choked out, her voice barely more than a whisper, yet it cut through me like a blade. "I couldn't save her, Hades. I—I tried... I tried."

The guards stormed the room, guns raised, alert and searching for any more signs of danger as I quickly made my way to Ellen, who was a sobbing pile on the ground. She held on to Jules'



limp body, blood soaking into her dress, hands, and face as she held her as close as she possibly could.

"Oh, goddess..." Kael whispered, horror bleeding into his voice as he took in the macabre scene. Blood was splattered onto the adjacent wall, some still dripping. The floor was slick with more of Jules' blood. I knew whatever wrath he felt toward Jules for what she had done to him to escape fizzled out at the sight of her body.

Ellen rocked her, her screams and pleas slashing through the air. "Please, please, don't leave me alone. Not you too. Please," she hiccupped.

"Don't go like this. I'll tell you everything. I won't hide anymore. Please, you want to hear the whole truth? I'll tell you. Please, open your eyes..." She struggled against the avalanche of emotion threatening to swallow her whole. "I'm begging you!" she screamed. "I'm begging... you." 1

I pulled Ellen to me, but her hold on Jules did not falter even a little bit; if anything, it became tighter as if she dreaded someone taking her away.

I looked into Jules' face. She was bruised too, but for whatever reason, she almost looked at peace, as if asleep, save for the color leaching out of her



skin. I held Ellen to me as she sobbed into Jules, her cries fractured and shattered, each sob cutting through the silence like shards of glass. She trembled violently in my arms, her grip on Jules unrelenting, desperate, as if sheer willpower could keep her here, tethered to life.

"Ellen," I whispered, my voice raw, hollow. "She's gone."

"No," Ellen choked, her body wracked with sobs. "No, she can't be. She—" Her voice cracked, and she pressed her forehead against Jules', tears slipping down her cheeks and onto the lifeless skin below. "We were supposed to have more time. I was supposed to fix this... to make things right."

Kael stepped closer, his usual composed expression fractured with something that looked too much like regret. He knelt beside us, his gaze heavy with unshed grief. "Ellen..." he murmured softly, but she shook her head violently, her arms tightening around Jules in defiance.

"Don't," she snapped, her voice sharp with the sting of heartbreak. "Don't you dare tell me to let her go."



I felt her body tremble beneath my hands, and my grip on her tightened. "No one is telling you to let her go," I said, my voice low, my own grief bleeding through. "But we need to get her out of here. We need to—"

"Do what?" Ellen spat, her head snapping up to meet my gaze, fury and despair colliding in her bloodshot eyes. "We couldn't protect her. She died, Hades. Right in front of me. And I couldn't do anything. Nothing!" She beat her fist weakly against my chest, her strength depleted. "I should have—" Her voice broke, her sobs swallowing her words whole.

I closed my eyes, pressing my forehead against hers. "I know," I murmured. "I know."

Around us, the guards shifted uneasily, exchanging glances, unsure of what to do. The air was thick with the scent of blood and sorrow, a heavy weight pressing down on all of us. No one dared to move Jules' body, not with Ellen clinging to her like this.

I took a slow, shuddering breath, lifting my head to look at Kael. His jaw clenched, but he nodded. "I'll clear the room," he said, his voice low. "Give her time."



I nodded back, grateful. The guards began to retreat, their footsteps echoing hollowly against the cold floors. The world beyond these four bloodstained walls blurred into nothingness, leaving only Ellen, Jules, and the unbearable silence that followed in death's wake.

Ellen's sobs had quieted into ragged breaths, her fingers threading through Jules' hair as if she could memorize every strand, every feature. "You were always too good for this world," she whispered, her voice cracked but full of love. "And I was too broken to deserve you." 9

I swallowed the lump in my throat, guilt gnawing at me. "Ellen," I said softly, but she shook her head.

"She deserved so much more," Ellen murmured, her gaze distant, as if she were looking through me, beyond me. Her eye was bloodshot. "She deserved to be loved." 2

I felt something inside me break at the raw ache in her voice. "She did," I confirmed, my voice barely above a whisper. "And you loved her."

Ellen let out a shuddering breath, pressing a kiss to Jules' forehead and continued to sob.



I returned to our bedroom after taking Jules to be cleaned up for whatever came next. Ellen had refused to let go of Jules, and it had taken her having a panic attack and falling unconscious for her grip to finally be pried off.

It was the overwhelming smell of blood that did her in. But the fact that, for a moment in her grief, the blood had not even registered was a testament to how bonded she had been to Jules.

It was not hard to find out what happened later after Jules had suddenly incapacitated Kael by shooting him twice with his own gun and ringing the fire alarm as a distraction. She would have gone to the room and tried to hurt or even kill Ellen, only for a fight to the death to ensue. Yet I found it impossible that Ellen would kill Jules, despite having watched her kill her own sister—twice.

I opened the door, and for a moment, my blood ran cold when I did not see Ellen on the bed. I froze at the threshold, my eyes locked on Ellen's crumpled figure on the floor. The bed remained untouched, the sheets still crisp, but she sat against the wall, knees drawn to her chest, staring blankly ahead. No tears, no screams—just silence. A silence that pressed against my chest



like a weight I couldn't shake. 2

Her face was hollow, bruises stark against her pale skin. The blood had dried in dark streaks along her arms, staining her fingers. She had refused the Deltas' healing and had not showered. She was still bloodstained, wearing the same clothes. Her bloody fingers clutched something tight—a key. Small, unremarkable, yet gripped with such force that her knuckles had turned white. 2

I didn't call for the guards. I didn't ask what the key was for. Whatever it meant, whatever it unlocked, I knew it wouldn't undo tonight. Wouldn't bring Jules back.

Without a word, I crossed the space between us and lowered myself onto the ground beside her. The chill seeped through my clothes, but I didn't care.

For a long moment, I said nothing. I didn't touch her, didn't try to pull her out of whatever abyss she was staring into. I just sat there, letting the silence stretch between us like an unspoken understanding.

Ellen shifted slightly, the movement so subtle I almost missed it. Her fingers tightened around



the key in her hand, her grip desperate but her expression vacant.

"I couldn't save her," she whispered finally, her voice barely audible, raw and empty.

I swallowed hard, looking at the bruises on her wrists, the blood under her nails. "You saved her in more ways than you could ever realize," I said, my voice rougher than I intended.

Ellen didn't respond. She simply stared down at the key in her trembling hands, her fingers curling around it like it was the only thing tethering her to reality. I watched her chest rise and fall in shallow, uneven breaths, each one sounding like it took more effort than the last.

The silence stretched on, thick and suffocating.

I shifted slightly, careful not to startle her. "Ellen," I said softly, but she didn't move, didn't even blink. Her gaze remained fixed on the key, as if it held answers she couldn't yet decipher.

For the first time in a long while, I didn't know what to say. What could I say? There were no words to mend what had been shattered beyond repair.

I reached out, hesitating just before my fingers



brushed against hers. "We need to get you cleaned up," I tried again, my voice quieter this time, measured. "Let me help you."

She flinched at the touch. "She loved you," She whispered, her voice hoarse, her eyes steady on me.

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