



136 Neither Ellen Nor Eve

Eve 1

I leaned into his touch, if only to steal a little more warmth from him, to hold onto this fragile moment where I wasn't Eve or Ellen—just the broken pieces of both.

"I don't want to hear that name," I whispered, barely able to push the words out. "Not from you."

Hades stiffened slightly, his thumb brushing along my cheekbone in slow, careful circles.

"Then what should I call you?"

The question lingered between us, weighted with more meaning than either of us dared acknowledge.

I hesitated, but only for a breath.

"Call me Red," I said softly, leaning closer until my lips nearly brushed his again. "Your Red." To think that nickname had once unnerved me. 1

The possessiveness in those two words slipped out before I could stop them, but I didn't regret it. I wanted to be his. In this moment, I needed to be something other than the fragile lie I'd



wrapped myself in.

Hades exhaled, a low rumble vibrating from his chest as his forehead pressed against mine.

"Red," he murmured, the word curling against my skin like smoke—dangerous and intoxicating. His grip tightened again, and I felt the embers smoldering beneath his touch, the fire that only he could wield.

I shivered, but not from the cold.

"Mine," he added, almost as if testing the weight of the word.

I didn't correct him.

I didn't want to.

Instead, I kissed him again—slow, deliberate, as if sealing the words between us with every brush of my lips.

Because in his arms, I wasn't Eve. I wasn't Ellen.

I was Red.

And for now, that was enough.

"And I might have to let Jules out," he said quietly.

It took a moment for me to process his words.

"Let her out of what?" I asked, dreading the



answer already.

He was silent for a moment before letting out a nervous chuckle. "I might or might not have thrown her in a cell for hurting you."

"Hades!" I all but screamed. "You did what?" Horror settled heavily in my gut.

"I thought she hurt you. She was over you when I came in," his voice dropped lower with each syllable, like he was afraid of my reaction.

"Hades..." I let out his name in a frustrated sigh.

He pulled me closer, cradling my face. "I was worried," he murmured.

"And infuriated," I remarked.

"Aren't I always?" he asked. "But you did not see what I saw. I was... terrified," he whispered, an almost-confession.

I smirked. "I thought you had no fears," I teased.

"I don't," he grumbled childishly. "I just... don't like the idea of someone else having the chance to hurt you." 2

His words were gruff, but the way his forehead pressed against mine betrayed him. Hades—the Lycan king feared by all—was afraid of losing me. 4



I softened, threading my fingers into his hair. "I wasn't in danger," I reassured him quietly. "Jules was just—"

"Hovering over you like a vulture," he interrupted, his grip tightening as if remembering the sight all over again. 1

I sighed, resting my head against his chest. His heart thudded steadily beneath my ear, a rhythm I could lose myself in. "She wouldn't hurt me."

His silence told me he didn't believe that.

"I'll talk to her," I promised, though I wasn't entirely sure how that conversation would go. Jules was still a puzzle I hadn't unraveled. I felt her sharp edges sometimes, the bitterness she carried just beneath her skin—but I wanted to believe she wouldn't betray me. 1

Hades' lips brushed the top of my head. "I'll let her out in the morning."

"You'll let her out now," I countered, tilting my head up to meet his gaze.

His eyes narrowed. "Red—"

"Now," I said firmly. "Before she decides she should hurt me for throwing her in there." I joked.



His growl was soft but indulgent, like he was already regretting letting me have my way. "I still don't understand why she didn't call for help when she saw you that way," he murmured. "Not to mention that she was thirty minutes early." 1

I mused, recalling the last incident between us—the coded entries she had kept. What would have happened if I had written them in code? I tried not to think about it. "She must have had her reasons," I replied. 1

He was quiet for an unbearably long time. "What if she tried to kill you?"

I stiffened against him. "She would never—" 1

"Like your sister would have never?" he countered. 1

I pulled back, my heart clenching. "She is not Eve," I said.

"And Lucas did not torture Lucian," he added, an edge slipping into his voice. His grip on me tightened. 2

My heart skipped a beat, confusion swirling inside me. Torture? "Lucian? Who is Lucas, Hades?"

"That is not important," he said quickly. "Be



careful with Jules is all I'm saying. People are rarely as they seem." 3

The name Lucas echoed in my mind, louder than it should have. I wanted to search his face for answers, but I knew that Hades' expression would have already slipped into that guarded neutrality. It wouldn't have made a difference if I could see his face.

"Hades," I pressed softly, "who is Lucian?"

His jaw tightened, but he didn't meet my eyes. "It doesn't matter."

"It matters if you brought him up."

His grip on my waist tensed, a silent warning that the conversation was nearing dangerous ground. I could feel it—the weight of something he wasn't ready to say. 1

I opened my mouth to push again but stopped.

Instead, I slowly leaned forward and brushed a soft kiss to his forehead.

Hades froze beneath me, his entire body stiffening as if he hadn't expected it.

His voice was sharp and questioning. "What was that for?"



I smiled faintly, brushing his dark hair back into place. "Thought you needed it."

"I didn't."

"Of course, you didn't."

He let out a startling sound that could have been a mix of a chuckle and a snarl. "First spoon-feeding me, then the cringe-worthy nickname, now forehead kisses. What's next? Will you start breastfeeding me?" 4

For a moment, I could only pause in speechlessness before I struck him hard on the arm. "You and your perverted jokes!" I continued my assault as he laughed, unaffected.

"What?" he asked, feigning innocence. "What did I say now? You have enough to feed me."

I gasped, smacking him again—harder this time, though he barely flinched. "Hades!"

He laughed even harder.

"You will be getting spanked next!" I warned. 2

"But it should be the other way around," he countered.

"Hades!"



Hades

"She is more fragile than she looks," Amelia said, taking off her glasses. 1

"I figured that out already."

"For cases like this," she began slowly, "I would typically prescribe something to ease the symptoms—anti-anxiety medication or mild antidepressants to help stabilize her emotional state."

I felt my jaw tighten. "Then do it."

But Amelia didn't move.

She shook her head, tapping the rim of her glasses with a measured calm that immediately put me on edge. "I can't. Not with her condition."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why not?"

Amelia met my gaze, unfazed by the warning in my voice. "Because her bond with her wolf is already compromised, Hades. Any medication that affects her neurochemistry—especially suppressants—could widen the gap between them. If that happens..."

I leaned forward, feeling the edge in her hesitation. "If that happens, what?"



She exhaled quietly, as if weighing her words.
"She could spiral completely."

A growl vibrated low in my throat, but I bit it back. "You're telling me there's nothing you can do? That I'm supposed to just sit back and watch her break apart?"

Amelia's gaze softened, a small smile touching her lip as if she saw something that I didn't. "I'm telling you that she has to get better naturally. Aiding it with medication is dangerous. The more distant her wolf becomes, the weaker she'll feel. And the weaker she feels, the easier it will be for her to slip further into depression and obvious anxiety. It's a cycle, Hades—and one that can't be broken with a pill." **1**

I dragged a hand down my face, frustration curling beneath my skin like wildfire. I wasn't used to this—helplessness. "Some thing must be able to be done."

"There is something that you can do for her." **2**

"Me?" I narrowed my eyes at her.

Amelia leaned forward, folding her hands on the desk with the kind of calm that only irritated me further.



"Yes, you," she said simply, as if the answer had been obvious from the beginning.

I arched a brow, waiting for her to elaborate.

"She doesn't need prescriptions, Hades. What she needs is distraction."

I frowned. "Distraction?"

Amelia gave a slow nod. "Simple things—mundane, even. Take her to dinner, ask about her interests, indulge in her hobbies. Make her laugh. But not with that dark humor you always fall back on." Her eyes narrowed knowingly.

"Light-hearted, Hades. And yes, I know that's not your specialty, but you're going to have to figure it out." 2



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Eve 1

The air was heavy, but I forced myself to look forward. At Jules. Her eyes were on me as well, unreadable in an eerie way.

I opened my mouth to apologize, but her hand came up.

"You don't need to," she said. "It was not your fault. I'm just glad you are doing better."

I glanced down at the hands she folded in her lap. Every other part of her was as still as a statue, except for her fingers, which restlessly twisted together, betraying the calm expression she wore. The silence stretched between us, taut and thin, as if any wrong word might shatter it.

I wanted to believe her. That it wasn't my fault. But the weight pressing against my chest didn't lift.

"Jules..." I said her name softly, tasting the hesitation on my tongue. "I—"

Her fingers stilled. Her gaze flickered up to meet mine, sharp and searching.

"It's in the past," she cut in, a small, practiced



smile curving her lips. "No point dragging it out again, right?"

She was deflecting. I knew that smile too well. It was the same one I had given Hades countless times—the one that said I'm fine when I wasn't.

"Maybe," I replied, though my voice lacked conviction. "But I still feel like I owe you an explanation."

Jules exhaled through her nose, a quiet breath, as if calming herself.

"Don't," she insisted, her tone firmer now. Her hand brushed against mine for a second before she pulled back, clasping her hands tightly again.

"Seriously, your highness. Let it go."

Your highness?

I nodded, but the unease between us didn't dissolve.

"I should be the one apologizing for not respecting boundaries. I know things have been cold between us lately, but I want you to know that I will always be your friend." For a moment, the dullness in her eyes receded, giving way to something lighter before it shifted once again.

"Even if I seem like a whole different person at



times."

A whole different person?

But with the way her expression suddenly closed off again, I knew better than to push. I wouldn't get an answer—I just knew it. So I smiled, this time reaching for her hand.

Her skin was cold to the touch and clammy. She was far more anxious than I initially thought. She stilled at the contact, her eyes going wide.

"I guess we both have faults," I murmured softly.

"But it just goes to show how far we've come from being strangers. Friends will always be a little messy, right?"

Jules didn't respond immediately. Her eyes dropped to where our hands met, and for a fleeting second, I thought she might pull away. But she didn't. Her fingers twitched beneath mine, and though her skin remained cool, she let the contact linger.

"Messy, huh?" she echoed quietly, almost to herself. "I guess so."

The tension in her shoulders eased slightly, but the guarded look in her eyes never fully disappeared.



"I mean it," I pressed gently. "You can tell me if something's wrong. I don't want to pretend things are fine when they're not."

Jules' lips parted, but whatever she intended to say died in her throat. Her eyes flickered toward the window, as if searching for an escape. There was something tragic in her gaze, something foreboding, and in my gut, it felt so familiar.

"You are a good person, Ellen," her voice softened, almost feather-light. 1

"Glad you think so," I said, though my smile turned shaky.

Her eyes snapped to mine, her gaze sharp but her words soft.

"No, I mean it. You are genuinely kind." Her gaze turned searching, as if trying to unlock something within the depths of my eyes. "You don't blame, you don't judge. Even when you should." 1

I swallowed, the weight of her words settling heavily over me. There was something raw in the way Jules looked at me—like she was holding back a truth too sharp to say aloud.

"I don't see the point in judging someone I care



about," I said softly. "Not when I know how much pain they're already in."

Jules' expression flickered just for a moment. Her lips pressed together in a thin line, and she gave a short nod, as if my words confirmed something she already knew.

"You are the type to give pieces of yourself away until there is nothing left to give. You do it because you deem too many people worthy. Even when you bleed from the knife they thrust into your back." 1

A horrible chill ran up my spine. My palms turned clammy, and I found it harder to hold her gaze.

"You shouldn't be so forgiving," she murmured, more to herself than to me.

"Maybe not," I admitted. "But I can't change who I am."

For the first time that evening, Jules' mask cracked. Her eyes shone with something I couldn't quite place—grief, maybe, or guilt. She looked down again.

I didn't ask. I knew she wouldn't tell me.

"You call it forgiveness," she said after a long



pause. "I call it dangerous."

The silence that followed was thicker than before, pressing in around us like fog.

"You're not dangerous to me," I whispered, but the words felt fragile, even as I said them.

Jules' gaze met mine, sharp and conflicted. There was something in her eyes—something she desperately wanted to say but couldn't.

"Maybe you should stop trusting me so much, Ellen." Her voice was barely audible, but the weight of her words echoed loudly in my mind. 3

I stared at her, heart pounding. "Why would you say that?" 1

She hesitated for only a second. "Just... be careful. That's all." 1

"I will," I whispered.

For the first time, she smiled at me, but I could have sworn there were tears glistening in her eyes. She blinked, and it was gone.

"Ellen," she whispered so low that I had to move closer to hear her.

I tilted my head. "Yes?"

"When I found you, I was scared. You were



crying on the ground, your eyes closed, your body trembling. You were sobbing one name on your lips." There was an eeriness in her voice that made me hold my breath. Whose name would I have—? Then I froze. Ellen. It would be her name. Goddess, no—

"Ellie," Jules muttered. "You were whispering the name Ellie."

I blinked as if snapping out of a trance. "Ellie?"

Jules nodded, her eyes narrowing. "Yes, Ellie. There was so much pain in your voice as you said it. As if the name itself was breaking you apart."

"I—" I faltered, unsure of what to say. I could not believe my luck. She had heard Ellie, instead of Ellen.

"I was worried about who Ellie was and why the name would incite so much grief, so I asked."

"Who?"

"Beta Kael. He told me that Ellie was the nickname you gave Elliot Stravos, the late king's son." 2

Relief flooded my veins. "Yes, Ellie." I let out a breath.



As if a switch had flipped, her sharp eyes softened. "I heard you saved him. You must have missed him a lot."

I did miss the little boy, but the pang in my chest wasn't for him.

"I did," I said, forcing a smile. "Ellie was like a little brother to me." He was, for a little while.

Jules studied me carefully, but the suspicion that had lingered moments before faded. She nodded, as if satisfied with my answer, but something told me this wasn't the end of her curiosity.

Her hand rested briefly on mine once more before she stood. "That's sweet," she said softly.

The ache in my chest tightened, but I swallowed it down. "Thank you, Jules."

She hesitated at the door, glancing over her shoulder. "You know," she began, her voice barely above a whisper, "I thought for a moment... maybe Ellie was someone else. Someone you lost." 2

I forced a soft laugh. "No, nothing like that."

Her eyes lingered on me, searching one last time for cracks I couldn't let her find. Suddenly, she



burst into laughter. "Why are you so upright?" 1

Her laughter caught me off guard—light, but carrying an edge I couldn't quite place. I blinked, unsure how to respond.

"Upright?" I echoed, trying to match her tone, but the tightness in my chest lingered.

Jules grinned, stepping away from the door and folding her arms loosely across her chest. "You always sit like you're bracing for impact. Like someone's about to throw a spear at you."

I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips. "Maybe I am."

Her laughter softened, but as it faded, something thoughtful flickered across her face. "Ellen, you don't have to hold everything together all the time. You can relax, you know?" 2

I nodded, but we both knew it wasn't that simple.

Jules studied me for a moment longer, her amusement dimming into something more introspective. "It was strange..."

My heart jumped into my throat again. "What was strange?"

"Seeing His Majesty that way. When he saw you



on the ground. He looked—panicked. Desperate..." She almost mused. "He gathered you into his arms like the most delicate thing in the world. Like you were falling apart and he wanted—needed—to keep you together."

I swallowed, a painful lump forming in my throat at the mention of Hades. But more than that was the feeling of surprise. "He did what?"

"I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't been right there. It was the most beautifully tragic thing I've ever seen."

Jules' words hung in the air, thick with something unspoken. I felt frozen beneath their weight.

Hades... desperate?

It didn't seem possible. Not him.

"I didn't think he..." I trailed off, unsure how to finish the thought.

"Neither did I," Jules admitted softly, her gaze distant as if recalling the moment. "For a second, I thought he might tear apart anyone who got too close. I've never seen him like that before."

"He was just worried there might have been an intruder."

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"Maybe... but if that were the case, he wouldn't have whispered your name like a prayer or made a vow to you."

"A vow?"

Jules' expression turned inscrutable, her voice almost ominous. "He vowed never to betray you." 6

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