

203 Scars To Claws

Eve 1

Tomorrow was the day, and every waking thought was on what the dreaded meeting would bring. My mind flipped through all the possible manipulation tactics they would use to sway me back into their clutches.

As we lay in bed together, his arms wrapped around my waist, my head resting in the crook of his arm, sleep refused to find me. I tried to calm myself by listening to his steady heartbeat, but each time I closed my eyes, I could see their faces. 1

My damnation gleamed in their gazes.

My curse—the one they had branded onto my soul since the day of that fateful birthday—would be their weapon, sharpened by years of torment, of whispers in the dark, of the cold chains that once bound me.

I could already hear their voices.

Their justifications.

Their lies.



"We did this for your own good."

"We tried to save you from yourself."

"You belong with us. You always have. You always will."

A shiver crawled down my spine, and I curled deeper into Hades, as if I could escape the ghosts of my past by pressing myself into his warmth. His grip instinctively tightened, his subconscious recognizing my unease even in sleep.

I tilted my head slightly, looking up at him in the dim glow of the moon filtering through the curtains. He looked so at peace—so unlike the king who bore the weight of a pack on his shoulders. His brow, usually furrowed in thought or restraint, was smooth, his lips slightly parted as he breathed deeply, steadily.

I envied him.

Hades had his demons, but he had conquered them. He had torn them from their roots and forced them to submit to his will.

Mine still lurked in the shadows.

I exhaled slowly, carefully slipping from his hold.



His arms twitched, reaching for me in his sleep, but I moved softly enough that he didn't fully wake. Standing, I wrapped one of his discarded robes around myself and padded toward the window.

I pressed my forehead against the cool glass, my fingers tightening against the fabric of the robe.

"You are not Ellen Valmont anymore."

"You are Eve Stravos."

I repeated the words in my head like a mantra, willing them to become truth.

But names alone did not erase the past.

I had spent so long surviving that I had never learned what it meant to live. To be free.

And tomorrow, I would be stepping back into the cage I had once called home.

The sound of shifting sheets pulled me from my spiraling thoughts, and I turned to see Hades watching me, his eyes alert like he had not been sleeping.

"You should be sleeping," he murmured, his voice husky from sleep.

I offered him a tired smile. "So should you. You

weren't sleeping, were you?"

"Your heart was pounding like a war drum. There was no way I was sleeping. Rhea is agitated too—Cerberus can feel it."

He sat up, rubbing a hand down his face before pushing back the covers. Without a word, he stood, walking toward me.

I didn't move as he approached, his warmth radiating even before his arms wrapped around me from behind, pulling me against his chest.

"Talk to me," he said simply.

I swallowed, staring out at the city. "I just... can't shut my mind off."

His chin rested against my shoulder. "You're scared."

It wasn't a question.

I let out a quiet laugh, but there was no humor in it. "Wouldn't you be?"

"Yes," he admitted without hesitation. "But fear is nothing compared to what you have become, Eve." His voice was steady, unwavering. "They don't get to define you anymore. They don't get to own you. You walk in there tomorrow as their



reckoning. Not as their victim." □ □

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His words struck something deep inside me, unraveling the tight knot that had lodged itself in my chest.

"They're going to try to make me doubt myself," I whispered.

"They'll fail," he said simply.

I turned in his arms, tilting my head to look up at him. "And if they don't?"

His hands slid to cup my face, his eyes dark and determined. "Then I will remind you. I will never let them take you, Eve. Not in mind, not in body, not in soul."

His conviction bled into me, wrapping around my bones like armor.

"They'll use that," I murmured, trying to keep from shuddering.

He raised a brow. "What?"

I bit my lip. "You. Us. This. They know it's why they no longer control me. They will try to look for cracks."

"They can try."



I turned to face him. "I know them. They will find one."

"You don't believe in..."

"Us? Of course, I do. I have conviction. I love you."

"I love you too," he whispered.

My eyes wandered to the earring dangling on his ear. "But when all else fails, I know they will go for the jugular."

Hades' jaw locked, his eyes hardening. I could feel the dread wrack his body. He knew what I was referring to.

"You are not the monster that killed her. You are not the beast of the night. You are not your father, either. You did not make that call." 1

"I know," I muttered. "The earring was for her."

He stilled and gulped. "Yes. A present for our wedding anniversary. How did you know?"

"A man like you wearing a single emerald earring? It wasn't hard to figure out," I said softly, reaching up to trace the edge of it with my fingers.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed, his hands



tightening ever so slightly around my waist. "She loved emeralds," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. "They were the color of her eyes too."

"I am sorry, Hades," I whispered, caressing his cheek.

He leaned into my touch. "You are not at fault."

"But they'll still use Danielle."

Saying her name left a sour taste in my mouth, and it twisted my heart. Her life had been ripped away from her by my father, but I couldn't help but shatter a little each time I remembered that if she were still alive, I would have no place in Hades' life.

Hades exhaled sharply, his grip shifting like he was bracing himself. "You didn't hurt her."

"But my family was responsible, and they will play into that. They might have no remorse, but I do. They will weaponize my guilt. They will say that I should be ashamed for taking her place."

"You are not taking her place. She was not an outline for you to fill, Eve," Hades said, his voice firm, unwavering. His grip on my waist tightened as if he could will the thought away from my



mind entirely. "Danielle was a part of my past, but you—you are my present, my future. No one, not even them, gets to dictate what you deserve." 2

I wanted to believe him. Gods, I wanted to. But the weight of it—the idea that her absence had carved a space that I now occupied—it haunted me in ways I couldn't put into words.

I inhaled shakily. "They will say that I was never supposed to exist. That my birth was a mistake, and her death was fate balancing the scales. And they will say that you... that you should have been hers, not mine."

Hades' entire body went rigid.

"They will try," he said, his voice deceptively calm, but there was steel beneath it. A storm brewing. "They will try to twist the past into something it never was, to make you doubt what we are. But let me tell you something, Eve—" His fingers slid to my chin, tilting my face up to his.

His eyes burned into mine, fierce. "No fate, no prophecy, no divine decree could have stopped me from choosing you. Even if Danielle had lived, even if things had played out differently... I know, with every part of me, that my heart would still belong to you."



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His voice trembled.

A sharp breath left me, something inside me cracking under the weight of his words.

"Then tell me about Danielle. The accident. Everything. I need to hear it from you, not from them. No surprises they can weaponize, no manipulation. I need you to trust me with your scars so that they don't make them claws." 1

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