



## 288 On Her Own

Eve <sup>1</sup>

My stomach dropped.

Not from fear.

Not this fucking time.

But from the sick realization that I could not call Rhea.

Not now.

Not after I'd forced her to rest, to heal, to retreat deep into the marrow of my bones where the pain couldn't touch her anymore. I'd told her I needed to learn to survive without leaning on others—on her. <sup>2</sup>

And this?

This was the price of that vow.

"You hear that heartbeat?" one of them whispered with a wet grin, his face too close to mine. "She's scared. I like them scared."

Another chuckled as he pried my jaw open,



fingers thick and calloused. "Open wide, sweetheart. Don't fight it. There had been a rumour that some mutts have been sneaking through the border. We just gotta check.

I didn't scream.

I bit down.

Hard.

He howled, staggering back with blood pouring from his hand.

That was my moment.

I drove my elbow into the gut of the one behind me, twisting free from the grip that held my wrist. He snarled and went to grab me again, but I grabbed the trash can lid beside us and slammed it into his temple with a grunt. The clang reverberated down the alley.

The third one lunged.

I ducked, sidestepped, and jammed my knee into his thigh. He buckled just enough for me to grab a broken pipe on the ground and slam it across the side of his head. Blood sprayed across the bricks.



My ribs ached. My shoulder burned. I didn't stop.

They regrouped fast.

The first one I'd bitten charged me, growling, half-shifted now. Claws extended. Fangs peeking.

I hurled a chunk of concrete at his face—it cracked against his brow. He stumbled.

Another leapt at me. I caught him mid-air with a shove, using his momentum to throw him into the dumpster with a sickening crunch.

But I was tiring. Fast.

Adrenaline buzzed in my ears like static. My breaths came shallow.

The last one grabbed a metal pipe and swung—

It grazed my shoulder, knocking me sideways.

I hit the ground, pain blooming in my side.

He loomed above me. "Been trailing for a while now, who the fuck are you?"

I didn't answer.





I surged up, ramming my fist into his gut.

Then his throat.

Then his jaw.

I fought like I wasn't made of bone and skin and muscle.

I fought like I was fire and fury and every scar that hadn't healed right. 1

I kicked his knee backward, and it buckled with a crack. He howled and collapsed.

Then the first one grabbed me by the back of the jacket and slammed me into the wall.

My vision blurred.

I grabbed a shard of glass from the broken bottle near my boot and jammed it into his side. He shrieked, stumbling back, clutching the wound.

I ripped off my coat, lighter now, faster.

I pivoted on my heel and landed a brutal roundhouse to the side of the third one's face as he staggered toward me again, his claws raised. Blood flew from his mouth.



He dropped.

I stood there panting, sweat soaking through my shirt, body bruised and trembling but still standing.

They lay around me—groaning, unconscious, or too broken to try again.

And I hadn't shifted once. 3

My fingers bled. My lip was split. My ribs throbbed with each breath.

But I had done it. 1

Alone.

No Rhea.

No Hades.

No one.

I wiped the blood from my mouth with the back of my sleeve.

Then I spit on the ground beside them.

I didn't wait for them to rise.

I walked out of that alley without looking back.



My legs trembled, but my spine stayed straight.

I wouldn't bow.

I wouldn't break.

Even if healing was slow because I let Rhea recede, I just needed to be alive by the time she returned. She trusted me for a reason.

I limped out of the alley, each step sharp with pain.

My shirt clung to my back, sticky with sweat and blood. My breathing came in shudders now—less from exhaustion, more from the crashing aftermath of what I'd just done.

I didn't feel triumphant.

I felt... raw.

Like I'd peeled my skin back just to prove there was still something human beneath.

But I kept moving.

One foot.

Then the other.



Past the blinking traffic lights.

Past the slurred howls of the nightlife.

Past the moon hanging above the skyline like it  
was watching and saying nothing.

I reached the next block, dragging my weight on  
one leg.

The streets were emptier now.

Quieter.

But I didn't trust the silence.

Something prickled at the back of my neck.

Then I heard it.

A footfall.

Too close.

Too precise.

Too late.

Before I could even turn—before I could even  
reach for the shard of glass still tucked in my  
pocket—an arm snaked around my torso,  
yanking me off balance.





And then—

A damp cloth was clamped over my mouth.

No.

I thrashed, kicked, twisted.

But the hand on my waist was iron. The cloth reeked of chemicals. Sharp. Bitter. Familiar in the worst way.

I tried to scream, but it was swallowed by the fabric.

My nails clawed at the stranger's arm, scraping skin, drawing blood—but he didn't even flinch.

I felt his breath at my ear, steady. Unhurried.

Like he'd done this before.

Like he knew I couldn't fight him for long.

"No," I hissed through clenched teeth, my voice muffled. "No—let go—let—"

My vision blurred.

The city lights stretched like melting stars.

Rhea.





I reached for her.

I didn't want to.

I didn't want to call for her yet. I hadn't earned it.

But I was slipping.

> Rhea...

My body jerked in his hold.

His grip only tightened.

> Rhea, please...

My thoughts frayed. My muscles betrayed me.  
My knees buckled.

The scent hit me then—deep, cloying cedar and  
silver ash.

Familiar. 2

Too familiar.

My stomach churned.

I knew this scent.

Gods, I knew it.

The dread crawled up my throat.



"I know this," I whispered against the cloth, each syllable slurring. "I know this—I know this—I—"

> Rhea... help me...

But she didn't answer.

She couldn't.

Because I'd pushed her too far away.

And now...

My limbs went numb.

My head lolled against his chest.

Darkness bled through the corners of my sight.

I tried to scream.

Tried to curse.

Tried to fight.

But my arms went slack.

And the last thing I saw—

Blond hair. 4

Like a crown of doom above a face I couldn't see.

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So much for not bowing.

Then the dark swallowed me whole.

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