



## 289 We Meet Again

Eve <sup>1</sup>

It was drowning, my hands flailing in the oppressive depths. Panic saturated my body like the water that now wanted to take me. My stared up or what I hoped was up as I propelled myself up. <sup>1</sup>

My lungs burned, my heart pounding like a war drum in my ears as I clawed through the thick weight of whatever dream, or memory, had me trapped. I couldn't see, couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

Until I broke the surface.

A sharp gasp tore from my throat.

I sat up so fast it felt like whiplash, my body seizing forward as air flooded my lungs like fire.

The world spun.

My hands flew to the ground, fingers digging into something soft, grass? Carpet?

I blinked hard.



Again.

The blur gave way to shadowed walls. A dimly lit room. A windows. Just the sharp tang of alcohol, old blood, and steel in the air. A low hum of electricity in the silence.

I was on a mattress.

Not a bed. A mattress. No frame. No blankets.

Just me, damp with sweat, breath shallow, heart clawing at my ribcage like it wanted out.

I dragged my palm down my face.

My mouth tasted like chemicals.

My head throbbed like I'd been clocked with a brick.

And my arm...

My arm had a puncture mark.

Needle.

They'd drugged me.

The memory of the blond hair came back in a flash. My stomach turned. 1



I knew that scent. I knew it. But it was tangled in the wrongness of the moment, warped by the fear and the fog.

I scanned the room. Slowly.

A door. Heavy. Reinforced.

One camera in the corner. Red light blinking.

I was being watched.

No chains. No cuffs.

Not yet.

Just a locked room and silence loud enough to scream through.

I crawled to the far wall, pressing my back against it, trying to steady my breathing. My head swam. My thoughts were thick sludge.

Rhea.

I tried to reach for her again—tried to feel that flicker of warmth, of power beneath my skin.

But there was nothing.

Still.





She was still sleeping.

I was truly on my own.

I rested my forehead against my knees, curling tighter into myself as the dread began to settle under my skin like rot.

Where the hell was I?

Who had taken me?

And worse...

Why hadn't they hurt me yet?

Because this wasn't mercy.

This was waiting.

Waiting for something.

For someone.

And gods help me, I had the sickening feeling of who it could be.

My heart lunged out of my chest when the door opened, I snapped up to my feet and took a defensive position.

In walked a man, and instantly alarm bells began



to ring as I took a steady step back. My last memory of him still made my skin crawl with dread, nausea blossoming in response. "You..." I wanted to sound firm, but the words came out breathless.

He stopped as well, his widening slightly as though he did not expect me to be awake so fast. "Your Highness..." His voice was surprising me level, almost soft, none threatening as though not to startle me. "You are awake." 1

An awkward moment passed, none of us saying a word, the silence weighing tone before he blinked slowly, collecting himself. "I brought you something to eat."

It was only then that I dared to notice what he was holding, a tray with a simple dish on it ...a bowl of broth, a piece of bread, and a tin cup of what smelled faintly like herbal tea.

My stomach growled—loudly. Betrayal.

But I didn't move.

My eyes stayed locked on him, on the way his fingers curled around the tray, on the faint stiffness in his posture. He wasn't quite at ease



either. That made two of us.

His blond hair was slicked back now, damp at the edges, as if he'd just washed his face. There was a faint line across his jaw, an old scar I didn't remember being there.

Not that I remembered much about him.

Not beyond that night when he had taken me the same way. A cloth over my mouth when I was none the wiser.

Not beyond the sound of his voice calling me a mutt, as the sedative took me under.

Only to bring me to Felicia's torture chamber.

He was one of the twins, Hades old henchmen. 4

"You're safe," he said quietly, setting the tray down on a metal table bolted to the floor near the far wall.

I didn't reply.

He stepped back slowly, hands raised in a show of peace. "You're not restrained. You can eat. You can move around. The door's locked, yes, but only for protocol. Not to punish."





I narrowed my eyes. "Protocol?"

He hesitated. "You're still considered... unstable."

I snorted.

"Understandable," he added quickly. "After what you've been through. What they did to you."

"They?" My voice cracked like glass. "You mean you weren't part of it?"

He winced, just a flicker, but I caught it.

"I have been...following you, since you left the tower." he said simply. "And for that—I won't insult you with an apology. I just want you to know I never would've let them—" He cut himself off. "But you took care of them yourself." This words came out breathless as though in...awe.

Dark eyes that I recalled shimmering a little. He no longer appeared as smug as I remembered, no trace of the hostility I could never forget.

My heart thundered in my chest. I took another step back. The wall was cold at my back, grounding. Real.

"I know you don't trust me," he said.



"You think?"

He nodded once. "You shouldn't...after..."

That made me pause.

He looked down, then back up, something taut in his expression now. Regret. Maybe. Or a shadow of something deeper. "But I didn't bring you here to hurt you."

"Then why?" I rasped. "Why bring me here? Why take me?"

He took a long breath, as though deciding just how much to reveal. "You were in danger in those streets. I wanted to return the favour of letting his Majesty spare me and my brother."

My lips curled with distaste. "I was doing well on my own. I didn't need you knocking me out." The words came out as a growl. 1

He took a step back, raising his hand defensively. "I am sorry for that but you were on edge. And you would have been detected by smell once you get too close to the woods. The rogues can be dangerous."

I let that settle in. "What's your name?" I





questioned.

"Rook," he replied. "Nice meeting you again, Princess." 2

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