



347 The Mark's Control

It itched as I ran but the last thing I could do was care. The wind rushed past my ears, dragging the sound of my breathing into a blur. Thorns bit into my ankles, the cold earth tore at my soles, but I didn't stop. Couldn't. Wouldn't. **1**

I waited for the alarms to ring. For the sirens to blare. For my name to thunder through the air like a curse, chased by orders and the echo of boots.

But there was nothing.

Just the ragged pulse in my throat and the sharp beat of fear in my chest.

No bells. No voices. No crashing gates.

Only the sound of leaves whispering secrets to one another.

The sun hit my skin, blinding me but I welcomed the pain.

I broke into the clearing, heart hammering, breath caught somewhere between panic and



disbelief. For a split second, I stood still, chest rising, sweat clinging to my back, eyes darting around like prey expecting a hunter.

Still nothing.

Relief swept over me so violently it almost knocked me to my knees. My vision blurred for a moment, not from tears, but from release. From disbelief that I'd made it even this far.

The forest swallowed me like a secret. Dense. Unforgiving. Alive.

Branches clawed at my skin like warnings. Roots curled like fingers around my ankles, but I pushed through, further and further, until Faculty 14 was no longer a silhouette behind me—just a weight in my mind.

I didn't know how long I'd have before they noticed.

But for now... I was free.

But for how long...

I grimaced as the itching in my arm grew but I could risk touching it, not now, until I was far enough, but could I ever be far enough? How did



the accursed mark work?

Fear seized me before I even pulled up to sleeve to look down at it. My heart flipped painfully in my chest as it continued to pulse. 1

I did want to wait to find out what it meant

I jumped into a sprint again

It started as an itch. Then it stung.

Then it burned.

Each step forward was like running through glass. My breath hitched, catching in my throat as I pushed harder, deeper into the forest, trying to outrun the fire gnawing up my arm. I dared not look at it again. Not yet. Not while I still had a head start.

But the moment I heard the sirens, something inside me shattered.

WEE-OO. WEE-OO. WEE-OO.

The blare sliced through the trees like a blade, echoing across the canopy in cruel triumph.

"ALERT: Subject Ellen Valmont has escaped containment. Section 9 lockdown initiated. All



tracking officers report to grid sector twelve. This is a live manhunt. Engage with extreme caution."

My name. My name screamed into the wild.

A sob threatened to burst from my chest but I choked it down with a curse. Run. Just run.

My feet pounded against the earth, the sound of boots now crashing in the distance behind me—multiple sets. Shouts. Weapons. Collars.

The mark on my arm throbbed again, worse than before.

It wasn't just burning now. It was pulling—a hot, clawing weight dragging me back like invisible hands had closed around my spine. I staggered, nearly tripping over a gnarled root, and gritted my teeth as the pain surged.

"Kala," I whispered. "Please—"

Silence.

Only the sound of blood in my ears and the dark, empty chasm where my wolf once lived. Hollow. Gone.



The Hollowing had taken her. Stripped me bare.

The mark pulsed again—harder, deeper—and my knees buckled.

A voice followed. His voice.

"My darling girl," my father's voice filtered through the trees like a spell, soothing, wrong. "You're frightened. I know. I know this isn't what you thought it would be. But you're not alone."

I cried out, slamming my palm into a tree to stop from collapsing. "Get out of my head."

"You'll have power, Ellen. The kind only the blood of the moon can give. But first... we need yours. Just a little more."

"No—"

"It won't be long now. You should remember our deal."

The mark flared like molten iron.

This is not real. This is not real.

But it was. Not a hallucination. Not a memory. Control.



The mark wasn't just tracking me.

It was turning me around.

I could feel my body shifting without my will.
Like marionette strings had sunk into my skin.
My limbs trembled as I tried to resist, panic
clawing up my throat like a second heartbeat.

"Turn around," he whispered gently, "and we'll
forgive this mistake. You're still our blessed one.
You still matter, Ellen."

Tears sprang to my eyes—not from emotion, but
from the sheer force of the agony that followed.

This wasn't just a curse.

This was Vassir's horn at work. Five years of
conditioning. Subtle. Invasive. Mind control
etched into my very blood.

How many times had I said yes without
knowing?

Not this time.

Not this time.

With a roar, I slammed my fist against the
nearest tree, ignoring the crack of pain in my



knuckles.

"I'm not yours!" I shouted into the void.

And I ran again. Even as my body screamed.
Even as the mark tried to pull me back like a
leash.

Because if I stopped now... I wouldn't be me
anymore.

It was still fighting me.

The mark—that cursed, crawling rot—kept
tugging at my nerves, trying to twist my limbs
back toward the sound of boots and teeth and
loaded guns. But something was off. Different.

It wasn't as strong.

I didn't know why. Maybe the moon. Maybe the
flare of power I felt back in the cell before I
broke free—when the lights had flickered and
the air had stilled like time itself paused for
breath.

All I knew was that the grip had loosened.

And I had to move while I still had the chance.

The shouts grew clearer. Rough. Barked.



Familiar.

Too close.

I dropped low into the brush, crawling through the undergrowth on shaking limbs. My body was on fire. My breath came in short, tight gasps. But I was quiet. I had to be quiet.

Behind me, I heard the snap of a twig. Then another.

"They said she went this way," a voice growled.

"Check the trail by the eastern ridge."

"Shift," another ordered. "Catch her scent before it fades."

No.

No no no—

The mark pulsed again, violently this time, like it knew I was hiding. Like it wanted to call to them.

And it was.

A low, humming heat began to rise from my arm. Like it was broadcasting. Signaling. Beaconing.

My limbs shook as I pressed myself deeper into



the foliage, trying to will the pain away. Trying to smother the light that wasn't light—the energy rippling out of me in invisible waves.

But I could feel it now, moving beneath my skin like worms. Crawling toward my chest. My throat.

It wanted me to stand.

To step into the clearing.

To be found.

I bit down on my tongue until I tasted blood. My fingers clawed at the soil.

"No," I whispered, voice raw. "You don't get to choose anymore."

My gaze flicked to the forest floor, frantic. Desperate.

And then I saw it.

A sharp rock. Jagged. Split like a blade.

I snatched it with trembling fingers. Without thinking—without letting myself hesitate—I shoved up my sleeve and slammed the stone into my skin.

The scream caught in my throat.

But gods, it burned.

Again.

I dug into the mark, tearing into the lines scorched over my veins. The pain was unbearable, like fire laced with poison, like pulling barbed wire through muscle. But I didn't stop.

I couldn't stop.

This is mine. My body. My choice.

The scent of blood rushed into the air—my blood. I bit down on my own wrist to muffle the sob that tore free. My vision swam.

The mark writhed under the assault, lashing back with heat and fury, but it was no longer in control. Not completely.

Something had weakened it. And I would exploit every second of it.

"I am not your pawn," I hissed. "I am not your daughter. I am not your weapon."

I kept digging.



The boots were coming closer again—snapping, crashing. But I didn't care.

Because for the first time in five years, I felt it—the string snapping.

The control fraying.

And if I had to peel every cursed inch of skin off to be free—

Then so be it.

It didn't even feel like skin anymore.

The stone slipped from my grasp, slick with blood, and I kept digging with my nails—peeling, scraping, sobbing through gritted teeth. The bark beneath me was smeared red, the soil drank it up greedily. My arm trembled violently, the air around it shivering like heat haze.

Then—

Nothing.

No pain. No fire. No voice.

Just silence.

A terrifying, unnatural silence.



My fingers froze. My chest stopped rising. I blinked—and blinked again—because the world had gone still, too still.

Then, all at once, I moved.

I rose—fast, like a string had yanked me upright.

My legs obeyed without consent. My arms hung limp, blood dripping freely. My mouth opened—

And I screamed.

"I'm here!"

The words tore out of me like they didn't belong to me. Like my voice had been hijacked. Hollow. Empty. Announcing myself to the hunt.

No. No. No—

Horror surged like black ice in my veins.

I looked down, breath catching.

The mark was still there—burning through the torn flesh of my arm like it had never been touched. Like it was mocking me.

And then—



A hand wrapped around my throat.

Large. Cold. Calloused.

I choked, fingers flying up to pry it off, but another hand caught my wrist midair, yanking it behind my back with ease.

A growl thundered into my ear. "Found you."

I thrashed wildly. "No—let go of me!"

He laughed. It wasn't cruel—it was worse. It was calm. Like this was a game he'd already won.

"You never had a chance, Ellen. You think this little tantrum makes you free?"

The mark throbbed, syncing with his grip.

He tightened his hold on my throat just enough to still me, then leaned close, his breath brushing my cheek.

"Let's go home."

My legs refused to move. My mouth refused to open.

I screamed in my mind—screamed so loud my soul should've shattered.



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But my body... It obeyed him.

Because the mark was never just a tool.

It was a leash.

And my father was still holding the other end.

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