



393 The Thing In Black

Eve **1**

The world stopped.

Her words slammed into me so hard I forgot
how to breathe.

Lyra.

My mother.

Marked.

It was as if every sound in the infirmary bled out
at once. The Gammas. The medics. The quiet
shuffle of boots on the polished floor. Gone. All I
could hear was the pounding in my own ears.

And then came the memories.

Not the good ones.

Not the warm ones.

Just the jagged, splintered fragments of the last
time I saw her.

"You are no daughter of mine. You are a plague.



A curse."

Her voice had been razor-sharp, cutting straight through flesh and bone, lodging itself deep where no one could pull it out. I had been standing there, chained and bloodied, my face swollen from the last round of interrogation, still trying to believe that if I held on just a little longer, she would come for me.

I remember staring at her in shock, the sting in my chest far worse than the ache in my broken ribs.

I remember the confusion, the disbelief.

I remember clinging to the only explanation I could bear—

that she did not mean it.

Because the alternative, that she did, would have destroyed me.

I remember the days in the cell, my body a map of bruises, my ears ringing from the screams of others. Every moment, I told myself the same thing:

She will come.



She will walk through that door.

She will tell me she believes me.

She will stop this.

She never did.

And then there was that call. The strange, stilted one, where her voice wavered, where for a heartbeat I thought I had imagined the venom in her words. For a heartbeat, she sounded like herself again. I had whispered, "Mum?" and for that fragile second, I thought she was breaking. I thought she would fight for me.

Until I heard him.

My father's voice in the background.

She changed in an instant. Her tone sharpened, her words twisted, the distance slamming back into place like a steel door.

It had been so obvious. So damn obvious that something was wrong.

And yet, I had not seen it.

I had been too deep in my own prison to see hers. Too consumed by my own survival to even



think of saving her.

Guilt burned hot in my veins, but tangled with it—strangely, shamefully—was relief.

Because if she was marked, then maybe... maybe she had not meant any of it. Maybe it had not been her at all. 2

My knees threatened to give out under the weight of it. My throat tightened, my vision blurring not from tears, but from the dizzying collision of rage, sorrow, and the faintest, most dangerous spark of hope.

Lucinda's voice pulled me back, ragged and urgent. "That place..." she muttered. "They called it the Cauterium." She shuddered. "It is in Silverpine."

Confusion seeped into the convoluted mass of emotion balled in my chest. "How the hell did you get there? Without Montegue finding out?"

Her voice was hoarse. "Blood in her room. Felicia's room... It requires blood."

Confusion twisted tighter in my chest.

"Blood in her room?" I echoed.

Lucinda's hands trembled as she wiped at her face, her voice hoarse. "It required blood to start the teleportation. To the Cauterium. In Silverpine." Her eyes unfocused, staring at something only she could see. "It fed on it. Drank it in. And then it let me in."

I blinked, my mind struggling to keep up. "You mean you walked through a portal?"

She shook her head slowly. "No. There was no walking. It was like the air ripped open. A bright light swallowed me, and suddenly I was in this... white chamber. Blinding. Sterile. I did not even have time to breathe before they came."

Her voice broke for a second, and when she spoke again, it was barely a whisper. "The Gammas. Not like the ones here. These... these were worse. They did not just look dangerous. They felt it. It was in the air, in the way they moved. They mauled me before I could even think, but I screamed that I was from Felicia."

I stilled.

Lucinda's gaze darted to mine, her expression bleak. "The moment I said her name, they stopped. Just stopped. Then they took me to a

room. No questions. No hesitation."

She shuddered again, her whole body curling inward. "And then... I saw him."

My stomach dropped. "Who?"

Her eyes lifted to mine, and for a heartbeat, I thought she might break. But her voice came, soft and raw. "Your father. Darius."

My heart slammed into my throat so hard I thought I would choke on it.

Lucinda's voice shook. "Eve... his aura... it is pure evil. Twisted in a way I did not think was possible. My wolf... she did not just retreat. She hid. Curled up so far inside me, I could barely feel her. It was like he stripped the air out of the room. Like every part of me knew—"

She stopped, but she did not have to finish. The grave look in her eyes spoke volumes.

Whatever she had faced in that place, whatever she had seen in him... it had left a mark she would never shake.

Lucinda's eyes shifted, and when she spoke next, it was like she dropped a stone into the pit of my



stomach.

"Your mother..." She hesitated, swallowing hard.

"She was... docile."

The word hung there, wrong.

"Docile?" I repeated, my voice thin.

Lucinda nodded. "Far away. Gone. She looked straight ahead like she did not even know where she was. No recognition. No fight. Just... blank." Her gaze drifted over my shoulder, as though she could still see it. "She sat there in that white room, staring into nothing."

My chest felt tight, my nails digging into my palms. "And who else was there?"

Lucinda's lips pressed into a thin line before she said, "Beta James."

I felt my pulse quicken.

"And... one more person."

Something cold slid down my spine. "Who?"

Lucinda's eyes returned to mine, heavy with something that felt like both fear and disbelief.



"He was dressed in all black," she said slowly. "Not just black—black that swallowed the light around him. He stood taller than any man in the room, his hands pale against the darkness. And when he moved... it was like the air bent to make way for him."

I did not breathe.

She swallowed, her voice trembling now. "He opened his mouth and I saw... fangs. Like a Lycan's. But he cannot be a Lycan. He was something else entirely."

My skin prickled. "What was he?"

Lucinda shook her head, her tone dropping to a whisper. "Otherworldly. Nothing like I have ever seen before. He looked a million years old... and yet... ageless." 3

It sounded like a myth but I had a horrible inkling as to what it could be. It was outlandish, they had not been seen since the moon fell, since Vassir was vanquished by Malrik Valmont.

The vein pulsing in my head was so close to bursting. "Lucinda, what did he do?" I asked. "Did he hurt you? What did he do to you?"



Lucinda turned impossibly paler than she already was, more beads of sweat gathering at her brow. She took a gulp of air, my eyes darting to her hand that had already begun to twitch.

The dread that weighed down on my gut grew heavier. The Gammas that surrounded us were all on high alert, Elliot licking his grandmother's face to encourage her.

She managed a shaky smile and gulped. She squeezed her eyes closed, trying to recall the memories we needed, the information we sought.

"He was the one... who marked me as per your father's orders. He... held it." She bit her lip and for a moment I thought it was over. "It was the horn. It had to be the horn you said you were looking for. It had to be the one." Her eyes flew open, haunted and wide with horror. "He used the tip..." she demonstrated with her shaky hands, creating a point with her index finger and thumb. "The tip of the horn." She shook her head as if she refused to believe her own words.

I gripped her hands to steady her, stroking her hair that was damp with sweat and nerves. "I am



here, Lucinda," my smile was strained, and I hoped she would not notice. "We are here. We will be okay," the lie tasted like sawdust.

Her eyes filled with tears. "Our enemies... are... invincible. I could not breathe, Kara retreated so far, my wolf lost all bravery, all strength."

Her voice cracked, the words breaking apart as if even speaking them cost her more strength than she had left.

"What are we if we are not wolves?" she whispered, the question trembling in the air like something fragile. "What are we... when even the part of us that is meant to fight would rather hide?"

It was too much.

All of it.

I sat back on my heels, feeling the press of the room around me like the air had grown thicker. My gaze drifted, almost without thought, to Monte. He lay pale and unmoving in the infirmary bed, the medics still working quietly around him. Tubes. Wires. The steady beep of the monitor. It was all so fragile—he was all so



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fragile—and yet, somehow, we were supposed to survive what was coming.

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