



484 Eight Years Old

Eve 1

It was opened quietly for me and I found myself hesitating before I stepped in. I made sure I made minimal noise. The darkness of the room was overwhelming, as though no light dared to enter.

The room smelled of her—the scent I had caught in the garden when I had ordered her to be taken to the Tower: ash and the dull tang of despair.

I held my breath so I could hear hers. Her form was splayed out on the queen-sized bed, not like the patients in hospitals who assumed the controlled positions of corpses.

I smiled then. Some things never changed. I would recognize my sister anywhere.

Her breathing was even, chest rising and falling slowly. The file suddenly felt even heavier in my hands, and I knew it was time I left.

Hesitantly, I turned on my heel.

"Evie?"



I startled, frozen where I stood. With a click, more light flooded the room as she turned on the bedside lamp.

"Is that you?" Her voice had a tremor.

Horrible things she had done and said rose to the surface. Not just to me, but I recalled the videos of Ellen terrorizing subjects—like the maid she had shot in the head without flinching, without mercy.

It all came rushing back. But I had to remember that she had no arm for a reason. The Mark of Malrik had been removed by amputating it. I shuddered at the thought of what that thing had made her do. What it had made Lucinda do.

What it could have made me do, if circumstances had been different.

I turned around slowly.

Ellen was sitting up now, propped against the pillows, her remaining hand clutching the sheets. The lamplight cast harsh shadows across her gaunt face, making her look even more like a ghost than a person.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, my voice steady. Professional. The tone of a Luna checking on a



patient, not a sister reuniting with her twin.

"Better," she said softly, though her eyes told a different story. "The doctors said... they said I was lucky to be alive."

"You are." I moved closer, my footsteps measured. "Your vitals have stabilized. With proper care, your body should recover."

"My body," she repeated, a bitter smile twisting her lips. "But not the rest of me."

I didn't respond to that. What could I say?

Ellen tried to shift, to swing her legs over the side of the bed. "I should—"

"No." I crossed the distance quickly, my hand on her shoulder, gently but firmly pressing her back. "You need to rest."

"But how have you been? I've been resting for hours—"

"And you'll rest for hours more," I said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Doctor's orders. Luna's orders."

Ellen stared at me, and something in her expression made my chest tighten. It was awe. Pure, unfiltered awe, like she was looking at



something holy.

"You're really here," she whispered. "You're really... real."

"I'm real," I confirmed curtly.

The awe flickered, replaced by hurt. Ellen looked away, her fingers twisting in the sheets. "Right. Of course. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

Silence fell between us, heavy and suffocating.

I should say something. Comfort her. But the words wouldn't come. All I could see was the maid's body, blood pooling on marble floors. All I could hear were the screams from the videos Hades had shown me of Ellen's "work" for Darius.

"I was always jealous of you," Ellen said suddenly, her voice so quiet I almost missed it.

I looked at her sharply.

"Your kindness when we were kids," she continued, still not meeting my eyes. "Your ability to give until nothing of you was left. You would have been Alpha and I would have been Beta. To me, it looked like karma—like the universe punishing me for not being as good as you. But then my jealousy never left." She took a



shaky breath. "And then Father told me the prophecy when we were eight. That we were born on a full moon night. That one of us would be cursed and one would be blessed."

My heart stopped.

"I thought I would be the cursed twin," Ellen whispered, tears streaming down her face now. "Because I wasn't good like you. I wasn't kind or selfless or worthy. So I went to Father and I—" Her voice broke. "I begged him. I told him I wanted to be the blessed one. That I would do anything, be anything he needed. I didn't understand that look on his face then." She physically shuddered, her breath catching. "Like I had given him all he wanted. I was eight years old and I made a deal with a monster because I was so desperate not to be the cursed one."

She finally looked at me, and the raw agony in her eyes was unbearable.

"He smiled at me, Evie. He smiled and he said, 'Good girl. You've just proven you're worthy of the blessing.' And I thought—Gods, I thought I'd won." A sob tore from her throat. "I thought I'd saved myself. But all I did was condemn you. On our eighteenth birthday, just before I came to comb your hair, he gave me the Mark. He said it



would give me bravery for what I needed to do that night. I needed to frame you. You were too loved—even if you shifted into a lycan, no one would do what was needed."

So they needed attempted murder just to make it stick.

The file slipped from my fingers, hitting the floor with a dull thud.

"You were eight," I heard myself say, my voice distant.

"I was old enough to know better—"

"You were eight years old," I repeated, stronger this time. "A child. He manipulated you. Used your fear against you."

"I chose—"

"You were a child," I said again, and this time my voice cracked. "We both were. And he destroyed us both, Ellen. Just in different ways." 2