

485 The Other Side

Eve 1

Ellen was sobbing now, her whole body shaking. "I killed people, Evie. So many people. I shot that maid and I didn't even blink. I tortured prisoners. I hunted down Eclipse members and watched James cut them down. I did all of it with a smile because the Mark made me enjoy it and I—I can't—I can't live with what I did—"

She didn't smile during the execution, when she had killed Thea's sister. She looked lost. "Then don't," I said quietly.

She looked up at me, confused and terrified.

"Don't live with what the Mark made you do," I clarified. "Live with what you choose to do now. With whom you choose to be moving forward." I said despite the bitterness and anger being a ugly knot in my chest.

"You don't understand," Ellen said, her voice desperate, gaining momentum now like a dam breaking. "It wasn't just the Mark controlling me. After a while, even the Mark made me go numb. I started to see things clearly. I realized—" She stopped, her remaining hand trembling. "My

biggest mistake. The one I made when I was eight."

I waited, my heart pounding.

"The pack," Ellen whispered. "The prophecy said you would bring ruination and darkness to your pack. I always thought it meant Silverpine." She looked at me, her eyes wild with realization. "But it was the pack Darius was going to build from the bones and blood of all the packs. Both Obsidian and Silverpine. Every territory he conquered. Every wolf he subjugated. The pack he's creating right now—that's the pack the prophecy warned about. That's the pack you were always meant to destroy."

My breath caught even Hades had said something of that sort when he first returned. But hearing it from her directly, someone who has been on his side for a time, whether willingly or unwillingly for a time, hit harder than I had anticipated.

"And Darius knew," Ellen continued, her voice rising with urgency, words tumbling faster now. "He knew that your very existence threatened everything he was building. But he couldn't kill you. He needed you. You're immune to the Bloodmoon, Evie. That's why he kept you alive

even though he was terrified of you."

"What?" I breathed.

"He harvested you for years," Ellen said, and now she was speaking rapidly, desperately, like if she didn't get it all out now she never would. "The torture, the wolfsbane, keeping you hollow and broken—it wasn't just to punish you. He was forcing adrenaline through your system, your body always fighting to keep you alive and whole putting you through hell to create the purest form of the marker that makes you immune to the Bloodmoon. Your blood, your suffering—that's what he used to make the serum for his gammas."

I felt sick, bile burnt at the back of my throat.

"That's why he kept you in that cell," Ellen pressed on, her voice cracking. "You weren't just a prisoner. You were a resource. And when Hades declared war before Father's plan was ready, when everything started falling apart—Father panicked. He still needed me to wield the Bloodmoon, and you were already used up, wolfless, traumatized. So when Hades asked for you in return for a treaty, he threw you to the wolves. Literally."

She laughed, a broken, horrible sound.

"He married you off to Hades thinking it was your death sentence. The Alpha of Lycans, our mortal enemy. He thought you'd try to kill Hades and he'd kill you. Or you'd kill yourself in Hades's hands. Either way, problem solved. You'd be dead and he could move forward after giving Hades what he wanted." 2

My hands were shaking.

"But Father had no idea," Ellen said, and now there was something almost manic in her eyes. "He had no idea that Hades didn't want you dead. That you two were fated mates. That somehow, against every odd, you'd survive. That you'd get stronger. That after pumping you full of wolfsbane, that you would find your wolf."

"And Felicia, what was her role?" I whispered, pieces clicking together.

"Yes!" Ellen's voice pitched higher. "Felicia told them everything. Told Father and James it was turning into a love story. That you were getting stronger, that Obsidian was protecting you, that you weren't broken anymore. And Father lost his mind. This wasn't supposed to happen. You were supposed to die."

She was breathing hard now, her face flushed.

"So when your handmaid died," she continued, words spilling out faster.

"Jules," I whispered, her name still a knife in my chest.

"Yes, Felicia called her Jules. And Jules died, it created an opening when you were vulnerable and grieving. And then he came as a hero to 'rescue' you—but really to take you back before you were fully out of his control. Before the bond made you too strong to recapture. But you sided fully with Hades. That was never supposed to happen."

I could remember their desperation. How me getting close to the full prophecy had made them panic.

"It was all timed perfectly," Ellen said, and I could see her getting more agitated, her remaining hand gesturing wildly. "And the chip—oh gods, the chip. James led you to it in the restaurant bathroom. It was planted, Evie. Planted to make Hades think you were still working for Silverpine. To create suspicion, friction. Felicia helped James get into Obsidian to fake all the evidence—"

"The kidnapping," I said numbly.

"Yes! They made it look like you orchestrated the little royal's kidnapping. What was his name again?" She tried to recall.

So I answered for her. "Elliot?"

Her eyes lit up as she snapped her fingers. "They tried to make Hades distrust you and to lead him to you being the Beast of the Night responsible for the massacre. All of it designed so Hades would kill you himself. So Father wouldn't have to get his hands dirty. Because if he killed you, the treaty would be off."

Ellen was speaking so fast now I could barely keep up.

"But I knew," she said, her voice rising. "I knew they'd destroy you. So I saved the muzzle cam footage. From when they drugged you, when they muzzled you to assassinate Hades's family. I kept the footage and I locked it with a password only you would know. 'Uniform.' Remember? Only you would remember how I couldn't pronounce unicorns. 3

My breath caught. "You remembered that? You did that? Even with the Mark?"

"I remembered everything, I did it. The mark creates compulsion to bend to Father's will but

as long as I kept my mind blank and my actions did not constitute directly to saving you, I am in the clear. It was just me uploading files on a chip." Ellen said fiercely. "Even with the Mark, even when it tried to erase you, I remembered. And I hid that footage because I knew it would vindicate you. And it would expose Felicia as Danielle's real killer—"

She stopped abruptly, swaying slightly.

"Ellen—"

"The footage worked," she continued, but her voice was weaker now. "It proved your innocence. It showed Felicia killing Danielle. But Father found out. He found out I saved it. That I hid it for you. And he—" Her breath hitched. "He beat me. Within an inch of my life. And then he didn't let me rest. Barely any food, barely any water. And he made me wield the Bloodmoon. Again and again and again as punishment."

Tears were streaming down her face now.

"It should have taken months to pull it closer," she gasped. "But he made me do it in weeks. Every time I collapsed he dragged me back. Every time I begged him to stop he made me do it again. The Bloodmoon drained everything—my

organs started failing, my body aged decades, I could feel myself dying piece by piece—"

"Ellen, stop," I said, reaching for her. "You need to —"

"No!" She jerked away, her voice desperate now. "You need to understand! Father never thought fate would find a way. He never thought love could derail his entire plan. He built everything on control and calculation and power but he couldn't account for you and Hades falling in love. He couldn't predict the mate bond. He couldn't control that—"

Blood dripped from her nose.

"Ellen—"

"And now you're stronger than ever," she continued, not seeming to notice. "You're building alliances, you have Obsidian's loyalty, you have the Eclipse Rebellion, you have Hades—and Father is terrified because you're doing exactly what the prophecy said. You're bringing darkness and ruination to his vision of the future. You're destroying the pack he's trying to build before it even—"

2

More blood, trickling down to her lips.

"Ellen, you're bleeding—"

"He can't win," she said, her voice taking on a frantic edge. "As long as you're alive, as long as you keep fighting, he can't win. The prophecy wasn't about you destroying Silverpine or Obsidian—it was about destroying him. His empire. His kingdom of corpses. You're not the villain, Evie, you're the hero and Father knows it, he's always known it, that's why he tried so hard to break you but he couldn't because love was stronger than torture and fate was stronger than his plans and you—you—"

She swayed dangerously.

"Ellen—"

Blood poured from her nose now, staining her lips, dripping onto the white sheets.

"You have to stop him," she gasped. "You have to destroy what he's building. The Bloodmoon, the Mark, the empire—all of it. Promise me, Evie. Promise me you'll—"

Her eyes rolled back but she kept speaking. "Felicia planted the bomb in your phone and I wanted to call you to say goodbye..." She smiled, even as only the whites of her eyes remained.

My heart fell.

"I was so mean..."

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She collapsed.

"ELLEN!" I caught her before she hit the bed, cradling her limp form. "GUARDS! GET THE DOCTOR! NOW!"

The door burst open, footsteps pounding.

But all I could do was hold my sister, her blood staining my hands, and whisper, "I promise. I promise. Just stay with me. Please stay with me."

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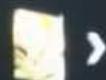


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