

## 538 Epilogue

Eve 1

It was chilly and I reached over for Hades and froze. My eyes snapped open and I launched upright into an empty bed. I looked around, eyes darting and adapting to the darkness before I turned on the bedside lamp, rising.

The room was faint of his scent; he had not been around for a while.

I slipped on my robe and checked the bathroom but there was nothing.

I picked up my phone on the way to the twins' room, dialing Hades' number since his phone was not on the nightstand. The beeping continued all the way until I got to the girls' room first. I didn't need to look at the bed to know they were not there either. The scent of warm skin, light and powdery softness, was far too faint.

The beeping stopped—no one picked the call. I dialed him again, the sleep completely wiped from my eyes now as I opened Elliot's room next door. The smell of paint from the day before was the only thing that permeated. Elliot's was

decisively missing.

Panic had started to settle in like a cold, unmoving stone in my chest.

I sent a text next but, very much unlike Hades, he did not reply by the next second.

I dialed other numbers—the security wing, Kael, Cain—but it was all the same. No one picked their call. It felt like I was alone on an island with no way to get back home. What the hell had happened? Did something happen while I was asleep? Had James somehow— 4

No. I shook off the bizarre possibility. James had taken his own life two months ago. It could not be him, or had he been truthful about the portals to other realms and his death was a call to creatures from beyond our world?

I breathed, slowly, the exercises that Lia had taught me. These outlandish scenarios were playing in my head because of my PTSD. Nothing had happened.

Even the vampires are allies now. We were okay. I inhaled through my mouth and exhaled through my nose. There was an explanation for this—a reasonable one that did not involve my life and family in certain peril. 1

Four years ago, I would have worried that my mother had let her bloodlust take her and she had attacked, but it was too clean if that were the case. And she had come a long way from the semi-mindless creature she was when she was just turned.

I bit on my nail, my eyes falling to Ellen's room, and dread washed over me anew. She was vulnerable, still had not opened her eyes. I was already moving as more thoughts cycled through my head. If something truly happened, they could attack her first. Her caretaker was just her little lady, too. Oh God, what had I been thinking? I could have taken Cain up on his offer. 3

I turned the knob and pushed the door open. This time the lights turned on unprompted, blinding me for a second. I startled as a chorus made me flinch.

"Happy Birthday!"

My eyes finally adapted to the bright lights of Ellen's room.

My gaze shifted from each face that was present in the now crowded room—the council members, Lucinda, Kael, and Thea. My eyes widened when they met Maera with her walking



stick, Silas beside her like he always seemed to prefer. Even Lia was around; her legs were better.

The children filtered out from the adults, running to me with unicorn birthday hats strapped to their heads. 1

"Happy birthday, mummy!" The twins spread their arms for a hug, their dimpled cheeks rounded in wide smiles, their blue eyes bright with excitement that only five-year-olds could muster at this ungodly hour.

I dropped to my knees, pulling Seraphina and Daniella into my arms, breathing in their scent—powder and strawberry shampoo and home. My heart was still racing, the panic not quite faded, but their small bodies pressed against mine helped ground me. 2

Elliot appeared next, grinning like he'd just pulled off the heist of the century. "We got you!" he said proudly, though regret crossed his face. "I hope we didn't scare you too much."

I ruffled his hair, swallowing my unwarranted fear.

"You—" I couldn't even finish the sentence. Just pulled him into the hug too, squeezing all three

of them until they squeaked in protest.

Hades stepped forward, guilt written all over his face despite the party hat perched ridiculously on his head. "I'm sorry. I know we shouldn't have—I didn't think about how you'd react when you woke up and we were all gone. I just wanted—"

"To give me a heart attack?" I stood, still holding the twins on my hips. "To make me think something terrible had happened? To trigger every single trauma response I've spent four years learning to manage?" It was the truth and I hoped every day we would never have to relive that experience.

His face fell. "Eve—"

I let out a breath, the tension draining from my shoulders as I stroked Seraphina's red hair, then Daniella's. Their soft curls like mine caught the light. "But I'm okay," I said, managing a real smile this time. "Just... maybe next time leave a note? Or a text that says 'surprise party, don't panic'?"

"Deal," Hades said immediately, relief washing over his face.

The other children swarmed me next. Sage wrapped her arms around my waist, her ten-year-old enthusiasm infectious. Sophie

followed, giggling as she tried to put her own unicorn hat on my head. Elliot stood back, grinning proudly at the successful surprise.

Everyone else followed, showering me in hugs and birthday wishes. Even Silas and Gallinti embraced me. Montegue and Lucinda squeezed me between them, each of them kissing my cheeks like grandparents. My heart felt so full with the amount of love washing over me from his people who were my chosen family.

The rest followed, engulfing me in warmth.

Micah—Thea's fifteen-year-old brother—leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, trying to look too cool for birthday parties but failing to hide his smile. "You should've seen your face when you walked in. Priceless."

"Micah," Thea scolded, swatting his arm. "Be nice."

"I am being nice. I didn't film it."

I laughed despite myself, setting the twins down so I could actually look around the room properly.

Ellen's medical room had been completely transformed. Streamers in purple and silver—my

favorite colors—hung from the ceiling in elaborate swoops. Balloons clustered in every corner, and someone had strung fairy lights along the walls that cast everything in a soft, warm glow. A banner reading "HAPPY 29TH BIRTHDAY EVE & ELLEN!" was draped across the far wall, the letters slightly crooked like children had helped hang it.

And in the center of it all, still lying in her hospital bed, still unconscious, was Ellen. 1

With a unicorn birthday hat carefully positioned on her head.

My throat tightened. "You put a hat on her."

"Of course we did," Cain said quietly from beside her bed. His hand rested on hers—twisted, scarred, unmoving—like it had for the past four years. "She wouldn't want to be left out."

I crossed to the bed, adjusting the hat so it sat a little straighter on her red hair. "No," I agreed softly. "She wouldn't."

For a moment, the room went quiet. Everyone looking at Ellen, at the sister and best friend who'd burned herself alive and still hadn't woken up. Who might never wake up. She twitched again.

Then Sophie broke the silence by blowing a party horn directly in Micah's ear.

He yelped. She cackled. Sage tried to steal his hat. And just like that, chaos resumed.

I turned away from Ellen's bed, blinking back the grief that always lurked at the edges of moments like these, and that's when I saw it.

The ring on Thea's finger.

My gasp cut through the noise. "Thea. THEA. Is that—"

She flushed, holding up her hand so the diamond caught the fairy lights. "We were going to tell you after cake, but—"

"We're engaged!" Kael announced, grinning like an idiot as he wrapped his arm around her waist. "I proposed last week. She said yes. We're thinking spring wedding." 2

"Oh my god!" I pulled Thea into a hug, then Kael, then both of them together. "That's amazing! Congratulations!" 1

"Finally," Micah muttered. "He's been carrying that ring around for three months. I thought he was going to propose at a gas station at this rate." 1

"Micah!" Thea threw a napkin at him.

"What? I'm just saying, the suspense was killing me."

Laughter filled the room again, warm and genuine, and I felt some of the panic from earlier finally release its grip on my chest.

The door opened.

My mother walked in carrying a birthday cake—three layers, covered in purple frosting, with candles already lit and flickering. She'd changed so much in four years. Still had the red vampire eyes, still moved with that unnatural predator grace, but there was more humanity in her face now. More awareness. More her.

"Happy birthday, daughter," she said, her voice warm and clear.

I blinked. She almost never used terms of endearment. Usually stuck to names or nothing at all.

She set the cake down on the table beside Ellen's bed and turned to me, opening her arms.

For a moment I just stared.

Then, hesitantly, I stepped into the hug.

She was cold—vampire-cold—but her arms wrapped around me with surprising gentleness, and when she pressed a kiss to my forehead, I actually gasped.

"Mom?"

She pulled back, a small smile playing at her lips. "I've been studying," she said, like this explained everything. "Social cues. Displays of affection. Lucinda gave me a book." She paused. "Well. Several books. And some videos. Apparently I've been 'emotionally distant' so I'm... working on it."

Lucinda chuckled.

"For my twenty-ninth birthday?"

"Your twenty-ninth birthday," she affirmed, then winked. Actually winked. "I have a year to practice before the big three-zero." She turned to Lucinda. "Isn't it?"

"Yes," Lucinda affirmed, unable to hide the amusement from her voice. "I know you can do it."

I laughed—surprised and delighted and so utterly baffled that this was my life now. "Thank you, Mom, thank you too, Lucy." Lucinda smiled at me in response.

"You're welcome, Eve." She squeezed my hand once, then stepped back. "Now. Make a wish before the candles drip wax all over my very expensive cake. I hope you don't mind that it has a little blood in it. I baked it and could not help myself." 1

Everyone gathered around—kids pushing to the front, adults forming a circle behind them. Hades's hand found mine, warm and solid and real. The twins climbed onto chairs so they could see better. Even Cain stood, though his other hand never left Ellen's. 5

I looked around at all of them. This impossible family we'd built from war and trauma and sheer stubborn refusal to give up.

Maera with her walking stick and Silas hovering protectively beside her. Kael and Thea with their engagement ring and matching ridiculous grins. The children—Micah trying to look cool, Sophie bouncing on her toes, Sage and Elliot whispering about something, the twins wide-eyed at the candles.

My mother, learning to hug.

My husband, who'd orchestrated all of this just to make me smile.

And Ellen. Still. Silent. But surrounded by people who loved her and refused to let go.

I closed my eyes.

I wish for one more year of this. All of us. Together.

And blew out the candles.

My mother began deftly cutting the cake and distributing it.

It tasted like love and salt instead of sugar. So it was awful but no one would tell her that. We all exchanged looks while managing bites, even the kids played along.

"Wow, grandma," Serephina exclaimed, trying not to cringe.

"You should be a baker," Daniella added.

We all laughed again.

Someone coughed and we laughed harder. "The cake is so good, someone almost choked on it," I joked. 1

Another cough and we all stilled. We spun to the source of the sound. Ellen's hands were not only twitching but her chest was rising as she hacked a cough after another.

"We will get the medics and Maya," Cain and Thea were out the door in a heartbeat.

My heart did a flip as her pale lids began to flutter, everyone holding their breaths as if making half a decibel of sound would pull her back into unconsciousness. 1

As though looking for the light, her eyes moved beneath her lids until—her lids pulled back, her eyes unfocused for just a minute. It was the most surreal—

Her eyes snapped into focus.

Red. Glowing. Hungry.

And she launched at Cain.

Everything happened too fast. One second she was lying still, the next she had him by the shoulders, her mouth at his throat, and then—

The wet sound of teeth breaking skin.

"NO!" I screamed, moving forward, but Hades caught me, holding me back.

Cain didn't fight. Didn't push her away. Just closed his eyes and let her drink, his hands coming up to cradle her head gently, like this was exactly what he'd been waiting five years for.

The room erupted into chaos. Lucinda gasped. The children were ushered back. My mother moved forward—vampire recognizing vampire—but stopped when Cain shook his head slightly.

Let her.

Ellen drank for five seconds. Ten. Fifteen.

Then she pulled back.

Her mouth was stained with blood. Her red eyes were wide, shocked, horrified. She stared at Cain's neck—at the bite marks already healing thanks to his werewolf blood—and then up at his face.

"Cain?" Her voice was hoarse, broken, like vocal cords that hadn't been used in four years. But it was hers. Ellen's voice.

He was crying. Openly sobbing as he cupped her face in his hands. "Yeah. Yeah, it's me."

She blinked slowly, processing. Then: "The story." 1

He laughed, tinged with confusion. "What?"

"The story you were telling me. About the three bears who started a bakery. You said—you said you'd come back to tell me the rest. How it ended."

Cain burst into laughter. Full, loud, joyful laughter that shook his whole body. He pressed his forehead to hers, still laughing and crying at the same time. "You've been unconscious for years and that's what you remember? The stupid story I made up?" 1

"You promised," she said seriously. Then her face crumpled in confusion. "Wait. Years?" She looked down at her hands—twisted, scarred, not working properly—and tried to move them. They flopped uselessly. "What—why can't I—" She tried to sit up. Failed. Flopped back against the pillows like a pool noodle. "Why do my bones feel like jello?"

I was there before I even realized I was moving, dropping to my knees beside the bed and pulling her into a hug. Carefully. So carefully, afraid she might crumble.

But she didn't.

Her arms came up—slow, uncoordinated, but moving—and wrapped around me.

"Eve," she breathed. "What happened? Why am I—" She pulled back, looking at me with those red vampire eyes. "My eyes feel weird. And I'm so cold. And my throat—" She touched her neck. "I

bit him. I bit Cain. Why did I—"

"You're a vampire," I said gently. "Hades gave you his blood. After you—after the Bloodmoon. You've been unconscious for four years. Your body was healing. Transforming. And now you're awake."

She processed this. Slowly. Her eyes clouding over with confusion before clearing again. "Four years," she repeated. Then she looked at Cain. "You stayed."

"Of course I stayed."

"That's stupid."

"Probably."

"You should have moved on."

"Tried. Couldn't." He took her hand—the twisted, scarred one—and kissed it. "You're stuck with me. Even if you are a bloodsucking monster now." 2

"Hey," my mother called from across the room. "We prefer 'differently alive.'" She walked up to Ellen and cradled her face, more like in practice and less like she knew what it meant. "Don't mind him, second daughter."

Ellen's eyes lifted toward the voice, squinting. "Mum?" Her eyes widened. "Your eyes are red too. You're—" Realization dawned. "Oh. Oh. We're both—"

The door burst open.

Maya rushed in, medical bag already open, with three other medics on her heels. "Everyone back! Give her space! I need to assess—" She stopped when she saw Ellen sitting up—sort of—with Cain's blood still on her mouth and awareness in her eyes.

"Well," Maya said after a beat. "That's new."

Ellen looked at her. Blinked. "Hello, Dr. Maya."

"You remember me." Her shoulders slumped in relief. "That's a good sign," she said as she moved with the medics to begin an examination.

She was injected once it was all done, everyone looking on. Maya turned to us, to me especially. "Unlike Lyra, Ellen is like Eve when it comes to her imperviousness to fatal harm, obdurate to most forces of nature because, well, she is the Blessed Twin. Any other person that went through a quarter of what she did would have never made it to the second day of holding back the Bloodmoon's radiation. Like Eve, she is

indomitable, which made her turning smoother and less like Lyra's. Her body shut down temporarily to heal itself comprehensively and that is why she is the way she is now after just a few minutes of waking up, as opposed to Lyra's more tumultuous turning." She explained and finally allowed herself a smile. "She will make a full recovery." 2

Cain pulled her off the bed and back into his arms and spun her, while her body flopped, a tentative smile on her face as we all looked on.

"We've got another couple on our hands," Micah murmured. 2

We all broke into another bout of laughter. This would be my best birthday in a long while, as Hades drew me into his arms unwilling for Cain to have this moment and kiss me.

"Ew," Elliot cringed.

"Ew," His little sisters echoed, copying him.

THE END ❤ 24