



## 108 The Martyr

Eve 1

For the first time, I wondered why I always did this, but I knew it was because no one had protected me. I refused to become the monster they painted me as. I refused to become like those who hurt me and left me to rot. I wanted to be loyal to those who showed me kindness, to those who made me feel human in a world that sought to strip me of everything. Loyalty wasn't a weakness. It was my strength because it was all I had left. 1

"Jules is important to me," I said firmly, meeting his piercing gaze. "And I will not apologize for protecting her."

Hades exhaled slowly, his eyes narrowing as if he were scrutinizing every word, every flicker of emotion across my face.

"Important to you," he repeated, his voice a low rumble. "And where does that leave you, Red? Broken? Vulnerable? Dead?"

A lump formed in my throat as he hit the mark with an accuracy that stole the breath from my lungs.



He took a step toward me and brought his hand to my face, stroking my cheek with his knuckles. For a moment, Hades said nothing. His eyes searched mine, and I saw a flicker of something there—pity. His brows drew together, and I caught a glimpse of guilt.

"You can be loyal without being a martyr," he said quietly, his voice losing some of its edge. "If you fall, who will protect her then?"

The question struck a nerve, and I looked away, unable to hold his gaze any longer.

"I'll talk to Jules," he added after a pause. "She won't face punishment this time. But don't make a habit of this, Red."

I nodded stiffly, my throat tight with unspoken words. He stepped back, giving me space to breathe, but the tension in the room lingered like a shadow.

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Not long after he left, the door creaked open.

"Good mor—" Her words died on her lips when her gaze fell on me, propped up in bed with a sling supporting my arm. Her smile faltered, her expression shifting to one of horror.



I managed a shaky smile for her. "Good morning, Jules."

For what felt like an entire minute, she simply stood there, her mouth agape.

"Ellen..." Her eyes glistened with tears.

I was so stunned that I could form no words.

In a split second, she was by my side. "What have I done?" Her voice was thick with emotion, and she reached tentatively for me. "What... have I done?" Her voice cracked as her tears fell, and she sank to her knees. 3

I reached out with my good arm, my hand trembling as I placed it gently on her shoulder. Her body shook with sobs, and the sight of her tears made the lump in my throat swell.

"Jules," I whispered, my voice hoarse. "This isn't your fault." 1

She shook her head fiercely, her hands gripping the edge of the bed like it was the only thing keeping her upright.

"How can you say that? Look at you, Ellen!" Her voice broke, raw with anguish. "I was reckless, foolish—"

"No." My voice was firmer this time, though it



"No." My voice was firmer this time, though it wavered under the weight of my emotions. "You made a mistake. That doesn't mean you're to blame for everything."

Her tear-filled gaze finally met mine, searching for any trace of anger, of blame. She wouldn't find it because there was none.

"The king will punish me," she sobbed. "I deserve it, but please beg him not to hurt Aunt Agnes. She is innocent. She would have never let this happen." She rambled on, panicked. "Please, don't let him—" 2

"He won't punish you, and he definitely won't punish Agnes," I assured her, rubbing her back. "I promise that."

She blinked up at me, uncertainty etched on her face.

"But I—"

"It was a mistake. I made sure that the King understood that," I told her.

To my surprise, I did not see relief on her face. Instead, her pupils dilated, her expression twisting into something I couldn't decipher.

"He promised you, Ellen?" she asked again.

Despite my confusion and mild uneasiness, I nodded.

"Yes, Jules. He promised that you won't be punished."

"What did he ask for in return?"

I was taken aback by her question, but I answered honestly.

"Nothing."

It seemed that Hades had a reputation.

"He listened to you?" she asked.

I guessed that it did go against who Hades was as a person. He was as stubborn as a mule.

"Yes," I said.

When she responded with silence, I continued.

"Jules," I said softly, sensing her disbelief. "He listened to me because I made him understand that this wasn't entirely your fault."

Her gaze searched mine for any sign of a lie, her hands trembling where they gripped the bed.

"But... he's never been reasonable like that. Not with me, not with anyone who crosses him."

I sighed, my voice tired. "I'm not saying it was



I sighed, my voice tired. "I'm not saying it was easy. Hades isn't the type to bend without a fight, but I stood my ground."

Tears welled in her eyes again, but this time they weren't born of guilt. They seemed... conflicted, as though she wanted to believe me but couldn't quite let go of the fear that had been drilled into her.

"He cares about you," Jules murmured suddenly, her voice trembling.

I stiffened, unsure of how to respond to that. Hades and I had a complicated relationship, one that teetered on a line I couldn't quite define. But care? That wasn't a word I'd have used to describe his feelings toward me.

"I wouldn't go that far," I replied cautiously, avoiding her gaze.

She shook her head, a faint, humorless smile playing on her lips. "You don't see it, do you? The way he looks at you. The way he... softens, just a little, when it comes to you."

"Jules, this isn't about him or me," I said quickly, trying to steer the conversation back to her. "It's about making sure you're safe. That's what matters."



She didn't push further, but the look on her face said she wasn't entirely convinced. Instead, she wiped at her tears, taking a deep, shaky breath.

"You didn't need to fight so hard for me. I know how his majesty can be," she muttered under her breath.

Hades was definitely a flawed man with questionable values and even more questionable methods—if not downright atrocious in his actions. He was complex and ruthless, yet there were moments—rare and fleeting—where the man beneath the crown peeked through. Those moments didn't erase the pain he caused, but they hinted at something deeper, something not entirely consumed by the monster everyone saw. I shuddered as his black eyes filled my vision.

"Ellen—"

I shook myself out of my trance and horror. "He can be understanding at... times," I said reluctantly.

Her eyes widened to the size of saucers. "Really?" Her voice was low and laced with something that filled me with unease.

"Really," I affirmed.



Jules's throat worked as she swallowed. "Do you think you could feel something for him?"

My stomach lurched at the question, and it was my turn to be stunned.

"Feel something?"

Jules's expression eased up an inch, and she flashed me a sheepish grin. "You know what I mean, Ellen."

"Like—"

"Could you love him?" she asked. "Could you love the widower of the woman who your father's monster killed?" Her voice was tinged with accusation. 5

I froze, her words cutting through me like a blade. The air seemed to thicken around us, suffocating and heavy.

"Jules," I began, my voice barely above a whisper. "That's not... it's not something I've thought about."

Her gaze didn't waver, and the intensity of her stare made it impossible for me to look away.

"But could you?" she pressed. "Even after everything he's done? After what his kind has taken from you? After what yours have done to





"But could you?" she pressed. "Even after everything he's done? After what his kind has taken from you? After what yours have done to our kind?" 1

I inhaled deeply, struggling to gather my thoughts. Could I love Hades? The man who had loomed over my life like a shadow, both protector and tormentor? The man who, in rare moments, seemed almost human, almost vulnerable, but who was still the widower of a woman whose death haunted us both? And whose death was caused by a man whose blood flowed in my veins.

"I don't know," I admitted finally, the words tasting bitter on my tongue. "I don't think it's about love, Jules. Not with him. Not with me."

Her expression softened. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I shouldn't have asked that." 1

"It's okay," I replied, though my chest ached with the weight of the conversation. "I just... I can't think about that. Not now. Not with everything else."

Jules nodded, her hands fidgeting in her lap. "I just want you to be happy, Ellen. You deserve that, after everything you've been through."

I forced a smile, though it felt hollow. "It's just an



"Is it only about the marriage?" The suspicion in her eyes made me want to run. My outburst had alerted her to a monumental secret.

No, not again.

"Jules—" I tried to steer the conversation away, but the words faded from my mind when she suddenly unzipped her uniform.

"I know deep-seated scars even without seeing them, Ellen." She turned her back to me, peeling the fabric away. My blood slowed to a crawl in my veins as my confusion morphed into horror. My breath caught, and I could do nothing but stare as a shudder ran through me.

On her back was a single scar that ran diagonally across, taking up most of the space. It was grotesque, the flesh puckered and uneven. It was the kind of scar that told a story—one of pain and cruelty.

My stomach twisted, and I should have looked away, but Jules's voice pulled me back.

"You don't want to share your story," she said softly. "But I'll tell you mine." 1