

489 The Blessed Twin's Power

Eve 1

A week to the Bloodmoon, and everyone had gathered after our first physical meeting in weeks. We were ahead of schedule—but that was only for Obsidian and for the refugees already adapting to the new territory. With every contingency planned and every dome in place, there was only one variable left to test.

Ellen.

The observation deck was crowded. Council members, scientists, military commanders—all of them pressed against the reinforced glass, watching the containment chamber below. I stood at the front, Hades's hand steady on my shoulder, anchoring me.

I had disallowed Ellen from doing this weeks earlier because of her health. She'd been placed on hours of bed rest, light exercise, supplements, and IV drips just to get her strong again. The doctors had worked miracles. Her vitals were the best they'd ever been. She was looking like she was in her early thirties now instead of her late forties—color in her cheeks,

steadiness in her movements.

But she was still fragile. Still recovering.

And now we were asking her to prove she could wield the Bloodmoon's radiation.

In the chamber below, Ellen stood in the center of the containment unit—a massive vacuum-sealed space designed to replicate the conditions of the Bloodmoon's arrival. She wore a simple white medical gown, her remaining hand clenched at her side. Her shortened hair had grown out slightly, no longer the uneven hack job from before. She looked small in that vast space.

But her expression was determined.

Beside me, Thea stepped forward, speaking into the intercom so her voice carried both to the observation deck and into Ellen's chamber.

"We've created a simulation of the Bloodmoon's radiation," Thea explained, her tone clinical. "Same wavelength, same frequency, same altitude, same effects. It's been calibrated to match the readings we took during the last Bloodmoon event twenty years ago."

Maya picked up where Thea left off, her fingers

flying over a tablet as she pulled up holographic displays for the observers.

"The radiation will be released in controlled bursts," Maya said. "Starting at ten percent intensity, increasing by ten percent intervals. Miss Valmont's task is to repel the radiation—create a barrier that prevents it from reaching her. If she can maintain the barrier at full intensity for thirty minutes, we'll know she's capable of sustaining it for the seventy-two hours required during the actual event."

"And if she can't?" Montague asked quietly.

Maya's expression was grim. "Then the radiation will affect her the same way it would affect anyone without the serum. Cellular breakdown, organ failure, death within minutes at full intensity."

A murmur rippled through the crowd.

"She has a panic button," Thea added quickly, gesturing to a device strapped to Ellen's wrist. "If at any point she feels she can't hold the barrier, she presses it and we shut down the simulation immediately."

"Will she use it?" Gallinti asked skeptically.

I looked down at my sister through the glass. At the set of her jaw, the steel in her eyes.

"No," I said quietly. "She won't."

Hades's hand tightened on my shoulder.

Thea glanced at me, then back at the chamber.

"Miss Valmont, can you hear me?"

Ellen looked up at the observation deck, finding me through the glass. She nodded.

"We're going to begin," Thea said. "Remember—if at any point you need to stop, press the button. There's no shame in it. This is a test, not the real event."

Ellen's voice came through the speakers, steady despite the tremor I could hear underneath. "I understand. I'm ready."

Thea looked at Maya. Maya looked at me.

I nodded, even though my heart was hammering against my ribs.

"Begin at ten percent," Thea said.

Maya entered the command.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the chamber lit up with a faint crimson glow—the

simulated radiation filling the space like a living thing, swirling and pulsing.

Ellen closed her eyes.

I held my breath.

The radiation moved toward her—and stopped.

It was like watching water hit an invisible wall. The crimson light pressed against something unseen, rippling outward in waves, but it couldn't pass. Ellen stood in the center of a perfect circle of empty space, untouched.

"Barrier established," Maya said, her voice tight with amazement. "Ten percent radiation successfully repelled."

A collective exhale swept through the observation deck.

"Increasing to twenty percent," Thea said.

The crimson glow intensified. The radiation pressed harder against Ellen's barrier. I could see the strain now—the way her remaining hand clenched tighter, the way her breath came faster.

But the barrier held.

"Twenty percent successful," Maya confirmed.

"Thirty percent," Thea said.

The light grew brighter. Angrier. It crashed against the barrier like waves against a seawall, trying to find a weakness, a crack, anything.

Ellen's lips moved silently. Her eyes stayed closed. Sweat beaded on her forehead.

But the barrier held.

"Forty percent."

The radiation was a roaring storm now, battering the invisible shield from all sides. Ellen's whole body was trembling. Her breath came in short, sharp gasps.

"Her heart rate is elevated," Maya said, watching her tablet. "But within acceptable range."

"Fifty percent," Thea said, and I heard the hesitation in her voice. "100% of the Bloodmoon's calculated natural intensity."

The chamber was almost blinding now. The crimson light seethed and writhed, a living maelstrom of death contained only by Ellen's will.

Ellen swayed.

"Ellen—" I started, pressing forward against the glass.

Hades pulled me back gently. "Let her do this."

Ellen steadied herself. Her eyes opened—brilliant gold, glowing with the same light as the radiation. She raised her remaining hand, palm out, as if physically pushing against the storm.

And the barrier solidified.

"Fifty percent holding," Maya said, disbelief coloring her tone. "Stable."

The observation deck erupted in murmurs.

"Sixty percent," Thea said.

Ellen gritted her teeth. Blood trickled from her nose.

"Ellen!" I shouted into the intercom, but she couldn't hear me—or she was ignoring me.

The barrier flickered.

"Barrier destabilizing—" Maya started.

Ellen screamed.

The sound was raw, primal, torn from the depths of her. And the barrier flared—brilliant, blinding, unbreakable. 1

"Barrier re-established," Maya gasped. "Sixty percent holding."

