

490 Aegis

Eve 1

Ellen was shaking violently now. Blood ran from her nose, down her chin, dripping onto her gown. Her eyes burned gold, inhuman.

"Seventy percent," Thea said, her voice barely audible.

I couldn't watch this. I couldn't—

But I couldn't look away either.

The radiation was a hurricane now. The chamber shook. Alarms blared. The barrier wavered, rippling like water under pressure.

Ellen dropped to one knee.

"STOP IT!" I shouted. "STOP THE TEST!"

"Eve—" Hades tried to hold me back.

"STOP IT NOW!"

"Luna, she hasn't pressed the button—" Thea started.

"I DON'T CARE! END IT!"

Ellen's voice cut through the chaos, broadcast

through the speakers. Hoarse. Broken. But fierce.

"No."

I froze.

"Don't you dare stop it," Ellen gasped, blood pouring from her nose now, staining her gown. "I can—I can do this—"

"Ellen, please—"

"Eighty percent," Ellen said, looking up at me through the glass. Her eyes were still glowing, still gold, still inhuman. "Do it."

Thea looked at me.

I was crying. When had I started crying?

"Do it," Ellen repeated.

Thea's hand hovered over the controls.

"Do it," I whispered, hating myself.

Thea entered the command.

The chamber exploded with light.

The radiation was a sentient thing now, a beast trying to devour everything in its path. It slammed against the barrier again and again and again—

And Ellen held it.

Her scream was continuous now, an endless sound of agony and will. Blood ran from her nose, her ears, her eyes. Her body convulsed.

But the barrier held.

"Ninety percent," Maya whispered.

"No—" I breathed.

"Final test," Thea said, her voice shaking. "One hundred percent. 200% of the Bloodmoon's calculated natural intensity

"Don't—"

The command was already entered.

The world turned red.

The radiation filled every inch of the chamber, a solid wall of death. It should have killed her instantly. Should have torn her apart at the cellular level.

Ellen was glowing now—her whole body suffused with golden light, matching the crimson storm. She stood, somehow, rising from her knees. Her remaining hand thrust forward. Her mouth open in a silent scream.

And the barrier blazed.

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"Full intensity repelled," Maya said, her voice breaking. "One hundred percent. She's doing it. She's actually doing it."

The observation deck erupted.

But all I could see was my sister, burning herself alive to prove she could save seventy thousand lives.

The timer on the wall ticked forward.

One minute.

Five minutes.

Ten minutes.

Ellen stood in the center of that inferno, unmoving, unbreaking.

Fifteen minutes.

Twenty minutes.

Her nose was still bleeding. Her ears were still bleeding. But the barrier never wavered.

Twenty-five minutes.

"Almost there," Thea whispered.

Twenty-eight minutes.

Twenty-nine.

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Thirty.

"Shutting down simulation," Maya said, and her hands were shaking as she entered the command.

The radiation vanished.

The chamber went dark.

Ellen collapsed.

"ELLEN!" I was running before I could think, Hades right behind me, sprinting for the chamber access.

The doors opened. Medical teams rushed in.

I reached her first.

She was unconscious, blood covering her face, her gown soaked through. But her chest was rising and falling. She was breathing.

"Ellen," I sobbed, cradling her head in my lap. "Ellen, please—"

Her eyes fluttered open. Gold was fading back to blue.

"Did I—" she rasped. "Did I do it?"

"Yes," I choked out. "Yes, you did it. You held it for thirty minutes. You did it."

Ellen smiled—weak, exhausted, triumphant.
"Good," she whispered. "Then I can save them."
And she passed out in my arms.

Seventy-two percent of our forces had been administered the vaccine, with more receiving it at that very moment. By the end of the week, everyone would be injected — including the rangers from the Eclipse Rebellion who were joining the fight.

From what we had discussed after Ellen's shielding testing, the strategy crafted by High Gamma Victoriana was that Ellen herself would need shields and swords. That would take the form of a brigade positioned around the shield center, where Ellen would be doing the heavy lifting — keeping the radiation at bay and away from the civilians.

The brigade would be led by a colonel whose job was to ensure that Ellen was not attacked and to defend the tower from assault. The final mission was to ensure that Darius, frustrated that his people were not being killed by the radiation as he had planned, would not be able to send gammas to begin a genocide by attacking the

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civilians Ellen was trying to save.

Cain had volunteered to be the colonel in charge. Victoriana proposed three layers: The inner ring, they would be her direct protection, somewhat stationary with a medical team. The outer ring, they would be the sword, on the offensive to intercept threats around Ellen. And finally the mobile forces, they will be counter any attack from Darius's forces that might attempt to neutralise civilians within the shield zone. 1

All of them would be coordinated by Colonel Cain and his second-in-command, Lieutenant Colonel Freddie, as Cain himself had proposed. It was the best possible plan that could have been crafted for the mission in Silverpine.

Code name: Aegis. It meant shield.

A shield for Ellen and the people.

Ellen finally stirred awake, her lips fluttering open. When she saw my face, she smiled – only for her face to crumble.

"It worked," she quietly said, sitting up. "We can save them."

I nodded. That was all I did.

Turquoise eyes like mine, red hair, and a

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stubborn mouth. I wanted to memorize her face, even if we were identical twins.

She spoke again, uncertain. "Will you ever forgive me?"

My tears instantly blinded me, but my answer came fast and sharp, like a whip.

"NO. I will not forgive you."

Her eyes widened, lips trembling as her tears fell.

I reached out and wiped them away.

"I will not forgive you," I reiterated. "Unless you come back to me. Unless you fight for your life like you fight for others. You will keep your eyes open. You will force your heart to keep beating, no matter how much you want to let go. You don't get to die and call it redemption. You will live – and earn it. You will come back to me. And then I promise you, I swear on the lives of all that I love and cherish, that I will forgive you."

"Eve..." she whimpered.

But I cut her off. "That is my condition, Ellen. All you have to do is come back to me."

Her eyes searched mine, desperately looking for

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the lie — the trick — but when she found none, she nodded.

I smiled then, sad and heavy with the weight of my selflessness and my inability to let her go.

I dipped my head and feathered a kiss on her brow.

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