

## 504 Atlas

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## Aegis

The reports reached Cain as he watched the city line from the roof. The streets were silent and devoid of any movement, finally, after he'd had his men hack every television signal to broadcast the state of things and ordered that families and individuals stock up on food and necessary resources for the next seventy-two hours, if not more.

There had been little resistance from the people. They simply cherished their lives enough to obey. Cain studied the reports, taking it all in and storing them somewhere to be retrieved at a later hour.

The wind on the roof was minimal, the air only slightly chilly. It would be no problem for Ellen to hold on.

He turned around and looked at her. She had her eyes open—turquoise eyes like her elder twin sister. Her pallor was not great, nor was the almost lost look in her gaze.



Her arms were up, pressed against the satellite dish like a fucking sacrifice. Cain gritted his teeth, unable to swallow past the lump in his throat. A sacrifice she was—that was all he could see.

A girl used by a monster to perpetuate some of the most atrocious crimes, only to try and use her body to shield the rest of the people who would have been victims to the ploys of said monster.

Her nose began to bleed again.

Cain clenched his hand into a fist as he made his way toward her.

This would be the sixth nosebleed since this all started just ten hours ago. A day had not yet passed.

Her gaze came into focus as he approached, the distant look fading as he reached up and wiped her nose and mouth with a clean cloth.

She wrinkled her nose, sniffling. "I'm fine."

"You're bleeding." 1

"A minor detail."

Cain's mouth twitched despite himself as he

wiped the sweat from her brow. "Most people consider blood loss fairly significant."

"Most people aren't holding back a nuclear winter." Ellen managed something that might have been a smile if her face wasn't so pale. "I'm special."

"That's one word for it."

"What's another?"

"Stubborn." He folded the cloth. "Reckless. Insufferable."

Ellen huffed a weak laugh. "You know how to flatter a woman."

"I'm told it's one of my better qualities." Cain studied her—the tremor in her arms, the way her jaw kept clenching, the sheen of sweat on her forehead despite the chill. "How bad is it?"

"It's not."

"Ellen."

"I said I'm fine." But her voice cracked on the last word, and she had to grit her teeth to keep from crying out as another wave of pain rippled through her.

Cain said nothing for a moment. Just watched

her—the way she held herself together like glass, like one wrong word would shatter her completely.

"You're good at that," he said finally.

Ellen's eyes flicked to his, still hazy with pain. "At what?"

"Lying. Pretending everything's under control when it's not." He paused, reaching up to dab at the fresh blood trickling from her nose. "I recognize it because I do the same thing. Make a joke. Deflect. Keep everyone at arm's length so they don't see how close you are to breaking." He didn't know why he was opening up now, maybe there was something about the quiet as the world beyond the borders of the pack fought for survival. 2

It felt like the epilogue of a book, no more foreshadowing and secrets to be revealed. Just honesty, all before the curtains finally dropped.

Maybe it would drop on them surviving or the latter. He was not sure. But looking at her, he was not sure she would make to the next volume of the story. He didn't know why a small unbearable pressure had begun to build behind his ribs. 2

Ellen stared at him, her arms trembling against the dish, even as the metal clamps held them there.

Then her mouth twisted into something bitter.  
"Well. At least we're consistent."

"Consistently stupid, maybe."

"Speak for yourself."

"I am." Cain stepped closer, still holding the cloth to her nose. "I also know what it looks like when someone's about to fall apart. And you're close, Ellen. You're so close."

Her breath hitched.

"Then let it happen," Cain said quietly. "Let yourself fall apart. It's fine."

Ellen's nose wrinkled. "I'm not falling apart."

"You are."

"I can't be." Her voice broke, tears spilling down her cheeks even as her arms stayed locked in place. "If I fall apart, if I—Cain, there are thousands of people down there. Thousands. And if I let go, if I stop for even a second—"

"They'll die."

It had taken her ten hours to break down. She'd been dissociating to keep her wits about her—taking her mind somewhere else, somewhere she didn't carry the moon like Atlas. It was all beginning to dawn, or maybe it had dawned long before but she had held back.

"Yes." The word came out strangled, and more tears fell. "And I can't—I can't do that. I can't fail them. Failing them is worse than dying. It's—" She broke off, her whole body shaking now. "Gods, I don't want to die."

Cain's chest tightened.

"I'm so afraid," Ellen whispered, her voice breaking as tears streamed down her face. "I'm terrified. I don't want to die, but if I stop, if I let myself think about it too much, I'll—I'll lose it. And I can't. I can't lose it. I have to hold. I have to—"

"Ellen." Cain moved in close, his hands coming up to cradle her face—careful, gentle, not pulling her away from the dish. "Look at me."

Her eyes met his, wide and desperate, tears streaming freely now.

"You're not failing anyone," he said quietly, his thumbs brushing away the tears even as more

fell. "You hear me? You're holding. You've been holding for ten hours. That's more than anyone could ask."

"It's not enough—"

"It's enough." His voice was firm, grounding. "You're allowed to be afraid. You're allowed to cry. But you don't have to carry this alone."

Ellen's face twisted, a sob tearing from her throat. "I don't know how not to carry it alone."

"Then let me help." Cain kept his hands on her face, anchoring her, his forehead nearly touching hers. "You don't have to pretend with me. You don't have to be strong every second. Cry if you need to. Break if you need to. I'm here. I'm not leaving." 3

And Ellen broke.

She couldn't bury her face in his shoulder. Couldn't pull away from the dish. Couldn't do anything but stand there, arms locked above her, and sob—harsh, wrenching sounds that tore through her chest.

Cain stayed close, his hands still cradling her face, his thumbs still brushing away tears that kept falling.

"I've got you," he murmured. "I'm here. You're not alone."

She cried—ugly, desperate crying—and he just held her face and let her, wiping away tears, keeping her grounded, keeping her there.

"I'm so tired," she sobbed. "I'm so tired, Cain."

"I know."

"I can't—I can't keep doing this—"

"Yes, you can." His voice was steady. Certain. "You can. Because you're stronger than you think. And because I'm not letting you fall."

Ellen's eyes squeezed shut, more tears streaming down. "What if I can't?"

"Then I'll be here to catch you." Cain leaned his forehead against hers—gentle, careful not to disrupt her position. "You're not doing this alone anymore. You hear me? You're not alone." 1

Ellen's breath hitched, and for a long moment she just stood there, crying, with Cain's hands on her face and his forehead pressed to hers.

Slowly, slowly, the sobs quieted.

Her breathing steadied.

And when she finally opened her eyes, they were red and swollen, but clearer than before.

"Better?" Cain asked quietly.

Ellen's laugh was wet and broken. "No. But... less awful."

"I'll take it." He pulled back just enough to look at her properly, his hands still cupping her face.

"You with me?"

"I'm with you."

"Good." He wiped away the last of her tears with his thumbs. "Because we're going to get through this. You and me. Together."

Ellen stared at him for a long moment, something fragile and hopeful flickering in her expression.

"Okay," she whispered.

"Okay?"

"Okay." She took a shaky breath, her arms still locked above her. "I'll try not to die. Out of spite, if nothing else."

"Spite works."

"Good. Because it's all I've got left."

Cain smiled—small, tired, but genuine. "Then we'll work with it."

Ellen nodded, and for the first time in hours, she looked like she might actually believe it.

Cain stayed close for a moment longer, then finally stepped back and pulled out another cloth.

"You've got blood," he said, gesturing at her nose.

Ellen wrinkled her nose. "Again?"

"Again."

"Fantastic."

Cain reached up and wiped it away, his touch careful. "Try not to bleed out on me, all right? I have a reputation to maintain."

"What reputation?"

"Competent and devastatingly charming." 1

"You're half right."

"I'll take it." He stepped back, folding the cloth.

"Now. Let's talk logistics. Because if we're going to keep you alive and this city intact, we need a plan."

Ellen straightened slightly, some of her strength

returning. "What kind of plan?"

"The kind where you don't die and I don't have to explain to your sister why I let that happen."

"Eve would kill you." The way she said it, made Cain believe, she was not sure if her sister cared to that extent.

But Cain knew that if anyone could love Ellen despite everything, it would be Eve.

Eve had loved Hades when he shared his body with a malevolent entity. 1

"Slowly." He said.

"Very slowly."

"Then it's settled." Cain's expression turned serious. "We keep you alive. No matter what."

Ellen looked at him—really looked at him—and nodded.

"No matter what," she echoed.

And standing there, arms raised like some strange kind of crucifixion, tears drying on her cheeks, Ellen believed him.

In many ways, he saw himself in Ellen. The evil brother, who was selfish and conniving but if

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only the story were that simple.

Ellen had been the same, the cunning mistress of mayhem, only to be revealed as a simple pawn. She intrigued him, it broke his heart that only dying women seemed to be able to do so.

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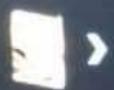


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