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72:00:00 1

Aegis

"I can feel it," Ellen whispered, her hand already outstretched, already straining, her veins popping. "It is so close." Her jaws clenched.

Cain watched her, before glancing up at the moon. He blinked and in the breath of a second the whole world was drowned in red. Cain's mouth went dry, he instinctively tensed bracing for the Lunar Cataclysm he had been Informed about even if he had been vaccinated.

The temperature rose to sweltering heights and air quickly grew humid.

Ellen groaned like a weight was pressed against her, and Cain could have sworn he heard the seismic shift in the air. Just as the scarlet haze had fallen over the world, it was pushed back before it even hit his feet.

Cain could not contain his awe as the red that overtook the world receded at an unfathomable speed. He watched the woman who could wield a phenomenon as the red rose as if returning to

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where it came from.

Unable to tear his eyes away from her, he activated his comm. The mobile forces first. "Report, over,"

There was no answer.

Cain's stomach knotted, he inhaled through his mouth and exhaled through his nose. "Mobile forces report now, over,"

He waited, nothing.

Then there was a cackle and a voice filtered through the receiver. "All clear here. Civilians remain safe in their homes. Over."

Cain allowed himself a proper breath. If the outermost part of the brigade were alright, it meant that Silverpine civilians were safe. All of them.

He raised his head, finally allowing himself to see the large, monstrous crimson moon in all its dreadful glory as it still took over the sky. He spoke into the comm again. "The bloodmoon, over?"

There was no pause this time, just immediate response. "We see it, Colonel. But we are in the clear over here. The shield holds, over."



Cain turned back to Ellen.

She was still strapped in unto the large satellite dish, her hand outstretched toward the sky—but the cost was written across her face. Blood trickled from both nostrils, dark against her pale skin. Her entire body trembled with the effort of holding back a cosmic force, sweat plastering strands of red hair to her forehead.

"Ellen," he said, crossing to her.

She didn't respond. Her eyes were distant, unfocused—seeing something far beyond this world.

Cain reached up carefully, pulling a cloth from his tactical vest. He wiped the blood from her face with gentle precision, his movements steady despite the knot of worry tightening in his chest. She flinched slightly at the touch, but didn't pull away.

"Medic," he called, keeping his voice level. Professional. "Now."

Two Deltas rushed forward, their med kits already open. The first—a woman named Rivera—immediately pressed a scanner to Ellen's wrist, her expression tightening as the readings came through.

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"Colonel," Rivera said quietly. "Her vitals are—"

"How bad?"

"Blood pressure is dangerously elevated. Heart rate is one-ninety and climbing. Body temperature spiking. Sir, if she maintains this level of strain—"

"I can hold it," Ellen whispered, her voice hoarse but firm. Her eyes finally focused, meeting Rivera's. "I can. I will."

The second Delta—a younger man named Chen—was already working, his hands glowing faintly as he channeled healing energy into her. The popped veins along her arms began to fade, the blood vessels knitting back together under his careful ministrations.

"Regulating now," Rivera murmured, watching her scanner. "Heart rate dropping... one-seventy... one-fifty... blood pressure stabilizing..."

Cain watched the numbers, his jaw tight. Slowly—agonizingly slowly—Ellen's vitals began to level out. Not normal, not even close. But survivable.

For now.

Rivera stepped back, exchanging a glance with



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Chen. "She's stable. For the moment."

"Stay close," Cain ordered. "Monitor her every ten minutes. Any change, I want to know immediately."

"Yes sir."

The Deltas moved back but remained nearby, ready.

Cain looked down at Ellen. She was still trembling, still bleeding slightly from her nose despite Chen's work, but her eyes were clearer now. Focused.

He reached up and carefully tucked a sweat-damp strand of hair behind her ear.

"You're stronger than the damn moon itself," he said quietly. 1

Her eyes slowly, tersely shifted to him and for a moment she said nothing, something like fear flared quickly in her eyes and died. A ghost of a smile flickered across her lips. "Flattery, Colonel?" Some life seeped into her as she surprisingly indulged him.

"Statement of fact." He held her gaze for a moment longer, then allowed himself the smallest smirk. "Though if you collapse before



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hour two, I'm demoting you." 1

She actually laughed—weak and breathless, but real. "Noted."

"Good." He squeezed her shoulder once, then stepped back. "Seventy-two hours. You've got this."

"Seventy-two hours," she echoed.

Cain turned away, activating his command channel as he moved back toward the defensive perimeter. The moment of tenderness was over. Now came the work.

"Command, this is Aegis Actual," he said into the comm, his voice clipped and professional. "Do you copy?"

A pause, then Hades's voice came through, steady and commanding.

"Copy, Aegis Actual. Report."

"The shield is operational," Cain said, scanning the horizon. "Bloodmoon radiation fully contained. Silverpine civilians are confirmed safe. Miss Valmont is holding."

"Her condition?"

Cain's jaw tightened. "Stable. She'll hold."



There was a beat of silence. Hades knew what "stable" meant in this context. Barely.

"Understood," Hades said finally. "Anticipated response?"

"Darius will know within the hour that his Bloodmoon gambit failed," Cain said. "Once he realizes the radiation isn't doing his work for him, he'll redirect forces. We're the obvious target—take out the shield, the civilians die."

"You'll be ready."

It wasn't a question.

"We'll be ready," Cain confirmed. "Aegis is dug in. Defensive perimeter is secure. We have overlapping fields of fire, anti-armor emplacements, and enough ammunition to hold off an army." He paused. "Which is good, because that's probably what's coming." 2

"How long can you hold?"

Cain looked back at Ellen—still standing, still holding her hand to the sky, still **holding**.

"Seventy-two hours," he said. "However long she can, we can."

"Good." Hades's voice was grim. "We're seeing



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movement on the western front. Darius is massing forces at Shadowhunt and Dawnstrike. The main assault is coming."

"Then you'll have your hands full," Cain said. "We'll handle our end. Just keep them off our backs long enough for Ellen to finish this."

"Count on it. Hades out."

The comm went silent.

Cain stood for a moment, looking out at the red-bathed landscape. Silverpine stretched out before him—a city holding its breath, its people huddled in their homes, unaware that a single woman was all that stood between them and annihilation.

Let them come, he thought grimly, checking his rifle one more time. *We'll be here.*

Behind him, Ellen whispered something too quiet to hear—a prayer, maybe, or a promise.

The Bloodmoon burned overhead, held at bay by sheer will.

Of the blessed twin.

And the war was only just beginning.