



509 A Mother's Apprehension

She blinked, looking at the coat, then at him. It took a long while before she spoke. "Thank you." 1

Silas nodded once, settling back into position.

The tent fell into silence again—just the hum of equipment, the distant wind, the occasional crackle of the comm.

Then Maera stiffened.

"Movement," she said sharply, eyes locked on the radar.

Silas was at her side in an instant. "Where?"

She pointed. "Northwest. Multiple contacts. Thirty—no, forty signatures. Moving in formation."

Silas studied the screen. The blips were moving with purpose. Coordinated. Deliberate.

"Not ferals," he muttered.

"No." Maera's jaw tightened. "Gammas. Shifted. They're coming fast."

Silas keyed his comm. "All units, enemy contact inbound. Northwest approach. Forty-plus

509 A Mother's Apprehension

shifted hostiles. Prepare for close-quarters engagement."

Acknowledgments crackled back.

Maera stood, the coat slipping from her shoulders. She caught it, held it for a moment, then set it aside carefully.

"Good luck," she said quietly.

Silas paused, turning to look at her.

It was the first real thing she'd said to him in hours—maybe longer. Not tactics. Not updates. Just... *words*.

Something flickered in her eyes. Something that looked almost like fear.

Not for herself.

For him.

Silas's expression remained stoic, but he nodded once. "You too."

Then he was moving—out of the tent, into the cold.

55:25:00

The enemy appeared at the tree line.

Wolves—massive, coordinated, moving with the discipline of trained soldiers. Not the jerky, mindless charge of ferals. These were *gammas*, and they knew what they were doing.

Silas shifted mid-stride—bones cracking, fur erupting, his wolf form larger and more battle-scarred than most. Around him, Frostfang's forces did the same—a wave of lycans flowing forward to meet the threat.

"Hold the center!" Silas's voice rang out—part growl, part command. "Wings, prepare to flank on my signal!"

The enemy charged.

Forty wolves, moving in a tight formation—spearhead at the front, flanks protecting the sides. Textbook assault formation.

But Silas had seen it before.

And he knew how to break it.

"Center, HOLD!" he roared.

His forward line braced—twenty lycans forming a defensive wall. The enemy slammed into them with bone-crushing force. Claws met claws. Jaws snapped. Blood sprayed across the snow.

But Frostfang held.

The enemy pushed harder, trying to break through—focused entirely on the center.

Perfect.

"Wings, NOW!"

From both sides, Frostfang's flanking forces surged forward—thirty lycans splitting into two groups, swinging wide through the trees. The enemy didn't see them coming. Didn't *know* they were there until it was too late.

The left wing hit first—slamming into the enemy's right flank with devastating force. Wolves went down, scrambling, caught off-guard.

Then the right wing struck—cutting into the enemy's left side, claws and teeth ripping through exposed flanks.

The enemy formation shattered.

Suddenly, they were surrounded—Frostfang's center holding them in place, Frostfang's wings closing in from both sides. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to retreat.

It was a slaughter.

Silas tore through the chaos—his massive wolf

form a blur of silver fur and violence. He caught an enemy gamma by the throat, bit down, felt bone snap. Released. Moved to the next.

Around him, his forces fought with brutal efficiency. No wasted movement. No hesitation. Just **execution**.

The enemy tried to rally—tried to form a defensive circle—but it was too late. Frostfang had them surrounded, outnumbered them two-to-one in effective combat power.

Within minutes, it was over. 3

Enemy wolves lay scattered across the snow—some dead, some wounded and whimpering, a few fleeing back into the trees.

Silas shifted back to human form, breathing hard, blood streaking his arms and chest.

"Sweep the perimeter," he ordered. "Make sure none of them regroup. Deltas, tend to our wounded. Gammas, secure the prisoners."

His forces moved immediately—disciplined, efficient.

Maera appeared at his side, her own wolf form shifting back. She was covered in blood—not all of it hers—and there was a gash across her

shoulder, but she was standing.

"Clean," she said, her voice grudgingly impressed. "That was clean."

Silas nodded, scanning the battlefield. "They were good. But predictable. Darius is testing us. Seeing how we respond."

"And now he knows."

"Now he knows." Silas's jaw tightened. "Which means the next wave will be harder."

Maera's eyes drifted to the tree line—dark, silent, waiting.

"How long until the next one?" she asked quietly.

"Hours. Maybe less." Silas turned to her. "You fought well."

Maera blinked, clearly surprised by the compliment. Then, slowly, she nodded. "So did you."

For a moment, they stood in the bloodied snow, two commanders who'd barely spoken in seventeen hours, finally acknowledging each other.

Then Silas turned away. "Get that shoulder looked at. We need you sharp for the next

assault."

Maera huffed—something that might have been a laugh. "You too, Commander. You too."

But underneath the humor, she was using as a front, her apprehension was clear. It was the way her eyes still furtively darted as clandestinely as she could manage.

She was looking out for our enemy.

Her son.

46:00:07

Aegis - Lunar Heights Rooftop

In the absolute silence of the pack, one would have been able to hear a pin drop. It was as though the civilians locked up in their houses were not there.

The entire pack could have been a ghost town.

So when the first shot rang out—the first in twenty-six hours—the whole pack quaked.

Cain had one leg at the edge of the roof, his eyes alert and searching through the distance, until he saw the smoke.

The signal.

He clicked the frequency.

"This is Lunar Heights," Cain said, his voice calm despite the spike of adrenaline. "Confirm signal. What's your status?"

Static crackled for a moment, then Freddie's voice came through—tight, controlled, but urgent.

"Hostile contact, western sector. Approximately twenty enemy gammas, shifted. They're pushing toward the residential districts—trying to breach the perimeter."

Cain's jaw tightened. Residential districts. Families. Children hiding in their homes.

"Hold them at the perimeter," Cain ordered. "Do not let them into the city. Deploy Mobile Units Two and Four for support. I'm coordinating from Lunar Heights."

"Copy that, Commander. Engaging—"

Gunfire erupted over the comm—sharp, staccato bursts that crackled through the speaker.

And then, behind him, a sound that made his blood turn to ice.

A scream.

"No!"

Cain spun.

Ellen was thrashing against the clamps—eyes wide, wild, unseeing. Her whole body convulsed, straining against the metal restraints holding her arms up.

"Please don't shoot!" she screamed, her voice raw and desperate. "Please! I'll be good! I'll—I'll—"

"Ellen!" Cain dropped the comm and was at her side in an instant. "Ellen, it's me! It's Cain! You're safe!"

But she wasn't hearing him.

Her eyes were distant, locked on something only she could see. Tears streamed down her face. Blood poured from her nose.

"Don't shoot—don't—" Her voice broke into sobs. "I'm sorry—I'm sorry—"

"Ellen, look at me!" Cain grabbed her face, forcing her to meet his eyes. "You're not there. You're here. With me. You're safe!"

Her eyes rolled back.

Her body went limp.

Cain's stomach dropped.

"ELLEN!"

The shield above them flickered.

For half a second—just half a second—the invisible barrier holding back the Bloodmoon's radiation vanished.

Heat slammed into Cain like a physical blow. His skin burned. The air shimmered, warping with toxic energy. 1

The dry heat...

Then the shield snapped back into place.

Deltas came running—bursting through the rooftop access door, medical kits in hand.

"What happened?" The delta demanded, dropping to her knees beside Ellen.

"The gunshot—she panicked—I don't know—" Cain's hands were shaking. "She collapsed. The shield flickered. I need you to fix her."

The delta's hands glowed as she pressed them to Ellen's chest, her face tight with concentration.

"Her vitals are crashing. Heart rate erratic.

Breathing shallow. She's—" her eyes widened.

"She's shutting down. Her body can't take the

strain anymore."

"Then unstrain her!" Cain snapped.

"I can't!" The delta's voice was desperate. "She's been holding the shield for over a day. Her nervous system is fried. Her brain is—" She stopped, swallowing hard. "She's not responding to healing. It's like her body has just... given up."

"No." Cain's voice was hollow. "No, she hasn't."

He leaned over Ellen, gripping her face in both hands.

"Ellen," he said, his voice firm. "Ellen, I know you can hear me. You're still in there. Come back. Come back to me." 2

Nothing.

Her chest barely rose. Her lips were turning blue. 1

Cain closed his eyes and reached.

Not with his hands. With his mind.

He didn't know if it would work—didn't know if the Bloodmoon's radiation had some psychic property, some connection he could exploit. But he had to try.

Ellen.

509 A Mother's Apprehension

He sent the thought out like a lifeline, diving into the space where her consciousness should be.

And he found her.

Barely.

A flicker. A spark. Drowning in darkness.

Ellen, it's Cain. Follow my voice. Come back.

The spark flickered.

You're not alone. I'm here. I've got you.

Her body twitched.

"She's responding!" The Delta said, her voice sharp with hope. "Keep going!"

Cain leaned closer, his forehead pressed to Ellen's.

Come back, Ellen. Please. The city needs you. I need you. Don't leave me. 1

Her eyelids fluttered.

But she still wasn't breathing.

"She's not getting oxygen," the Delta said urgently. "Her lungs—"

Cain didn't wait.

He tilted Ellen's head back, pinched her nose, and sealed his mouth over hers.

One breath.

Two.

Her chest rose slightly.

"Again!" She ordered, her hands glowing brighter over Ellen's heart.

Cain breathed into her again. And again.

Come on, Ellen. Breathe. Just breathe.

Her body jerked.

She gasped—a harsh, choking sound—and her eyes flew open.

Turquoise. Unfocused. Terrified.

"It's okay," Cain whispered, still holding her face.

"You're okay. I've got you."

Ellen stared at him, tears streaming down her face, her whole body trembling.

"C-Cain?" Her voice was so faint he could barely hear it.

"I'm here."

"The—the gunshot—" She broke off, sobbing. "He

509 A Mother's Apprehension

is coming for me---"

"They're not," Cain said firmly. "You're safe.
You're with me. And you're alive."

Ellen's breath hitched, and she nodded weakly.

She sat back, exhaling shakily. "She's stable. For
now. But Cain—" She looked at him, her
expression grim. "She can't take much more. If
she collapses again—"

"She won't," Cain said.

But even as he said it, he wasn't sure he believed
it.

Ellen's eyes were already drifting closed again,
her body sagging in the clamps.

"Stay with me," Cain whispered, his hand still on
her face. "Just a little longer. Please."

Ellen's lips moved, barely forming words.

"Trying..."

And above them, the shield held.

Barely. 4

