



## 516 Dropping Cargo

19:00:05 1

*Aegis*

Cain laughed like his chest was actively caving in. She laughed a long, her head still lulling side to side and her breathing erratic, Cain tried not to looke at her for too long, dread clutching his throat like a vice. He was surprised that he had not yet broken down. 1

The adrenaline that the ongoing war trigger still pulled me upright and prevented him from doubling over from the agony of knowing that she might not make it. 2

He wanted to hope, it had gotten to the point where even hoping tightened the vice.

He held her gaze, watching as the bloodvessels in her eyes burst, staining the whites of her eyes red, until there was no more white. Her eyes, the colour of a clean, clear beach in summer had been tampered with the red-orange that flooded her skin.

And she was willingly doing it, absorbing radiation that would fry her side out. The heat

that the radiation had brought with it had been borderline unbearable, not to speak of letting into the body to lighten the load.

She continued to tell story after story, but though her smile remained wide, it never reached her already bleeding eye. Even their current state there was profound sadness, an aching resignation that danced their depths.

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17:34:56

**Ironwall**

It was probably the hundredth argument that Kael had to personally come to diffuse. That was all the action that Ironwall had gotten since the Bloodmoon had come.

All things remained in order and it was quiet in the Obsidian center. It was not like the other outward flanks, so it was a complete surprise that after more than two days, nothing had happened.

Daily operations in and around the dome had remained undisturbed and there had been barely anything to report to Command Center.

But from the updates he got, it was only his

division that had that experience.

**Shadowhunt had gone against Felicia's division in the woods and scored an easy win.**

**Downstrike had come face to face with mutant plants of destruction.**

**Silas and Maera faced off against James and a new breed of ferals.**

**Eve had her back blown out and was pregnant with two pups.**

**Maera was paralyzed.**

**Hades—**

**Kael stopped himself from thinking about the last report. The one that had come in an hour ago. The one he still couldn't fully process.**

**Hades's skull partially destroyed. Critical condition. Deltas working.**

**He pushed the thought away. Focused on the present.**

**Ironwall was quiet. Too quiet. 1**

**The camp was tense—gammas pacing, checking weapons for the tenth time, staring at the horizon like they were waiting for the sky to fall.**

**Because it didn't make sense.**

Everywhere else was burning. Everywhere else was dying.

And Ironwall? Nothing.

Kael stood at the edge of the command tent, scanning the perimeter. Everything looked normal. Patrols running smoothly. Defensive positions manned. Civilians safe in the domes.

Too normal.

His instincts screamed that something was wrong.

"Commander."

Kael turned. His lieutenant—a sharp-eyed gamma named Voss—was staring at the radar screen, face pale.

"What is it?"

"Movement," Voss said, his voice tight. "In the sky. Multiple contacts. Fast. Coming from the northeast." 1

Kael's blood ran cold.

He crossed to the radar in three strides, staring at the screen.

Blips. Dozens of them. Moving at high speed. Flying.

"Get me eyes on them," Kael snapped. "Now."

Voss grabbed binoculars, thrust them into Kael's hands.

Kael stepped outside, raised the binoculars, and scanned the sky.

At first, nothing.

Then—

There.

Dark shapes against the red sky. Moving fast. Dozens—no, hundreds—of them.

Kael's grip tightened on the binoculars.

They were getting closer.

Lower.

And then the smell hit him.

Thick. Rancid. Like blood left to rot in the sun.

Vampires.

"All units, CODE RED!" Kael roared. "AIRBORNE HOSTILES INBOUND! PREPARE FOR ENGAGEMENT!"

The camp erupted into motion—gammas scrambling to positions, weapons raised, eyes on

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the sky.

The shapes descended.

And Kael saw them clearly now.

Vampires.

Massive. Red-skinned, leathery, bat-like wings stretched wide. Their faces twisted, monstrous, fangs bared.

But they weren't attacking.

They were dropping something.

Kael's eyes widened.

"No—"

The vampires swooped low—twenty feet above the ground—and released their cargo.

Ferals. 1

Dozens of them. Dropped directly into the heart of Ironwall. Into the spaces between the domes. Where the civilians were.

"OPEN FIRE!" Kael screamed. "TAKE THEM DOWN!"

Gunfire erupted—a wall of sound as Ironwall's forces unleashed everything they had at the falling ferals.

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The creatures hit the ground hard—some dead before they landed, others rolling, snarling, scrambling to their feet.

"ARTILLERY, NOW!" Kael barked.

The heavy guns roared to life—explosions tearing through clusters of ferals, shredding them, scattering body parts across the snow.

But more kept coming.

The vampires circled overhead, swooping low, dropping more ferals. Then rising again, disappearing into the red sky.

"They're using hit-and-run tactics!" Voss shouted. "They're not engaging—just dropping ferals and leaving!"

Kael watched through the binoculars as some of the vampires peeled away—flying back the way they came.

To get more.

"They're making runs," Kael said, his voice tight. "They'll keep coming back. Dropping waves until we're overrun."

Around him, his forces were fighting—gammas shifting, tearing into ferals, artillery pounding

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the ground. But it was chaos. The ferals were scattered, attacking from multiple points, forcing Ironwall to spread thin.

And the vampires—

The vampires stayed just out of range. Circling. Watching.

Not attacking directly.

Just delivering death.

Kael's mind raced.

Why aren't they fighting? Why just drop ferals and leave?

Then it hit him.

They're testing us. Seeing how we respond. How fast we can kill ferals. How much ammunition we'll burn.

They're gathering intelligence.

"Voss!" Kael snapped. "Get me a count. How many ferals have they dropped?"

Voss consulted the reports coming in over comms. "Fifty-plus. Maybe sixty. Hard to get an exact count—they're scattered across the entire camp."

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"And the vampires?"

"Still circling. Thirty, maybe forty of them. Some are leaving—heading northeast. Probably to grab more ferals."

Kael's jaw tightened.

This wasn't an assault.

This was a probe.

Darius was testing Ironwall. Seeing how they handled aerial drops. How fast they could respond. What their weaknesses were.

And when he had the data—

He'd send the real attack.

"All units, prioritize the ferals!" Kael ordered. "Kill them fast. Don't waste ammunition. Precision shots only. Deltas, standby for wounded. And keep eyes on the sky—if those vampires drop below fifty feet, light them up."

"Copy!" came the responses.

Kael raised his binoculars again, tracking the vampires.

They circled. Watched.

Waiting.

13:34:56

*Ironwall*

Four hours.

Four goddamn hours of this.

The ferals kept coming. Wave after wave, dropped from the sky like living bombs. Ironwall's forces had killed hundreds—hundreds—and still they came.

Kael stood in the command tent, staring at the ammunition reports, and his jaw tightened.

"We're at sixty percent reserves," Voss said, his voice tight. "If this keeps up—"

"We'll run out," Kael finished. "I know."

The ferals were easy to kill. That wasn't the problem.

The problem was there was no end.

The vampires weren't engaging. Just circling. Dropping ferals. Flying away to get more. An endless supply.

And Ironwall was burning through bullets like water.

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"We need a new strategy," Kael said.

Voss looked up. "What are you thinking?"

Kael turned to the weapons manifest. Scanned the list.

There.

Air-to-air missiles. Vampire-specific ordnance.

They'd been loaded onto the war jets weeks ago in preparation for exactly this kind of scenario. High-velocity explosive projectiles designed to penetrate vampire hide and detonate internally.

But using them meant going airborne.

Engaging the vampires directly.

In their domain.

Kael's jaw set.

"Get the jets prepped," he said. "We're going up."

Voss's eyes widened. "Commander—"

"We don't have a choice," Kael said firmly. "If we stay on the ground, we're just targets. They'll bleed us dry. We need to take the fight to them."

Voss hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, sir."

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13:20:00

Kael strapped into the cockpit of the lead war jet, his hands moving over the controls with practiced ease.

Behind him, three more jets roared to life—Ironwall's small aerial force, armed and ready.

"All units, this is Commander Kael," he said over the comms. "We're going airborne. Target: the vampires. Do not engage unless you have a clear shot. These missiles are expensive and we don't have many. Make them count."

"Copy," came the responses.

Kael's jet launched—engines screaming as it tore into the red sky.

The other three followed.

And suddenly, Kael was above the battlefield.

He could see everything from up here. The camp below. The scattered ferals. The domes.

And the vampires.

Dozens of them. Circling. Watching.

They hadn't noticed the jets yet.

Good.



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"Target lock," Kael muttered, his finger hovering over the missile release. "Acquiring—"

One of the vampires turned.

Looked directly at him.

Its eyes glowed.

Shit.

The vampire dove—faster than Kael expected. Massive wings folding, body streamlined, coming straight at him.

"EVASIVE!" Kael barked, yanking the controls.

The jet banked hard, G-forces slamming him into his seat.

The vampire followed.

Fast.

Too fast.

Kael's heart pounded. He pulled up, looped, tried to get distance—

The vampire was right there.

Claws extended. Jaws open.

Kael fired.

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The missile screamed out—small, sleek, almost elegant.

The vampire didn't dodge.

It caught the missile.

Mid-air.

With its mouth.

And swallowed it.

Kael's eyes widened. "What the—"

For a moment, nothing happened.

The vampire hovered, wings beating, staring at Kael with something like amusement.

Then—

Its stomach bulged.

The vampire's eyes widened.

It opened its mouth— 2

And exploded.

From the inside out.

Fire and gore and shredded wings erupting outward in a spray of red.

The remains plummeted toward the ground.

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Kael exhaled shakily. "Holy shit."

"Nice shot, Commander!" one of the other pilots shouted.

"Focus!" Kael snapped. "We've got more!"

The other vampires had noticed now. They were turning. Converging.

But they weren't attacking.

Just—watching.

And then one of them stepped forward.

No.

Not stepped.

Flew forward.

Larger than the others. Darker. Its wings stretched wider, its presence radiating power.

Its Chalyx seemed flared.

Recognition hit him like a punch to the gut.

The border.

The vampire that had attacked them at the border months ago. The one that had nearly made him kill himself.

It was here.

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And it was staring directly at him.

Kael's hand tightened on the controls.

The vampire's lips curled into something that might have been a smile.

Then it turned.

And left.

The other vampires followed—dozens of them, peeling away, disappearing into the red sky.

Gone.

Just like that.

Kael stared after them, his heart still pounding.

"Commander?" Voss's voice crackled over the comms. "They're... retreating?"

"For now," Kael said quietly.

He circled once more, scanning the sky.

Empty.

No more vampires. No more ferals being dropped.

Just—silence.

Kael brought his jet down, landing smoothly on the makeshift airstrip.

He climbed out, legs shaking slightly from adrenaline.

Voss was there immediately. "What just happened?"

"They were testing us," Kael said. "Seeing how we'd respond. Now they know."

"And?"

Kael looked up at the red sky. "They'll be back. And next time—" He stopped. "Next time, they won't just be dropping ferals."

Voss's face went pale.

Around them, Ironwall's forces were regrouping. Tending to the wounded. Counting the dead.

The camp was battered. Exhausted.

But intact.

For now.

Kael knew—with absolute certainty—that this was just the beginning.

The vampires had tested Ironwall.

And found it worthy of a real assault. 2