

518 Hunger

Ironwall 1

But more kept coming.

"ARTILLERY, FIRE!" Kael bellowed.

The heavy guns roared, shells screaming into the air, detonating among the swarm.

Vampires exploded—blood and gore raining down.

But it wasn't enough.

They were too many. Too fast.

One vampire dove straight at Kael.

He shifted mid-stride—bones cracking, fur erupting—and met it head-on.

They collided in midair.

Claws against claws. Teeth against teeth.

The vampire was strong—stronger than the ferals, faster, more controlled.

Kael's jaws snapped at its throat. It twisted away, claws raking across his shoulder.

He snarled, twisted, caught its wing in his teeth,

and ripped.

The vampire screamed, spiraling downward.

Kael hit the ground, shifted back to human, grabbed his rifle, and fired.

The vampire's head exploded.

But three more were already descending.

"FALL BACK TO THE DOMES!" Kael roared.

"PROTECT THE CIVILIANS!"

His forces complied—retreating in organized clusters, forming defensive rings around the civilian shelters.

The vampires pursued.

But now they were in range.

Close-quarters. Ground level.

Where Ironwall's gammas excelled.

Wolves tore into vampires. Claws met claws.

Teeth met fangs.

Blood—red and black—sprayed across the grounds.

Kael fought in the center of it all—shifting, firing, commanding.

A vampire lunged at him from above.

He fired. Missed.

It slammed into him, driving him to the ground.

Claws at his throat. Fangs descending—

A gunshot.

The vampire jerked, blood spraying from its skull.

It collapsed.

Voss stood over Kael, rifle smoking. "Get up, Commander!"

Kael scrambled to his feet. "Thanks!"

"Don't mention it!"

They fought back-to-back—Kael shifting, Voss firing, covering each other as the swarm descended.

And through it all—

Kael felt it.

The presence.

That same overwhelming, crushing weight he'd felt at the border.

He looked up.



And there.

Descending through the crimson sky.

The vampire from before.

The one that had stared at him. The one that had recognized him.

Larger than the others. Darker. Wings stretched wide, blotting out the bloodmoon.

It landed thirty feet away.

Ajax recoiled.

Kael could feel his wolf's horror in the moment. Because they recognized it.

It was the one that had almost killed him just before they made it home.

Before Kael could shift back to use his weapon, the vampire swung wide with its tail.

The last thing Kael saw was the spiked club before it collided with him.

Pain.

Blinding. Catastrophic.

His vision exploded into white.

He hit the ground—hard—and didn't move. 8



08:12:34

Ironwall

Kael woke to agony, he had been knocked out absolutely cold.

His head screamed. His ribs felt cracked. Every breath was fire.

"Commander!" Voss's voice, distant, muffled.
"Stay down! Don't move!"

Kael's vision swam. He tried to focus.

The sky was still red. Still swarming.

But—

The vampires were retreating.

Pulling back. Rising into the crimson sky.
Disappearing.

"What—" Kael's voice came out as a rasp. "What happened?"

"We drove them back," Voss said, kneeling beside him. Blood streaked his face. His armor was shredded. "The silver-infused rounds—they couldn't heal fast enough. We killed dozens. The rest retreated."

Kael tried to sit up. Pain lanced through his ribs. He gasped, fell back.

"Easy," Voss said. "You took a direct hit from that thing's tail. You're lucky to be alive."

"The vampire—"

"Gone," Voss said grimly. "It left with the others. But Commander—" His expression darkened. "We paid for it."

Kael's heart sank.

"How bad?"

Voss hesitated. "Forty-three dead. Sixty-two wounded, eighteen critical. And—" He stopped. Swallowed. "Some were taken. Grabbed by the vampires and carried off. We found—" His voice cracked. "We found bodies later. Drained. Torn apart."

Kael closed his eyes.

Forty-three dead.

In one assault.

"And ammunition?" Kael asked quietly.

Voss's face was grim. "Twenty percent reserves. Maybe less. The silver rounds were effective, but



we burned through them. If they come back with another swarm like that—" He stopped. "We won't have enough."

Kael forced himself to sit up, ignoring the pain screaming through his body.

Around him, Ironwall's camp was devastated. 1

Bodies—lycans and vampires—littered the ground. Blood stained the ground in wide, dark pools. The defensive positions were shredded. Equipment destroyed. Soldiers moved through the wreckage, faces hollow, hands shaking.

And the silence.

The eerie, terrible silence of a battlefield after the fighting stops.

Kael looked at the pile of bodies being gathered.

Ironwall gammas. Strong. Trained. Dead.

Some torn apart. Some with their throats ripped out. Some with claw marks so deep their spines were visible.

"We started with a full division," Kael said quietly. "Now—"

"Now we're at sixty percent strength," Voss finished. "And dropping."



Kael's jaw tightened.

He thought of the other divisions.

Dawnstrike—Eve blown apart, barely alive.

Hades's skull destroyed.

Frostfang—Maera paralyzed. Thirty-five percent casualties.

Shadowhunt—Felicia's forces obliterated at least.

Aegis from what he heard last had suffered the least casualties.

But Ellen had not been doing so well.

All of them bleeding.

All of them dying.

For what?

To stop Darius. To end this nightmare. To save what was left of their world.

Kael looked up at the red sky—still glowing, still pulsing with radiation.

Less than eight hours left.

Eight hours until the Bloodmoon ended.

Eight hours to survive.



"Get the wounded to the Deltas," Kael said, his voice hoarse but firm. "Reinforce what's left of the defenses. Ration the ammunition—only silver rounds for vampires, standard for ferals. And—" He stopped. "Prepare for them to come back."

"You think they will?" Voss asked.

Kael met his eyes. "I know they will."

Voss nodded slowly. "Yes, sir."

He turned and started issuing orders.

Kael stayed where he was, staring at the bodies.

So many bodies.

And more would die before this was over.

But they would hold.

Because if they didn't—

If Ironwall fell, if the domes were breached, if the civilians died—

Then everything—everything—they'd sacrificed would be for nothing.

Kael forced himself to his feet, pain lancing through his ribs.

"Hold," he whispered to himself. To his soldiers. To the ghosts of the dead.

"Just hold."

And somewhere, high above in the crimson sky,
the vampires circled.

Waiting.

Watching.

Preparing for the final assault.

06:46:56

Frostfang

*"Hold on," the voice—distorted but as familiar as
the bleeding colours of early morning—
whispered. "All of us. Just hold on."* 2

I snapped up, darkness greeting me first, before
light filtered through. I cringed against the
harshness that assaulted my eyes.

My head lulled back as though my neck was
unfamiliar with the weight of my own head. My
skull resisted a crushing pressure that made me
want to fall back into my previous position.

But the weight on my chest forced me back
upright. My body refused to let me lay back
down.



I raised my gaze to the ceiling, trying to recall how I got here and why everything in my body weighed a ton.

But I was rewarded instantly with a searing heat that lanced through one side of my entire head. I groaned deeply, the sound reverberating like a gong in my skull.

I clutched my head, willing the agony to stop, but nothing I did offered any respite. And even in the chaos of my pain, I could still hear the voice that had woken me up.

"Hold on. All of us. Just hold on." The disembodied voice had grown clearer, but with the clarity came urgency. 1

Panic and desperation bled through, my lungs on the brink of collapsing as something deeper tugged painfully at me.

The flap flew open, the sound alone enough to make me wince.

"Alpha," the voice was like sound underwater—distorted. My gaze shifted to the person. Dark, slightly greying hair and onyx eyes came into focus. I found myself squinting. "Silas?" I asked.

He nodded, the suggestion of a relieved smile



brightening his face. "You are awake already?"

He came up to me, his steps hurried and painfully loud.

My groaning made him stop dead. "It must hurt like bloody hell."

My eyes shuttered closed on their own accord. "What happened?" My words were slurred.

He did not speak for a minute and I found that I welcomed the silence, but it came with a creeping dread that raked itself up my spine. I straightened. "What happened?" I asked again.

"There was a bomb. You were in its line..."

That was all I needed to hear before my mind offered the rest in agonizing flashes that made me grab my head again.

James. The prime ferals. My howling. Then the explosion right in my face. The deafening ringing that followed before I drowned in the darkness.

"Half of your head was blown off and that should have killed any other person, but you were still breathing hours later as the Deltas rebuilt your brain and all. It was painstaking." He reported. "It is a miracle that you are alive at all." His voice rose.

I grimaced.

He halted and then continued again, softer this time. Better. "But the Deltas predict that you might suffer some side effects, like hemorrhaging and memory loss. You know, anything to do with the nervous system can be tricky when it comes to healing. James has retreated and there is no sign of him or his division on our radar. He won't be back for a while."

The information entered one ear and came out the other. Hades swallowed thickly, his tongue like sandpaper.

Thirst bloomed and twisted into hunger. Silas's heartbeat echoed in the space, pumping blood.

Craving gnawed at Hades as he watched Silas speak, his words tuned out. He needed blood, and in his head, he had stripped Silas to nothing more than a vessel that contained what he sought.

"...and Luna Eve is awake..."

At the sharp snap at Hades's chest, his hunger phased out for a second as he asked, "Who is Eve?" 8