

531 Brimstone

Dawnstrike 1

The blinding flash that had consumed the descending vampire left spots dancing across every gamma's vision, friend and foe alike. For a moment—a single, suspended heartbeat—the entire battlefield held its breath, every wolf frozen mid-snarl, every claw suspended mid-strike, every eye turned skyward toward the source of that impossible light.

And then they saw her.

It was the fiery silhouette of what could only be a woman. 1

She hung in the air above them, though "hung" was too gentle a word for what she was doing. She burned. Her form was barely recognizable as person much less a woman, more like the living heart of a star that had been ripped from the heavens and given shape. Her skin—what remained of it—glowed with the crimson fury of the Bloodmoon itself, as though she had swallowed the celestial body whole and now carried it writhing and seething inside her chest. The light that poured from her was not warm,

not comforting—it was the scorching, suffocating heat of radiation concentrated into something almost solid, almost alive. 1

No one spoke. No one moved. The battlefield had become a tableau of frozen horror and fascination, every warrior—Obsidian and Silverpine alike—transfixed by the impossible sight of this burning woman suspended above them like some apocalyptic angel come to deliver judgment.

Her mouth opened—to scream—and what came out was not sound but fire.

The first sphere of concentrated radiation tore from her outstretched palm like a comet ripped loose from its orbit. It shrieked through the air, trailing crimson and gold and something darker, something that carried with it the acrid stench of copper and burnt ozone and sweltering death, and when it struck the cluster of Silverpine gammas trying to regroup near the western flank, they didn't have time to scatter. The impact was instantaneous and absolute. Fur ignited. Flesh bubbled and peeled. Bones blackened and crumbled to ash before the wolves even finished their screams. The ground where they'd stood was scorched into glass,

smooth and gleaming and still smoking. 2

And she was only getting started.

Another sphere. Another. Another. She flung them down like some vengeful goddess raining judgment upon the unworthy, each projectile finding its mark with terrifying precision. A Prime Feral trying to coordinate an assault on the left flank took a fireball directly to its massive skull and collapsed mid-stride, its body convulsing once before going still, smoke pouring from its eye sockets. Three gammas attempting to flank Ironwall's weakened line were caught in a single explosion that turned the earth beneath them molten. A cluster of ferals—mindless, snarling, driven only by hunger and compulsion—were reduced to nothing but greasy smoke and the faint echo of their final shrieks.

The Silverpine forces broke.

Not strategically, not in any coordinated retreat. They simply shattered. Wolves scattered in every direction, some shifting back to human in their panic, others trying desperately to flee on four legs, all of them driven by the same primal terror that transcended species and rank and loyalty or even compulsion. The formation they'd

maintained so perfectly—the disciplined, methodical assault that had nearly overwhelmed Obsidian's exhausted forces—disintegrated like sand before a tidal wave.

Kael shook himself free of his paralysis. His Luna, his sister was down. Nothing else mattered.

He launched himself, shifting mid-leap, his gray wolf form hitting the ground in a full sprint. His muscles screamed in protest, his body already pushed far beyond its limits over the past hours of relentless combat, but he didn't slow. He couldn't slow. Eve's massive form lay crumpled where the vampire had dropped her, blood pooling beneath her in the scorched dirt, and every second he wasted was a second closer to losing her.

Another fireball streaked past overhead, close enough that the heat of it singed the fur along his back. The smell hit him like a physical blow—copper and fire and something else, something familiar that made his heart stutter in his chest even as his legs kept pumping. That sweltering, suffocating heat that tasted like the Bloodmoon itself, like radiation concentrated into something weaponized, like—

Ellen?

She was the only wielder of the bloodmoon...

The thought flickered through his mind for barely a heartbeat before he shoved it aside. It didn't matter. Whoever or whatever that burning woman was, she was buying them time, and he couldn't waste it. His Luna needed him. That was all that mattered.

Victoriana reached Eve first, dropping to her knees beside the massive wolf's broken body, her hands already moving to assess the damage despite the tremor in her fingers. Blood soaked through her clothes where she'd been injured earlier, one entire side of her body battered and bruised from the gamma pile-on, but she didn't falter. "She's alive," she gasped out as Kael skidded to a stop beside her, the words coming out harsh and breathless. "Barely. Help me move her."

Kael didn't waste time responding. He closed his jaws carefully around the scruff of Eve's neck, feeling the sticky warmth of her blood against his tongue, and began to pull. She was heavy—far heavier than any normal wolf, her hybrid form dense with muscle and bone—but he gritted his teeth and moved. Victoriana shifted beside him,

taking up position on Eve's other flank to help support her weight, and together they began the agonizing process of dragging their Luna toward the relative safety of the inner camp.

Above them, the burning woman continued her assault.

Another fireball exploded against a cluster of fleeing Silverpine gammas, turning them to ash before their screams could fully form. Another slammed into the ground where a Prime Feral had been attempting to rally the scattered forces, leaving nothing but smoking crater and the acrid stench of burnt flesh. The entire western flank of Silverpine's army was in complete disarray, wolves running in every direction with no coordination, no leadership, just pure animal panic driving them away from the rain of fire.

But Malrik's voice cut through the chaos like a blade.

"DEFENSIVE FORMATION! TO ME! NOW!"

The remaining Silverpine forces—what was left of them, the ones still close enough to hear their Alpha's command—responded immediately. The compulsion that marked them, that bound them

to Malrik's will, was still intact, still strong, and they moved as one despite their terror. Gammas and Prime Ferals alike abandoned their scattered retreat and converged on Malrik's position, their individual fear overridden by the absolute command in their Alpha's voice.

They formed a living wall around him, James and Felicia, within seconds, bodies pressed shoulder to shoulder, the larger Prime Ferals taking up positions at the front while the smaller gammas filled in the gaps behind them. It was a shield of flesh and fur and bone, dozens of wolves forming ranks to protect the man who had enslaved them, and when the next fireball came streaking down toward Malrik's position, they didn't scatter.

The outer wolves took the full brunt of the impact.

The explosion was deafening. Fire washed over the front line like a tidal wave, and the wolves caught in it didn't even have time to scream. Their bodies ignited instantaneously, fur and flesh melting away in seconds, bones cracking from the sudden intense heat. They collapsed where they stood, smoking husks that barely resembled anything that had once been alive,

and the stench of burnt meat rolled across the battlefield thick enough to choke on.

But the wall held.

The second rank stepped forward immediately to replace the fallen, and the third rank moved up behind them, and when the next fireball came, those wolves burned too. And were replaced. And burned. And were replaced. Over and over, a horrific cycle of sacrifice and replacement, Malrik's compelled army throwing themselves into the fire to shield their master with the mechanical efficiency of puppets dancing on strings.

Malrik stood at the center of it all, his face twisted into something between fury and fear, but his voice never wavered as he continued to bark commands, directing his forces to reinforce weak points in the formation, to rotate the ranks, to hold no matter what came at them.

And above them all, the burning woman's light was beginning to flicker.

Kael could see it even as he and Victoriana struggled to drag Eve's massive bulk across the torn earth. The brilliant crimson glow that had made the woman look like a fragment of the sun

itself was dimming, stuttering like a candle flame caught in a draft. Her movements were becoming less precise, her aim wavering. One fireball went wide, missing its target entirely and exploding harmlessly against an already-ruined section of the defensive wall. Another barely made it halfway to the ground before dissipating into smoke and sparks.

She was running out.

The light surrounding her form was fading from brilliant crimson to dull orange to something closer to dying embers, and her silhouette was beginning to lose definition, the edges blurring not from heat but from simple absence, as though she were being erased one pixel at a time.

She threw one more fireball—weak, barely more than a sputter of flame—and it fell short of Malik's formation entirely, exploding against empty ground with a pathetic pop that would have been almost comical if not for the tragedy behind it.

...And then her light went out.

Not fading. Not dimming gradually. Just—gone. Snuffed out like someone had flipped a switch,

and suddenly there was nothing left in the air above them but smoke and the faint after-image burned into everyone's retinas.

She fell.

Not gently. Not like a feather drifting on the breeze. She plummeted from the sky like a stone, her body suddenly limp and lifeless, dropping thirty feet in less than a second. She hit the ground with a sickening crack that echoed across the battlefield despite all the other noise, her body bouncing once—once—before coming to rest in a twisted heap near the center of the camp.

Motionless.

Smoking.

Silent. 2

