

514 Sleep By My Side

24:26:35 1

Frostfang

Hades flew into the camp and shifted back, the Deltas on his back alighting, just as the Frostfang gammas came to meet him, led by Silas.

"Welcome, Alpha," Silas greeted, but the light in his eyes had dimmed so low, he seemed barely there. He was bent over slightly in a hunch that was not there the last time that Hades had seen him.

Silas had always been the type to never show emotion other than disgust and anger. But this told Hades that things were bad, and judging by the pile of bodies that were still being loaded and body parts picked, it was just as grim as he feared.

"She is inside," Silas said quietly. "I will take you to her. They will soon be back so we have to regroup."

Hades nodded, following Silas toward the command tent.

He noticed the way Silas moved—stiff, careful,

like something inside him had cracked and he was holding himself together through sheer will.

"How bad?" Hades asked.

Silas's jaw tightened. "We've lost thirty-five percent of our forces. The prime ferals are—" He stopped. Swallowed. "They're devastating. We can slow them down, but we can't kill them. Not efficiently."

"And Maera?"

Silas's expression shuttered. "See for yourself."

The tent flap opened.

Maera sat in a makeshift wheelchair—cobbled together from supply crates and metal frames, a blanket draped over her lap.

Her legs were there—intact, healed—but lifeless. Unmoving.

Her face was pale, drawn, her eyes red-rimmed from crying.

But when she saw Hades, she straightened, forcing something like composure onto her features.

"Alpha," she said, her voice hoarse.

Hades stepped forward, his expression carefully neutral. "Commander."

He knelt beside the wheelchair, meeting her eyes. "I heard what happened."

Maera's jaw tightened. "I'm still functional. I can still help—"

"I know you can," Hades said quietly. "That's not in question."

Maera's breath hitched, and for a moment, Hades thought she might break down. But she held it together.

"We need to discuss strategy," she said, her voice firm. "The prime ferals are the key. If we can neutralize them, we can push back the gammas. But as it stands—" She gestured at the reports spread across the table beside her. "We're losing."

Hades nodded, standing. "That's why I'm here."

He moved to the table, Silas joining him, and spread out a tactical map.

"The prime ferals," Hades said, his finger tracing the positions where they'd been sighted. "Four of them. All marked with the Mark of Malrik."

Maera's eyes sharpened. "Your Chalyx."

"Yes." Hades's voice was grim. "These ferals are stronger and faster, they copies Eve. I guess he could not make enough from what he extracted from her. But the mark of Malik on them could be our way out 1

"Can you break it?" Silas asked.

Hades hesitated. "Yes. But not easily."

Maera leaned forward, still trembling. "Explain." She swayed but Silas caught her.

Hades exhaled slowly. "My howl. It's not just sound. If I howl at close range, the compulsion shatters. The ferals revert—either they drop dead if their bodies can't sustain themselves, or they regain consciousness if they were turned recently enough, I believe."

"Then do it," Silas said immediately. "Break them all."

"I can't." Hades's voice was flat. "Not all at once. Not on this scale."

Maera frowned. "Why not?"

"Because I'm part vampire," Hades said. "Everything I do—every ability I have—comes at

a cost. Energy. Life force. The howl is *expensive*. If I use it on a large group, I'll burn through my reserves too fast. I'll collapse. And there is still a threat of vampires coming."

Both of them flinched.

Silas stared. "How many can you break at once?"

"Four. Maybe five if I push it." Hades met his eyes. "Which means I can handle the prime ferals. But only them. The rest of the enemy forces—you'll have to hold."

"We can do that," Maera said immediately. "If you take out the primes, we can handle the gammas. We've been studying their tactics. We know how they move now."

Hades nodded. "Then that's the plan. When they return, I engage the prime ferals directly. You focus fire on the enemy gammas. We break their formation, eliminate their advantage, and push them back."

"And if more primes show up?" Silas asked.

Hades's expression darkened. "Then we adapt. But based on the info we have now Darius only has four active right now. We will start with those."

For a moment, silence fell over the tent.

Then Maera spoke, her voice softer. "How are Eve and the pups?"

Hades felt the tug in his chest.

"Eve's pups," Maera said, her eyes glistening. "I heard—about the twins. About what happened to her. Are they—"

"Alive," Hades said quickly. "All three of them. Eve is stable. Healing. The pups are—" His voice caught. "They're strong. Like her."

Maera's face crumpled. "Good. That's—that's good."

"Maera—" Hades stepped forward, his voice gentle. "You saved lives here. Held this front against impossible odds. You and Silas both. Obsidian owes you a debt we can never repay."

"I can't walk," Maera whispered, tears spilling over. "I can't fight. I can't—"

"You saved a general," Hades said firmly. "You jumped in front of a cannon. You held this line with a third of your forces dead and enemy forces that should have overwhelmed you. You are a *hero*, Maera. Don't let anyone—including yourself—tell you otherwise."

Maera sobbed—great, shaking breaths—and Silas was there immediately, dropping to one knee beside her wheelchair, pulling a cloth from his pocket and gently wiping her tears.

"It's okay," Silas murmured, his voice low, meant only for her. "You're okay."

Maera leaned into him, just slightly, and Silas's hand moved to her shoulder, steadyng her.

Hades watched them—this broken commander and the general who refused to leave her side—and felt something shift in his chest.

War did strange things to people.

It drove some into isolation, made them retreat into themselves, build walls to survive the horror.

But others—others it pushed **together**.

Forging bonds in blood and desperation, finding solace in shared suffering. 1

Silas and Maera had fought side by side for over a day. Had saved each other's lives. Had watched soldiers die, had made impossible choices, had bled together in the snow.

Of **course** they were close now.

Of **course** Silas stayed by her side.

It was natural. Instinctual even.

Hades cleared his throat gently. "We should prepare. They'll be back soon."

Silas looked up, nodded, then turned back to Maera. "Can you give us the command from here?"

Maera wiped her eyes, straightened. "Yes. I'll coordinate from the tent. You take the field."

"I'm not leaving you—" 2

"You **have** to," Maera said firmly. "The gammas need you out there. I'll be fine here."

Silas hesitated, then nodded slowly. "Alright. But if anything happens—"

"I'll call," Maera said. "Go."

Silas stood, his hand lingering on her shoulder for just a moment longer, then he turned to Hades.

"Let's end this," Silas said.

Hades nodded. "Let's."

They stepped out of the tent, into the cold, bloodied snow. 2

Around them, Frostfang's forces were regrouping—checking weapons, tending wounds, bracing for the next wave.

Hades could feel it in the air.

The tension. The dread.

The knowledge that this next fight might be their last.

But they would face it.

Together.

And when the prime ferals came—

Hades would be ready.

23:09:45

Aegis

The light permeated through Cain's shut lids. Instantly, he shot up from where he'd laid a sleeping cushion beside Ellen's satellite dish.

His heart stopped.

Ellen was glowing.

Not the faint shimmer of her shield—this was different. Brighter. Wrong.

Light radiated from within her—beneath her skin, pulsing with each shallow breath, turning her veins luminescent, her flesh translucent.

"Ellen?" Cain scrambled to his feet. "ELLEN!" 1

Her head lolled toward him, eyes half-lidded, barely focused.

"I'm okay," she slurred. "Just... tired."

"You're glowing!" Cain grabbed her face, turning her toward him. Her skin was hot—burning—and the light beneath pulsed brighter. "What's happening? MEDIC! DELTA, NOW!"

The Deltas came running—three of them, exhausted but alert.

One reached for Ellen, hands glowing—

And recoiled, hissing in pain.

"What—" The Delta stared at her hands, blistering red. "I can feel the radiation. It's—it's inside her."

"What?" Cain's blood turned to ice. "What do you mean inside her?" 1

The Delta's face went pale. She reached out again, more carefully this time, and her hands hovered over Ellen's chest. Her expression

shifted from confusion to horror.

"She's not just holding the shield," the Delta whispered. "She's absorbing it. The radiation. She's pulling it into herself."

"No." Cain's voice was hollow. "No, that's not— Ellen, tell me that's not true."

Ellen's eyes drifted closed. "Had to."

"HAD TO?" Cain grabbed her shoulders, shaking her gently. "Ellen, look at me. What did you do?"

Ellen's eyes opened—just barely—and they were glowing too. Turquoise, but shot through with veins of red.

"The shield," she whispered. "Too heavy. Couldn't... couldn't hold it all. So I—" She stopped, gasping. "I started... absorbing some. Just a little. To lighten... the load."

"A LITTLE?" Cain's voice cracked. "Ellen, you're glowing. You're—" He turned to the Deltas. "Fix this. Get it out of her."

The lead Delta shook her head, tears streaming down her face. "We can't. Once radiation is absorbed into living tissue like this—at this level—we can't extract it. It's bonded to her cells. It's—" Her voice broke. "It's cooking her from the

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inside out."

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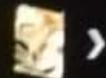


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