

## 515 Detonation 2 1

NO!" Cain roared. "No, there has to be something  
—" 1

"I'm sorry," the Delta whispered. "There's nothing  
we can do. If we try to pull it out, we'll kill her  
faster." 5

Cain stared at her, then back at Ellen.

Ellen, who was glowing.

Ellen, who was dying.

"Why?" Cain's voice was raw. "Ellen, why would  
you do this?"

"Because," Ellen whispered, her voice so faint he  
had to lean in to hear, "I was tired, Cain. So tired.  
And the shield—it was breaking. I could feel it.  
Cracking. And if it broke—" Tears slipped down  
her glowing cheeks. "Everyone would die. The  
children. The families. Everyone." 3

"So you decided to die instead?"

"I decided to hold on," Ellen said, her voice  
firmer now. "Just a little longer. And this—this  
helps. It lightens the load. Makes it easier to  
hold."



515 Detonation 2



"You're absorbing radiation," Cain said desperately. "It's killing you."

"I know." Ellen's smile was sad, peaceful. "I know, Cain."

"Then stop." Cain grabbed her hands, clutching them to his chest. "Stop absorbing it. Let the shield do the work. We'll find another way—"

"There is no other way," Ellen said gently. "Not in time. And I—" She stopped, her breath hitching. "I never expected to leave this alive, Cain. I made peace with that the moment I agreed to do this."

"No." Cain's voice broke. "Ellen, no, you can't—"

"I can," Ellen whispered. "And I will. Because it's worth it. They're worth it."

"You're worth it too!" Cain shouted, tears streaming down his face. "You're worth it, Ellen! You don't have to—"

"Yes, I do." Ellen's glowing eyes met his. "Because if I don't, who will? Who else can carry this?"

Cain opened his mouth. Closed it.

Because she was right.

No one else could do this.

Only her.

"How long?" Cain asked hoarsely, turning to the Delta.

The Delta's face crumpled. "Hours. Maybe less. The radiation is accumulating faster than her body can handle. Once it reaches critical mass—" She stopped. "She'll burn out. From the inside." 2

Cain looked back at Ellen, his hands still clutching hers.

"Hours," he repeated numbly.

"I'm sorry," Ellen whispered. "I'm so sorry, Cain."

"Don't." Cain's voice was fierce. "Don't you dare apologize. You're—" He stopped, his throat closing. "You're the bravest person I've ever known."

Ellen smiled—small, tired, radiant. "I'm just doing what needs to be done."

"No," Cain said, leaning forward until their foreheads touched. "You're doing what no one else could do. You're saving thousands of lives. And I—" His voice broke. "I'm so grateful. And so angry. Because you shouldn't have to. You shouldn't—" Her skin burnt his.

"But I am," Ellen whispered. "And I'm okay with that. I really am."

For a long moment, they stayed like that—foreheads pressed together, tears mingling, the light from Ellen's body casting everything in a soft, terrible glow.

Then Ellen spoke, her voice so quiet Cain almost missed it.

"Will you stay with me?"

Cain pulled back, staring at her. "What?"

"Until the end," Ellen whispered. "Will you stay? I don't—I don't want to be alone."

Cain's chest cracked open.

"Yes," he said, his voice raw. "Yes, Ellen. I'll stay. I'm not going anywhere."

Ellen exhaled—a shaky, relieved sound.

"Thank you," she whispered. 4

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22:47:08

Frostfang

By the first howl, the division knew they had come. They all took position, including Hades.

"POSITIONS!" Silas roared. "ALPHA LEADS! LET HIM THROUGH!"

Hades shifted—bones cracking, his massive wolf form emerging, larger than any other on the field. His eyes burned red in the darkness.

The enemy appeared at the tree line.

Sixty gammas. Four prime ferals flanking James.

James stood at the center, arms crossed, that same bitter smile on his face.

"CHARGE!" Hades's voice was a roar that shook the ground.

He launched forward, a blur of black fur and fury. Frostfang's forces surged behind him—a wave of wolves and gunfire.

The enemy gammas charged to meet them.

Fifty meters. Thirty. Twenty.

Then Hades broke.

He veered left, away from the main force, leaving the enemy gammas to Frostfang.

His target: the prime ferals.

"CONCENTRATE FIRE ON THE GAMMAS!" Silas bellowed. "LET THE ALPHA WORK!"

Gunfire erupted—both sides unleashing hell. Wolves crashed into wolves. The battlefield

exploded into chaos.

But Hades didn't slow.

He hit the first prime feral at full speed—shoulder-checking it, sending it sprawling. It recovered instantly, snarling, the Mark of Malrik burning dark on its hide.

The other three primes moved to flank him.

James's voice cut through the chaos. "His mouth! Don't let him open his mouth! Attack his jaw!"

The primes lunged.

All four at once.

Hades twisted, jaws snapping, catching one by the throat. It thrashed, claws raking his side—but Hades held on, dragging it close.

Then he howled.

Not loud. Not distant.

Point-blank.

The sound wasn't just noise—it was power. A wave of force that rippled through the air, infused with Chalyx, with blood, with compulsion.

The prime feral in his jaws convulsed.

Its eyes rolled back.

The Mark of Malrik on its hide shattered—black lines fracturing, dissolving like ash.

It went limp.

Hades released it. It hit the ground, unconscious or dead—he didn't know, didn't care.

One down.

The other three primes attacked.

Claws tore into Hades's shoulder. Teeth snapped at his throat. One locked onto his hind leg, biting, trying to cripple him.

Hades roared, twisting, throwing one off. He caught another by the scruff, slammed it into the ground, and howled again.

The sound tore through its skull.

The Mark shattered.

It collapsed.

Two down.

But the effort—

Hades staggered, his legs shaking. His vision blurred. The howl drained him, just like it had

with Orion. Each use burned through his reserves, his energy, his life.

He couldn't keep this up.

The third prime feral circled him, snarling.

Hades bared his teeth, forcing himself upright.

The prime lunged—

Hades met it head-on. They collided, rolling through the snow, claws and teeth tearing at each other.

Hades got on top, pinned it down, opened his jaws—

And howled.

Directly into its face.

The Mark shattered.

The feral went limp.

Three down.

Hades collapsed beside it, gasping, his whole body trembling. Blood streamed from a dozen wounds. His vision swam.

But there was still one left.

He forced himself up, legs shaking, and turned—

James stood twenty feet away, the fourth prime feral at his side.

And he was smiling.

Not panicked. Not afraid.

"You're stronger than I thought," James said, his voice almost conversational. "But you're predictable. I knew you'd come for the primes. Knew you'd exhaust yourself breaking them. Knew you'd think you were winning."

Hades snarled, but didn't respond. Couldn't waste the energy.

James's smile widened. "Did you really think I'd send four primes without a backup plan?"

He gestured at the fourth prime—the one still standing.

"This one's special," James said. "Go ahead. Break it. Use your howl. I'm counting on it."

Hades's eyes narrowed.

Something was wrong.

But the prime was attacking—charging forward, claws extended.

Hades had no choice.

He shifted.

His wolf form was massive, dark, well-trained.  
Beta strength. Beta speed.

James moved.

Not to attack Hades.

To retreat.

He backed away, putting distance between  
himself and the fourth prime.

Hades didn't have time to process it.

The prime was on him—claws tearing, teeth  
snapping. He twisted, caught it by the throat,  
dragged it close—

And howled.

One last time.

The sound ripped through the air—weaker than  
before, but still there. Still enough.

The Mark on the prime's hide shattered.

It went limp in his jaws.

Hades released it, swaying, his legs giving out—

And then he saw it.

Strapped to the prime's chest.

A device. Small. Metallic. Blinking red.

A bomb.

Hades's eyes widened.

He tried to move—tried to throw himself backward—

Too late.

The bomb detonated.

The explosion was catastrophic.

Fire and force and shrapnel erupting outward in a wave of destruction.

Hades was directly in the blast radius—zero distance—the prime's body pressed against him when it went off.

The left side of his face disintegrated.

Flesh vaporized. Bone shattered. His jaw, his cheek, his eye—gone. A portion of his skull ripped away, exposing brain matter and blood vessels beneath.

He didn't scream.

Couldn't.

Just collapsed, his body jerking once, then going still.

Blood poured from the ruined side of his head, pooling in the snow, steaming in the cold air.

Across the battlefield, James stood untouched.

He'd been far enough away. Safe.

Planned.

He stared at Hades's broken body, and his smile didn't waver.

"Predictable," James said quietly.

Around him, the Silverpine forces were already retreating—pulling back into the trees, mission accomplished.

James turned, mounted his wolf, and disappeared into the darkness. 1

Leaving Hades bleeding in the snow.

The battlefield went silent.

Everyone—Frostfang, Silverpine reserves, everyone—staring at the smoking crater.

At Hades.

At the ruin of him.

Sillas's voice cut through the silence—raw, desperate, broken.



"ALPHA!"

He shifted mid-sprint, his wolf form tearing across the battlefield, skidding to a stop beside Hades's body.

"No no no—HADES!"

Hades's remaining eye was open—barely. Staring at nothing.

Blood everywhere. Too much blood.

"DELTA!" Silas roared. "DELTA, NOW!"

They came running.

But even from a distance, Silas could see their faces.

Horror. Shock.

Doubt.

Because the left side of Hades's skull was gone. 7

