



352 Unlikely Antagonist

Hades ¹

The funeral was over.

But the mourning had not ended.

Outside the greenhouse, the soil was soft, freshly turned, rich with the scent of earth and rain from the night before. A silver-dusted clearing had been chosen—quiet, shielded by weeping willows and whispering vines. The air was cooler here, but not cold. It was the kind of place Danielle would have loved—wild, half-forgotten, and full of promise.

The capsule had been lowered with reverence beneath the roots of an ancient moonbark tree. Now, the earth had been returned, gently packed, and smoothed over until only the subtle mound remained.

A single marble stone sat at the head, unmarked for now.

Instead of a name, a row of moon lilies had been laid around it in a crescent—Danielle's favorite



shape. The new soil seemed to breathe beneath them.

Montegue stepped forward first, his usually impassive face twisted with a quiet ache.

He knelt stiffly, pressed one hand into the dirt, then rose without a word.

Lucinda followed, pressing a single white rosebud into the earth and whispering something too soft to hear. Her veil fluttered like wings in the breeze.

One by one, they came.

Silas. Gallinti. The Eastern and Western Alphas. Kael.

Cain lingered longer than the others. He knelt, planted a deep violet orchid, and bowed his head, whispering something in an ancient tongue. Eve tilted her head, barely catching the words:

"Let her bloom where we failed to."

Then it was Elliot's turn.

He held a tiny sprout in his hands—something



he'd grown himself. A sun blossom. Yellow, bright, and stubborn like he was.

He knelt, dug with his bare hands, and placed it near the base of the tree.

Then he sat back and stared.

Eve came next.

She knelt beside him, brushing soil from his hands before tucking her own flower beside his—a pale blue chrysanthemum. She didn't say a word, only brushed her fingers over the petals once before rising.

And then there was me.

I hesitated.

All I had was a seed.

Something Danielle had pressed into my hand long ago, on a day when the war felt far away and the future something we might survive.

"Plant it when we're free," she'd said.

I never did.

I never believed we would be.



But I did now.

Not in the way she meant. But in a way that counted.

I dug my fingers into the soil and planted it.

Not for her return.

But for her rest.

As I rose, I looked back at the people she had shaped with her love, her absence, her memory.

And I realized this garden wouldn't just be hers.

It was ours.

A place to return when the world became too much.

When the war came again.

When Elliot needed a place to speak to someone who would always listen.

Eve slipped her hand into mine.

And for a while, we just stood there, surrounded by the soft rustle of leaves, the scent of lilies and soil, and the quiet ache of parting. The last petals



had been laid, the last words whispered into the earth. Even grief had begun to settle into silence.

Montegue gave a slow nod. "We'll begin the closing rites."

He raised a ceremonial staff, tapping it gently into the earth three times as Lucinda chanted the first of the parting verses.

The garden fell into hushed reverence once more.

But then—

A voice broke through it all.

"—Lies! That's all they've fed us!"

A sharp shout rang out from the far edge of the garden.

Everyone turned.

An Obsidian Alpha, one of the younger Western liaisons, stormed forward, eyes wide, his tablet still glowing in his hand.

"Alpha Bren," Kael barked, stepping in, brows furrowed. "This is sacred ground."

But the man didn't bow. Didn't still. He looked haunted. Furious.

He shoved the screen toward Kael. "You need to see this. Now."

Kael took it with a scowl—ready to reprimand him—until his gaze dropped.

Then everything about him stilled.

Color drained from his face.

Kael turned to me, the wind cutting through the quiet like a blade.

"Your Majesty," he said, voice tight. "You have to see this."

I stepped forward, heart already beginning to beat faster, and took the screen.

A video was playing—live.

**OBSIDIAN IN SHADOW: GOVERNOR MORRISON
BREAKS HIS SILENCE ON THE CROWN.**

The headline was bold. But the footage was worse.

Governor Thaddeus Morrison—once loyal,



always careful—now sat in full view of the realm, dressed in formal grays, his salt-and-pepper beard trimmed to precision, his presence severe and unyielding.

He was seated across from Lysander Crane, the most popular political analyst in the realm, whose morning broadcasts reached millions.

Morrison's eyes were steel, his expression etched with what looked like righteous fury.

And then came his voice—clear, authoritative, heavy with years of buried anger:

> "The people deserve to know the truth. About the crown. About the Obsidian Pack. About what really happened to the royal family, and the experiments hidden in the north quadrant labs. And most importantly—about him."

The screen flickered as footage rolled beside him—redacted reports, blurred photographs, and then—

A still of me.

Obsidian armor. Blood-spattered shoulder. My eyes lit with Flux from weeks ago.



Gasps rippled through the mourners around us.

Lucinda dropped her crest.

Gallinti muttered a curse.

And I...

I didn't blink.

Because I knew what came next.

> "We were told Vassir died century ago but even the history books have been twisted. Vassir is not gone. It's not over. And the one you call King... may not be your savior at all. He may be what we should've feared all along. He is possessed by the thing."

Morrison leaned forward, jaw set.

Silence fell.

The kind of silence that curdled the air and drew blood from old wounds.

Kael turned to me slowly, his mouth dry, as the camera cut back to Morrison's grim face.

> "I have proof. And I won't be silenced anymore. Even though the king himself tried to. He tried



to use Vassir's corruption to neutralize me because he knew... i would not bow to deception against the people, people he vowed to serve has a leader but he has more skeletons than he has oaths."

Morrison's voice trembled—not with fear, but conviction. He leaned forward, eyes burning with the kind of fury that wasn't easily manufactured.

> "Ask him where the bodies are buried—literally. The bodies of men and children that he had authorised to be guinea pigs to the virus that is Vassir's essence before he deemed it tamed enough to inject the corruption into his own veins. Our king is a tyrant, a deceiver..."

The footage cut to black for a heartbeat.

Then—

> "Rebroadcast begins in five minutes. Viewer discretion is advised."

I handed the tablet back to Kael like it weighed a thousand blades.

All eyes were on me.

The garden of Danielle's rest had become a crucible.

No longer sacred. Just scandalized.

Montegue's mouth was a hard, flat line.

Lucinda had taken Elliot's hand in hers protectively, as if guarding him from the words that still hung like smoke in the air.

Cain was watching me—too closely. Measuring.

And Eve...

Eve hadn't moved. But her grip—once faltering—tightened suddenly around mine.

I looked down.

She wasn't withdrawing.

She was grounding.

"I know that look," she said quietly, almost beneath the breath of the breeze. "He timed this."

I blinked at her. "What?"

Eve's gaze didn't waver from the screen now



dark in Kael's hand.

"Morrison," she said. "He waited for us to be off-grid. No surveillance, no interference, no counter-narratives. We've been offline for what—three hours?"

Silas stepped forward, frowning deeply. "That can't be right. Morrison was practically a drooling mess last I saw him—three months ago during a border summit. He could barely string a sentence together. We had him declared psychologically unfit."

Kael snapped his fingers as if remembering. "He was moved to the Marrowcliff Facility. I personally authorized the escort team a month ago. Locked ward. Private level. There's no way he could've staged this. Not without outside help."

"Or something worse," Gallinti muttered, his tone low and vaguely horrified. "That broadcast wasn't just some bitter exposé. It was clean. Orchestrated. Politically loaded. This isn't a breakdown. This is an operation."

"Propaganda," Cain said, teeth clenched. "But weaponized with truth fragments sharp enough



to draw real blood."

Kael's jaw flexed. "We need verification. Was it deepfake? Old footage? Is it really him or a projected construct? This feels... too convenient."

Eve, still gripping my hand, stepped slightly forward. "It's not convenient. It's tactical. He struck while we were vulnerable. While the world knew we were mourning her."

She nodded toward Danielle's resting mound, the scent of moon lilies suddenly heavier in the air.

"This moment," she whispered, "wasn't just sacred—it was silencing. No one had their devices. No one was watching the feed. And now? The damage has already metastasized."

Kael cursed under his breath and started barking orders to his communicator. "Get me real-time access to Marrowcliff. I want full patient logs, camera feeds, and recent visitors within the last six weeks. Now."

I looked to Eve. Her eyes burned with clarity.

"They wanted us too shocked to react," she said,



her voice low, like she was speaking just to me.
"But we can't give them silence, Hades. Not this time."

I nodded slowly, then turned to the others.

"Everyone back to the Tower. Now. Council, Whisper Wing, Lucinda, Montegue. Eve and Elliot come with me. We need to prepare a statement before the next rebroadcast hits."

"And Morrison?" Gallinti asked grimly.

I didn't hesitate. "Bring him in—dead or alive. But not before we find out who helped him crawl out of that ward." 2

