



## 437 Vamparic Compulsion <sup>2</sup>

### Hades <sup>1</sup>

My chest constricted, my lungs still burning from the last exerting task I had yet to recover from. I should have flown higher the moment I had noticed the hidden city, but attempting another one of those ascensions when I was still yet to recover from the first would have been detrimental.

We had already almost fallen from the sky.

My amplified sense of sight let me see the creature below us almost face-to-face. This made my lungs burn harder as dread crawled up my throat, leaving me bereft of air.

"Hades," I could hear the terror that tinged Kael's words. Though he could not see what I was seeing, he could feel something was wrong.

The eyes of the creature below burned red, and I could feel its heat and intense scrutiny even with the distance that separated us.

"Hades, what is wrong?" Kael asked. "What are you looking at?"

I tore my gaze away from the thing still staring



right at us from below and turned to him, my voice strained and unfamiliar as I spoke. "Buckle up."

Kael's reaction came swiftly as he held on to our passengers, using his other hand to grab my membrane and tuck his legs.

I sucked in air like a vacuum. It seared my already bruised lungs, and the next flap of my wing was so strong, the wind almost blew me off my axis.

I feared for those on my back, but I didn't stop. I launched us forward with desperate urgency, following Thea's instructions to cut diagonally across the hidden city. My wings beat in powerful, measured strokes despite the fire in my chest, carrying us on the path she'd mapped out—the route that would take us safely to Obsidian territory if we could just maintain our course.

But I couldn't resist looking back.

My heart stopped completely when I saw the creature below beginning to move. What I had taken for a tall, pale figure in elegant black clothing was transforming before my eyes. The vampire's alabaster skin began to ripple and



darken, shifting from porcelain white to deep crimson. His lithe frame expanded as bones cracked and reformed with sickening pops that somehow carried even through the distance between us. 4

Horns erupted from his skull—curved and wicked, just like mine. His clothing dissolved into his changing flesh as dark red membranes unfurled from his back, stretching wide between newly elongated bone structures. The wings were massive, bat-like, their crimson surface catching the ethereal light of the hidden city below.

He was shifting into the same form I took.

The realization hit me like a physical blow.

And now he was coming for us.

The transformed vampire launched himself skyward with a speed that defied physics, his massive wings propelling him upward in a direct intercept course. The distance between us began to shrink with terrifying rapidity as he climbed through the air like a crimson nightmare.

I banked hard to the right, my passengers crying out as the sudden maneuver pressed them



against my spine. My lungs screamed in protest, but I pushed harder, flying with every ounce of strength I had left. Behind us, I could hear the distinctive sound of those blood-red wings cutting through the night air, growing closer with each passing second.

"Hades!" Kael's panicked voice slashed through my scrambling thoughts as I continued to launch myself forward, trying to avoid the thing coming right at us.

"It is coming," was the only thing I could say as I tried to save my breath and air to move faster than my exhausted body could manage.

If I were alone, maybe it would be possible to defend myself, but with three people on me, it would be a suicide mission. There was no way we could all survive.

The creature reached our altitude with impossible speed, rising through the air like a blood-red comet. Up close, the transformed vampire was even more terrifying—its crimson wings stretched wider than mine, membranes pulsing with visible veins that seemed to glow with their own inner fire. Its face had elongated into something predatory, fangs gleaming white against the darkness of its maw, and those



burning red eyes locked onto us with single-minded hunger.

Behind me, I heard Thea's sharp intake of breath, followed by Micah's whimper of pure terror. Kael's grip on my membrane tightened.

"What the hell is that thing?" Kael's voice cracked with horror.

The creature didn't answer. Didn't speak at all. It simply attacked.

It dove at us with talons extended, moving with the fluid grace of a natural predator. I rolled to the left, feeling the wind from its claws as they missed us by inches. My passengers cried out as the sudden movement pressed them hard against my spine, but I couldn't afford gentle maneuvers. Not when one solid hit would send us all plummeting to our deaths.

The fall from this height would kill them instantly, even if they managed to shift mid-air. They would be nothing but pulp scattered across the golden streets of the hidden city below.

I banked sharply right as the creature wheeled around for another pass, its wings cutting through the night air with deadly precision. Every instinct screamed at me to shift into full



combat mode, to meet this threat with all the violence I was capable of. But I couldn't. Not with three lives depending on my ability to stay airborne and stable.

The vampire struck again, this time catching my left wing with razor-sharp claws. Pain exploded through my shoulder as its talons raked across membrane and bone. I fought to keep my balance, biting back a roar of agony as I struggled not to roll or dive—any sudden movement would launch my passengers into the void.

Blood streamed from the wounds, making my wing heavy and unsteady. The creature circled back, preparing for another attack, and I realized with growing desperation that my options for defense were impossibly limited. I was fighting with one wing tied behind my back, forced to absorb damage rather than dish it out.

All I could do was try to outrun it and pray we reached Obsidian territory before it tore us apart.

Kael had enough, and to my horror, he rose on my back, standing precariously on my spine as he shifted and—



Leaped. 4

Thea screamed, voicing my alarm.

His wolf landed on our attacker's back and began an onslaught as he ripped into the vampire's membrane. There was no hesitation nor fear as he bit into its long neck.

The vampire thrashed against him, rolling and tossing to get him off its back, but it was no use as Kael held firm, his grey fur drenched in blood that was not red but black.

I glanced down to see that despite the noise we were making, the utter maelstrom of blood and wings in the skies, the little boy had begun to cry just as I went for the offensive, Thea gripping me as I sank my talon into its face and tore through it.

Then the onslaught on the creature continued in two fronts, from both me and Kael, as I tried to stay steady, ignoring the way it felt like razors raced through every muscle that I moved.

But with each assault, the creature's flesh mended while mine still throbbed and pulsed.

It still attacked but not as efficiently as before. It was still distracted by Kael on its back, not



relenting in his own assault.

We had to go, as soon as possible. "Kael," I called.

To my dreadful surprise, the thing froze as well. Stilled to the point that for a perplexing moment, it looked like a floating statue. It was as if something had dawned on it enough to make it pause.

But as if Kael had not heard me, he didn't stop. Only when the thing finally turned to him did he pause—but that was all it took.

"Beta Kael Orlov." Its voice made me stop dead, echoing even in open space. It knew Kael. Or remembered him.

Kael froze, like his body answered the call but not his mind, because his gaze flew to me, a silent scream for help.

Just as I prepared to ram into the creature, building distance that would translate into force enough to knock it off—hopefully without endangering Kael and sending him plummeting—I had so few options, it felt like the physical force of a hand wrapped around my throat.

But Thea spoke, her voice laced with fright, "His back is glowing, his back is glowing."



I stopped, eyes darting toward the creature's back, but there was nothing. Then to Kael—and my eyes widened as I saw the dull light glowing from behind him, through his clothes.

Confusion whirled through me as the creature spoke again. Its words were a whip disguised in a whisper: "Rip out your throat and jump." 1

My stomach churned as it dawned on me fast what the only thing that could be glowing on his back could be. The unfinished mark of Malrik on his back.

"Kael!" His name tore from my throat as I watched in horror. 2

## 438 Caught!

Hades 1

"Kael!" His name tore from my throat as I watched in horror. My mind raced through impossible calculations—every option a death sentence. If I moved too fast or hit too hard, Thea and Micah would fall. If I rammed into the creature, the sudden impact could send them plummeting or give the vampire a chance to grab them. If I tried to shake the creature off, Kael would be thrown into the void. But if I waited, Kael would die by his own hand.

All these thoughts crashed through my consciousness in the span of a heartbeat.

Kael's hand moved toward his throat with jerky, unnatural movements, but I could see him fighting it—his fingers trembling as he tried to force his arm back down. The partial control he still maintained over his own body was the only thing keeping him alive, but it was a battle he was losing.

The unfinished mark on his back pulsed brighter, visible even through his torn shirt. Malrik's incomplete claim was enough to give the

vampire some control, but not total dominance. Yet.

"Fight it, Kael!" I screamed, my voice breaking with desperation.

Behind me, I felt sudden movement. Before I could react, Thea had shifted into her wolf form—smaller and more agile than Kael's—and launched herself through the air with impossible speed and precision. Her leap carried her directly onto the vampire's back, right beside where Kael struggled against the compulsion.

Without hesitation, she bit down hard on Kael's clawed hand just as his talons reached his throat. Her smaller wolf form was no match for his strength, but the sharp pain was enough to break his concentration. Kael howled—a sound of anguish and rage that echoed across the night sky as he fought against both the vampire's control and Thea's intervention. 4

The vampire thrashed violently, trying to dislodge both wolves from its back while maintaining flight, but Thea held on with grim determination. Her bite wasn't meant to hurt Kael—it was meant to save him, to give him something real and immediate to focus on besides the insidious whisper in his mind.



For a moment, the three of them formed a struggling knot of wings, fur, and desperation against the starlit sky.

I had a child on my back.

What the hell was I going to do? The helplessness was a tight noose around my throat that I tightened every second.

The frustration and fear that had been building inside me reached a breaking point. We were supposed to make it home tonight. Kael should have been sleeping in his own bed by now. Thea and Micah should have been safe in Obsidian territory, finally free from the nightmare they'd been living, their debt paid after giving us the route that could change everything.

Instead, we were trapped in this aerial hell, with a child crying on my back and my closest friend fighting for his life against a creature that shouldn't exist. <sup>1</sup>

The rage that erupted from my throat wasn't human—wasn't even entirely lycan. It was something primal and ancient, the sound of Vassir's essence given voice. The growl that tore from me shattered the night air, so loud and powerful it seemed capable of ripping the very



sky apart. The sound waves rippled outward, carrying with them all my fury, desperation, and protective instinct.

The vampire stopped mid-snarl, its crimson form going completely still in the air as if frozen by the sheer force of my roar. Its burning red eyes widened, and for the first time since this nightmare began, it looked genuinely stunned. 1

The effect on Kael was immediate. Whatever hold the creature had on him snapped like a severed rope. He crumpled forward, his wolf form going limp as consciousness returned to his eyes. His hands—or what remained of them as they regenerated from bloody stumps—hung useless at his sides, but he was awake, he was himself again.

Kael shifted back to human form, naked and trembling but alive. Thea, still in her wolf form, grabbed him by the shoulder with her jaws and leaped off the vampire's back in one fluid motion. I dove beneath them, catching both of them against my spine just as they began to fall.

The vampire remained motionless in the air, staring at me with the same stunned recognition it had shown when it remembered Kael's name. Something in my growl had reached it—had

reminded it of something or someone it thought was lost forever. 3

It was strange too because from the moment I saw it, it felt familiar as well.

But I didn't care what memories my voice had stirred. All that mattered was getting my people home.

The air burned in my lungs, but I didn't dare slow. Each beat of my wings was agony, but the thought of losing even one of them after everything we had faced this night kept me pushing.

Below us, the hidden city stretched like a phantom tapestry, glittering towers wrapped in its impossible glamour.

And beyond the trees—

My eyes narrowed, heart kicking hard against my ribs. There it was. The wall. Tall and unyielding, stretching like a jagged scar across the horizon, dividing Obsidian from Silverpine.

Home.

A surge of gratitude rose sharp in my chest, cutting through exhaustion like a blade. Thea had been right. She'd led us true. She'd saved



Kael. She'd saved all of us. For the first time since this nightmare flight began, hope was close enough to taste.

Then the howl came.

It tore from behind us, long and piercing, a sound that rattled bone and froze blood. The vampire. Whatever trance my roar had forced upon it—whatever recognition had stunned it into stillness—was shattered.

I didn't need to look back to know. The thunder of crimson wings beat against the night air, closer, louder. The predator was hunting again.

Adrenaline flooded me, my muscles screaming as I forced more speed from my battered body. My vision blurred, spots sparking at the edges, but I drove forward anyway. Just a little further. Just to the wall.

Then—light.

Blinding beams cut across the sky, searing my eyes white. I reeled, the sudden glare slicing through the dark like a blade, and my stomach dropped as realization struck cold and merciless.

We weren't the only ones who had seen us. 1

Searchlights. 3