521 Four Hours

04:01:43 (Four hours until the end) 1

Above Ironwall

Hades' wings wove through the air, every energized snap propelling him closer to his destination. The headache had finally relented — a welcome mercy — but flashes of memory still struck him without warning, jagged and intrusive.

The blood had been the answer, and with so many willing to give theirs, the healing had progressed faster than even the Deltas theorized.

The moment the pressure on his skull eased, everything began to return — first in trickles, then in a flood that drowned him in images, conversations, events, and fragmented timelines.

Along with his memory of Eve and her condition, their past life came roaring back. His past existence struck with a clarity it had never held before.

It had not always been so vivid. It used to feel like watching through fogged glass — but it

seemed the brain damage and subsequent repairs had pulled every suppressed piece to the surface.

Hades clenched his jaw, smothering the overwhelming instinct to abandon his mission entirely and fly straight back to Dawnstrike. To see Eve. To beg on his knees for even daring to forget her. Because if he saw her now... he knew he wouldn't let go.

But with four hours until the Bloodmoon passed over, he had to be wary. Darius would soon lose the ability to weaponize the Bloodmoon — and the enemy would lash out with whatever final cruelty remained.

And from what Hades had been informed, Ironwall had taken massive hits. Two days of silence... and then devastation.

Because of the vampires.

His wings froze mid-stroke as the stench hit him — pungent, rotten, a cleaver slicing through the air. Thick enough to sting his eyes and run like a serrated blade through his nostrils.

They'd been numerous. An estimation rose unbidden — sixty vampires had flown over this area recently. And that was what triggered the

strangest shift: he recognized the scent of each one.

Names he had never heard before tore through his mind, as if unlocked by the same brain injury that had loosened all his memories.

A shout cut through the haze.

His head snapped down. Ironwall Division lay below him.

Bodies littered the ground — tiny specks from his altitude. He angled downward, tucking his wings to initiate a rough descent.

He hit the ground hard enough to make the camp tremble.

Gammas scattered — then froze.

Weapons raised. Eyes wide.

No one moved.

Then—

"ALPHA!"

Voss stumbled out, limping, bloodied, but alive. Relief broke across his face.

"You're here. Thank the gods, you're here."

Hades shifted back into human form, his wings folding and disappearing as bone and muscle reformed. He straightened, taking in the devastation around him.

Bodies. So many bodies.

Lycan and vampire, piled in heaps, dragged toward mass graves.

Blood soaked the snow in wide, dark pools.

The domes stood intact — barely. Scorch marks marred their surfaces. Claw marks gouged deep.

But they held.

"Report," Hades said, his voice rough.

"Two full assaults," Voss said. "Vampires. Hundreds of them. They dropped ferals first — testing us. Then the vampires came down themselves. Fed on our wounded to replenish mid-battle."

Hades's jaw tightened. "Casualties?"

"Seventy-three dead. Ninety-plus wounded. We're at forty percent strength." Voss swallowed. "We held the domes. But barely."

Seventy-three.

More than Frostfang. More than Dawnstrike.

Ironwall had bled the most.

"Where's Kael?" Hades asked.

"Medical tent. He—" Voss hesitated. "He killed their lead vampire. But he took a bite to the neck. The Deltas are working on him now."

"A bite?"

"He survived. His blood—" Awe crept into Voss's face. "It was poisoned. Silver. Thea's been injecting him for weeks. Built up tolerance. Made his blood toxic to vampires."

Hades stared. "He poisoned himself?"

"Yes. And it worked. The vampire that bit him — its mouth *burned.* The others saw it. They retreated. They're paranoid now. Thinking more of us might be poisoned."

Hades's silence stretched.

Then—

"Brilliant." Quiet, but fiercely proud. "Absolutely brilliant."

He strode toward the medical tent.

Everything in the camp felt haunted — the survivors moving like ghosts, hollow-eyed but

still obeying orders, still doing what needed to be done.

These are my people, he thought. *And they've bled enough.*

He pushed the tent flap aside.

Kael lay on a cot, stripped to the waist, bandages wrapped around his neck and chest. Pale. Weak. Breathing shallowly.

A Delta worked over him, hands glowing faintly.

Kael's eyes cracked open as Hades approached. "Alpha," he rasped. "You're—" A wince cut him off. "You're supposed to be dead."

"So are you," Hades said, sitting beside him. "Yet here we are."

Kael managed a weak smile. "Stubborn bastards."

"The best kind." Hades looked at the Delta. "Status?"

"Stable," the Delta said. "The bite was deep but clean. No venom. The silver in his bloodstream saved him — burned the vampire from the inside before it could inject anything. He'll live."

"Good." Hades looked back at Kael. "You did well. Ironwall held because of you."

Kael's gaze darkened. "We lost seventy-three."

"I know." Hades's voice was heavy. "And I'm sorry. But you *held*. The domes are intact. The civilians are safe. That's what matters."

"Is it?" Kael whispered. "Seventy-three dead. Ninety wounded. For *what*? To hold a line for a few more hours?"

"Yes," Hades said firmly. "Because in four hours, this ends. The Bloodmoon passes. Darius loses his advantage. And we win."

Kael's expression searched him. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure." His remaining eye burned. "We've bled. We've lost. But we're still here. And Darius —" His voice darkened. "Darius is running out of time. And out of moves." 1

Kael exhaled. "Then we finish this."

"Yes." Hades stood. "We finish this."

He turned to the Delta. "How many wounded can still hold a weapon?"

"Maybe twenty."

"Arm them. Prepare everyone else. Darius will throw everything he has left at Ironwall before the Bloodmoon ends. Go."

The Delta hurried out.

Hades squeezed Kael's shoulder. "Rest. You've earned it."

"What about you?" Kael said. "You just had half your skull rebuilt."

"I'll rest when Darius is dead."

He left the tent.

Outside, the camp was already stirring.

Weapon checks. Mobilization. Quiet dread.

"IRONWALL!" Hades called out.

Every head turned.

He saw exhaustion. Grief. Fear.

And resolve.

"Four hours," Hades said. "Four hours until the Bloodmoon ends. Until Darius loses his advantage."

He didn't offer comfort. He didn't lie.

"This won't be easy. It'll be brutal. Some of us won't make it. We've already lost too many."

Silence.

"But if we hold — if we make it to dawn — every life lost tonight will *mean something.* Darius will fall. The Bloodmoon will end. And Obsidian will *stand."*

A single gamma raised her fist. "For Obsidian."

Another: "For the fallen." 1

More voices followed.

Not loud.

Not triumphant.

A vow.

Hades nodded. "Four hours. That's all we need."

He spread his wings and launched into the air.

His chest tightened as Ironwall shrank beneath him.

Guilt flared, sharp and cruel.

I forgot her, he thought. *For four hours, I didn't even know her name.*

He forced the thought away.

Survive first. Mourn later.

Three more divisions awaited him.

And three hours to make sure Darius didn't take anything else from them.

A gamma stumbled past with a stretcher, dragging the body of a fallen comrade toward the growing line near the graves. The stretcher slipped in the snow.

Hades caught it before it crashed.

For a heartbeat, the gamma just stared at him—shocked, breath misting in the winter air.

"I've got it," Hades said quietly.

He lifted the body himself, the weight heavier than it should have been, heavier with everything it meant. Others paused, watching as their Alpha knelt beside the dead and helped arrange them with care—closing eyes, straightening limbs, lifting one fallen gamma after another. ①

No orders.

No speech.

Just silent labor.

Shared grief.

By the time they laid the last body down, the wind had stilled. The camp was quiet, reverent,

as though the dead demanded one final moment of peace.

03:09:41

Ironwall

Hades heard them before, he caught the pungent wiff of them. His ears twitched up, his late cup of blood pausing just before the final glup. Kael did not need to think too hard, Hades senses were never not accurate especially with the recent power up.

He faced the tent exist, detecting nothing himself but still asking. "They are here. aren't they?"

Hades nodded, his fangs already elogating, his eyes flaring red in the light. Rising, he turned to Kael. "They are about two miles inbound, I know you are not going to like this but you are going to rest in the meantime. It is a miracle you survived poisoning yourself for this war so I am going to trake it from here. We have a little over two hours until the bloodmoon continues on its path. We are close."

Kael did not even pretend to disagree. "And you don't want me dead before then."

A muscle in Hades' jaw jumped, his lip tilting into a small smile. "Thea will not forgive me if I let her mate die, neither will Eve. Leave the rest to me and do not come out no matter what you hear."

The Kael stare they exchanged was a conversation wrought with tension but bereft of any words.

But it was enough because Kael nodded. "You have my word."

That was all Hades needed to hear before he raced out and unto the camps. He looked skywards. The gammas milling about their responsibilities, stopped, doing the same. Their dread clear as the day. They did not need be told even once.

The smell of rot grew stronger. Hades fainally made the call, his voice carrying through the entire camp.

"Positions, Positions," He ordered. "The Vampires are inbound. One and a half miles and closing in fast. Get in positions."