

522 His Brother's Face

Above Ironwall 1

Orion's tongue still burned with the acrid, dreadful taste of silver in the Beta's tainted blood. He beat his wings faster, ire burning a hole through his chest. His lips curled back in a snarl just from the thought of the golden-haired Beta of the pack they would raze to the ground.

Once he destroyed Obsidian—once Obsidian was ancient history—he would be free. This time, Orion made sure not to make the same mistake twice. Unlike all those centuries ago, he would not hold a deceitful werewolf to his words alone.

He and Darius had locked themselves into the bloodoath that neither could break. If the Lycans had the Fenrir's Chain, vampires had the Bloodoath.

Yet, somehow, Orion could not put it past the slimy scum of a predator to slither his way past the confines of the contract etched in both their blood. But desperation lived in his weary bones after so many centuries of entrapment.

With the Chalyx that was the quintessence of the bearer, Darius had wielded the power of the



Vampire Prince in its purest form—which included power over Vassir's subjects themselves, the vampires.

Orion would never admit to himself that he regretted betraying Vassir only to end up caught in the inescapable web of a new master. All because he could not accept that his brother would taint vampire blood with that of a female shifting dog and damn them all.

Yet, Orion had been the one to do just that.

Unbidden, the memory of the man bearing his brother's face ripped through him, almost like an assault upon his tense senses.

Orion snarled again at the memory of the impostor wearing his brother's face, clad in his form, wielding his roar to subdue him. Hades Stravos was not Vassir; he had simply taken his essence for the power it afforded him. 1

He was no better than Darius.

The difference was that he could not kill Darius because of the contract—but the other thief, the Alpha of Obsidian, would meet his demise by his claws and teeth.

"We are close, Orion," Ezekiel said, eyeing the

distance.

"They have depleted their weapons and men,"
Rielle added.

"We will avenge our brethren and take the
victory for them—and win our freedom,"
Thaddeus continued, his eyes blazing as he sped
up.

Orion wanted to tell them that it was not so
simple. Nothing with Darius was ever that
simple. It was he who had been awake for the
longest, doing Darius' bidding, using forbidden
alchemy to build an army, twisting his daughter's
blood to create ferals, activating the Chalyx's
power of compulsion to make slaves of captives.
They only knew little of the full story. But Orion
knew every bloody, sordid, depraved detail. He
had lived it, participated in full, all for the taste
of freedom he had never gotten a sliver of. If
Darius could plot for the death of his pack, they
had little to expect. But he would not say that.

Let them have their hope.

It was all they had left.

"There," Orion said, pointing down. "The camp. I
see the domes."

"And I see him," Xavier growled.



Orion's eyes narrowed.

Standing in the center of Ironwall, looking up at them—

Hades.

Wearing Vassir's face. Wielding Vassir's power.

Thief.

Orion's wings beat harder.

"DESCEND!" he roared. "TEAR THEM APART!"

The swarm dove.

Vampires—wings folded, claws extended, fangs bared.

Screaming toward Ironwall like death itself.

And Hades—

Hades stood his ground.

The collision was cataclysmic. A detonation.

Artillery roared—shells screaming into the air, detonating among the swarm.

Vampires exploded midair. Wings shredded.

Bodies torn apart. Blood sprayed across their brethren, charred flesh raining down like ash.

But none of them paused.

None of them retreated.

They dove.

Hundreds of them—claws extended, fangs bared, eyes burning with hunger and rage.

Orion's eyes did not stray from Hades.

Even as artillery shells tore through the swarm around him. Even as his kin fell—screaming, burning, dying—his gaze remained locked on the wolf standing at the center of Ironwall.

Thief.

Hades returned the stare, his expression unreadable. He raised his rifle, aimed, and fired.

Orion twisted midair—wings folding, body spiraling.

The bullet screamed past him, catching the vampire behind him instead. It shrieked, spiraling down.

Hades fired again.

Orion dove left. Another vampire died.

Again.

Orion banked right. Another fell.



Hades's jaw tightened. He fired in rapid succession—three shots, four, five.

Orion weaved through them all—twisting, diving, ascending—a blur of red skin and black wings.

The vampires above and beside him weren't as fast.

They took the rounds meant for him. Fell screaming. Died in his place.

Orion didn't care.

His eyes never left Hades.

With every beat of his wings, with every meter he closed, the rage inside him grew.

Not just anger.

Apoplexy.

A writhing, boiling thing that churned behind his ribs, clawing at his chest, demanding release.

You wear his face.

You stole his power.

You desecrate his memory.

Orion's lips peeled back, fangs bared.

Fifty meters.

Thirty.

Twenty.

Hades lowered his rifle.

Shifted.

His massive wolf form erupted—black fur
bristling, eyes blazing red.

And howled.

The sound tore through the air—raw, primal,
infused.

Chalyx.

Vassir's Chalyx.

The power that should have died with his
brother, now wielded by this mongrel.

Orion's vision went white with rage.

He folded his wings and dropped.

Like a spear.

Straight at Hades.

They collided.

The impact shook the ground.

Claws met claws. Fangs met fangs.

Wolf and vampire—locked together, tearing at each other with fury and hatred centuries in the making.

Orion's claws raked across Hades's side. Blood sprayed.

Hades's jaws snapped at Orion's throat. Orion twisted, drove his claws into Hades's shoulder.

They rolled—a tangle of fur and wings and violence.

Around them, the battle raged.

Vampires descended on Ironwall. Wolves rose to meet them. Artillery boomed. Gunfire cracked.

But for Orion and Hades—

There was only this.

Only each other.

Only the rage.

Only the reckoning.

Through some unknown bond that linked the two enemies who battled with teeth and claws—tearing at sinew and hide, snapping at limbs—Hades could feel his opponent's rage.

He could taste it. Bitter, sour, scalding on his tongue.

The pungent smell of Orion's form grew staler the more his anger festered, building and building until it released in deep snarls and low, guttural growls.

Even in Hades's smaller form against Orion's more formidable one, they were evenly matched in strength and ability.

Where Hades had the sinuous reflexes of a lithe wolf, Orion had size and reach. Neither could get close enough to land the killing blow. The deadly dance was a frustrating choreography—dodge, strike, retreat, circle—neither giving ground, neither breaking.

Around them, the world was set alight.

Vampires descended on Ironwall like a plague. Gammas rose to meet them—some shifted, some firing, all bleeding.

The strategy was clear: flanking Gammas provided covering fire while the inner forces fought shifted—three wolves to one vampire. Almost like the plan they'd used against the Prime Ferals.

It was working.

Barely.

**For every vampire that fell, a Gamma died. For
every Gamma saved by covering fire, another
was dragged skyward, drained, dropped.**

But they held.

And Hades—

Hades could feel it.

The bond.

The thing connecting him to Orion.

It wasn't the Fenrir's Chain.

This was something else.

Something older.

Vassir.

**The essence he carried—Vassir's one Chalyx,
Vassir's power, Vassir's face—it recognized
Orion.**

Brother.

**And through it, Hades felt Orion's rage not as an
enemy's fury, but as something deeper.**

Grief.

Betrayal.

Guilt.

All of it wrapped in centuries of slavery, twisted into hatred, aimed at the wolf who wore his brother's stolen skin.

Hades's jaws snapped at Orion's throat.

Orion twisted, claws raking across Hades's ribs.

Blood sprayed.

They broke apart, circling.

Orion's wings spread wide, his eyes burning.
"You have no right to his face."

Hades shifted back to human—just for a moment. Just long enough to speak.

"I didn't ask for it," Hades said, his voice rough.
"We all do what we need to survive."

"Surviving?" Orion snarled. "You stole him. Wore him like a trophy. Dishonored his memory—"

"I carry him," Hades interrupted, his eyes blazing. "His power. His legacy. And if you loved him—if you ever loved him—you'd see that."

Orion's face twisted.

"You know nothing—"

"I know you betrayed him," Hades said quietly. "I know you're a slave now. And I know—" He stopped. "I know you want to die."

Orion froze. 1

For a heartbeat, the rage flickered.

Replaced by something raw. Broken.

True.

Then it roared back.

"THEN GRANT ME THAT MERCY!"

Orion lunged.

Hades shifted, met him mid-leap.

They collided again—claws and teeth and fury.

But this time—

This time, Hades understood.

This wasn't just a battle.

It was an execution.

And Orion was begging for it, but he would fight with everything that he had left to give first. He would not go out with his head dipped, his knees bent, waiting for the blade of a silver sword to end his centuries-long suffering and regret.

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No, he would demand it, he would force it, he would earn it, and he would die on the same ground as the impostor wearing the face of the brother he betrayed. 3

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