



523 Less Than Hour

01:23:47 1

Aegis

None of them could shift.

The realization made Cain's blood turn to ice.

Another bomb detonated in the distance, the entire home shivering from the aftershocks. They huddled together—father, mother, daughter—staring up at Cain with wide, terrified eyes.

He could see himself reflected in their little daughter's teary gaze. She was about Sophie's and Sage's age.

His back ached from the back-to-back rescue and defending. Pulling terrified civilians who weren't sure they could trust him, all the while still engaging with Silverpine gammas, had been backbreaking work.

His body was streaked with dirt, his head replaying Ellen's words to him.

Come back soon. So you can finish your story.

Cain made a decision.



So though his body burned after three hours of combat and rescue, he came closer.

"I know you are scared, but you have to trust me." He took another step as they squirmed away from him. "I will get you to safety. You just have to mount me since you cannot shift to get away fast enough."

Father and mother exchanged a look, their trepidation saturating the air along with their fear.

Then another bomb went off. Their daughter cried out, burying her face farther into her father's shoulder.

They looked at him.

And Cain was ready to haul them against their will—though it would deplete his energy faster when they struggled.

They nodded.

Cain wasted no time.

He shifted—the transformation causing his lungs to ache, the darkness at the edges of his vision creeping closer.

Before they could hesitate again, he grabbed



their child between his jaws. The mother screamed as he swung her onto his back. The pressure made his knees buckle.

He did the same to the rest of the family.

And within two large strides, he broke free of the confines of their home and raced through the deserted streets.

They held on tight to his hide, their grips painful against the overwhelming wave of exhaustion.

It had been a miracle that he had found them like he did. They had been the only ones left.

He raced them through the streets, bringing them closer to the capital. That would take another hour. If he found more people, another half hour would be added.

And then he would see Ellen again.

Or whatever was left of her. 1

00:24:56

Ironwall

The battle had drawn on long enough for both sides to be exhausted.



Vampires circled overhead—slower now, wings laboring. Blood streaked their red skin. Many bore wounds that refused to heal, drained of the energy needed to regenerate.

Below, Ironwall's gammas fought on—but barely. Shifted forms moved sluggishly. Rifle fire had slowed to sporadic bursts. Ammunition reserves were critical.

Bodies littered the ground. Lycan and vampire both.

The domes still stood—scarred, battered, but intact.

That was all that mattered.

Hades and Orion had broken apart again—circling each other, both bleeding, both exhausted.

Hades's side was shredded. His shoulder torn. Blood matted his black fur.

Orion's wings were tattered. Claw marks raked across his chest. One eye was swollen shut.

They'd been fighting for over two hours.

And neither had landed the killing blow.

Around them, the battle continued—but slower.

Weaker.

Dying.

Both sides were dying.

Orion bared his fangs, panting. "You... cannot win."

Hades's remaining eye blazed. "Neither... can you."

"Then we die... together." Orion's lips curled into something like a smile. "Fitting."

"No." Hades's voice was rough. Firm. "You die. I survive. And I end this."

"Arrogant... mongrel—"

"Desperate... slave," Hades countered.

Orion snarled.

And lunged.

But Hades's attention snapped left.

Three gammas—cornered against the remains of a supply depot. Five vampires descending on them, fangs bared, claws extended.

The gammas were wounded. Exhausted. Out of ammunition.



No.

Hades shifted back to human mid-dodge,
Orion's claws raking air where his throat had
been.

He opened his jaws.

And howled .

The sound tore through the battlefield—raw,
infused, commanding .

Chalyx.

Vassir's Chalyx.

The five vampires convulsed mid-flight. Their
eyes rolled back. Their bodies went rigid, wings
locking, and they dropped —crashing into the
snow, twitching, dazed.

The compulsion that bound them—shattered.

For a moment.

Just a moment.

But it was enough.

Hades shifted, lunged, tore into the nearest
vampire before it could recover. His jaws closed
around its throat, ripped .

Black blood sprayed.



One down.

He spun, claws extended, caught the second vampire as it tried to rise. Disemboweled it in a single swipe.

Two down.

The third was recovering—eyes focusing, wings spreading.

Hades slammed into it, drove it into the ground, crushed its skull beneath his paw.

Three down.

The fourth lunged at him. He twisted, caught its wing, tore it off. It shrieked, fell.

He finished it with his jaws.

Four down.

The fifth—

A shadow descended.

Orion.

Claws raked across Hades's back, tearing through fur and flesh. Pain exploded through him.

He roared, twisted, but Orion was already on



him—driving him into the ground, jaws snapping at his throat.

Hades barely got his paws up in time, holding Orion's fangs inches from his jugular.

"STILL... TRYING... TO SAVE THEM?" Orion snarled, spittle flying. "YOU... WILL... DIE... FOR IT!"

Hades's vision blurred. The howl had drained him. Again. Just like the dozen times before.

Every time he used it—every time he broke the compulsion on the vampires to save his gammas—it cost him.

Energy. Strength. Life.

And Orion knew it.

Had been counting on it.

Wearing him down. Waiting for the moment Hades was too weak to fight back.

This might be it.

Hades's legs trembled. His strength was failing.

Orion's jaws descended—

A gunshot.



Orion jerked, black blood spraying from his shoulder.

He snarled, twisted—

One of the gammas Hades had just saved was on his feet, rifle smoking. "GET OFF HIM!" 1

Orion's wings flared. He lunged at the gamma—

Hades caught his leg, yanked .

Orion crashed to the ground.

Hades dragged himself upright, gasping, bleeding, barely able to stand.

But he stood.

"You're right," Hades rasped, his voice rough. "I will die for them. But not today."

He limped forward, placing himself between Orion and the gammas.

"Fall back," Hades ordered, not looking at them. "Get to the domes."

"Alpha—"


"GO!"


They went.

Hades and Orion circled each other again.


Both bleeding. Both exhausted.
But Hades was slower now. Weaker.
The howls had cost him too much.
Orion saw it. His remaining eye gleamed.
"You're... done," Orion said, his voice a ragged growl. "How many times... have you used it now? Ten? Twelve?" He bared his fangs. "Each time... you grow weaker. And I... I grow closer."


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