

524 Recognition

Hades didn't respond. 1

Because Orion was right.

He'd been using the howl for over two hours—
breaking the compulsion on vampires, saving
gammas, keeping his forces alive.

But it was killing him.

Each howl drained more energy than the last.
Made him slower. Weaker. More vulnerable.

And Orion had been landing more hits because
of it.

The claw marks across Hades's back. The bite on
his shoulder. The gashes on his ribs.

All because he'd been too slow. Too drained.

But the gammas are alive.

The domes are intact.

Ironwall still stands.

Hades met Orion's gaze.

"Then finish it," Hades said quietly.

Orion's wings spread.



And he lunged.

This time—

Hades didn't dodge.

"Orion."

His voice was tender, wrought with exhaustion.

Orion froze mid-air—wings locked, claws extended, just inches from Hades's throat.

His eyes widened into saucers, even in his shifted state. It was the most expression apart from loathing that he had ever dared to show.

It was the voice .

Soft. Gritty. Tinged with exasperation.

The way that Vassir used to speak.

If Hades noticed the shock rippling through the vampire, he did not show it. He just continued to speak in that agonizingly familiar tone that had haunted Orion for centuries.

"You can't keep doing this. You have lost so much already. Your loyalty. Your honor. Your freedom. And now you will lose yourself, only to bow to him once again." Hades's remaining eye bore into Orion's. "What do you stand to gain? What did



Ezekiel stand to gain? Lysandra? Rielle? Thaddeus? Roiben?" His voice softened. "When will you ever learn?" 1

With every name Hades spoke in that tone that should not have been possible, Orion's gut churned a little harder. A little more painfully.

He blinked slowly, as though it were all a dream.

Then the anger began to simmer again.

The longer he stared at the impostor who had not only taken his brother's face, but his voice — who had rifled through his memories of their clan, their brethren, the ones who had fallen, the ones yet to fall—

Orion's body convulsed from the inside.

His organs were aflame. His mind in ruins. Anger coursed through him, leaving only desolation in its wake.

The next time Orion's jaw parted, it was neither a roar, a growl, nor a snarl that escaped.

It was a shriek .

Piercing. Sharp enough to fragment bone to dust.

The vampires froze in their assault, slapping



their wings against their ears. The gammas did the same, claws pressed to their skulls, eyes squeezed shut.

The sky could have fallen from the sound that shattered the air.

But it had no effect on Hades.

He only looked on, reading his brother from another lifetime through the ancient bond that still linked them—just as it once had, all those centuries ago.

Hades was no stranger to betrayal from brothers in this life. Maybe it was the reason he could see fully through the rage that Orion cloaked himself with. Why he could reconcile the memories of the adoring brother Orion had been in his past life with this broken shell of a slave who had learned too late that he had bitten off far more than he could chew.

And was still paying for his sin—decades upon decades longer than many got to live.

Hades's voice cut through the shriek, soft but unyielding.

"You want freedom, Orion?" Hades asked quietly. "Then let me give it to you."



Orion's shriek cut off.

He stared at Hades—wings trembling, body shaking, one eye swollen shut, the other blazing with centuries of rage and grief and guilt .

"He... he would not... You lie. You are a liar. You..."

"You know that no living being should be able to take in the essence of the Vampire Prince without perishing. Without the essence utterly corroding them from the inside out. That is why no one could don his Chalyx, his horn." Hades said firmly. "Even you couldn't do it. You could only draw power from it, a little at a time. But I could—because it was fate that it would reach me again as the reincarnation of its late owner. It is fate that I will destroy the descendant of the man who ended me centuries ago."

Hades tilted his head, almost thoughtful despite the gore that streaked his person. "You have lived far too long to believe in such things as coincidences."

For a moment, silence.

Then—

Orion's wings folded.

His body sagged.



And he landed .

Not attacking.

Just— landing .

In front of Hades.

The other vampires looked on, abandoning their opponents on the battlefield, wings beating slowly, hovering, listening .

Their prince had returned.

And Orion—

Orion, who had betrayed him—

Was kneeling before him.

"Vassir," Orion whispered, his voice breaking.

"No," Hades said gently. "Not anymore. But I carry him. And I remember." He paused. "I remember you, Orion. Before the betrayal. Before the slavery. When you were my brother. You are still my brother." 1

Orion's remaining eye spilled over.

"I... I did not mean... I thought..."

"You thought I was destroying us," Hades said quietly. "By loving a werewolf, by loving Elysia.

By mixing our blood. You thought you were saving our people."

Orion nodded mutely, tears streaming.

"But you weren't," Hades continued, his voice soft but firm. "You were damning them. And yourself."

"I know," Orion whispered. "I know. And I have paid. For centuries. I have paid."

Hades eyed his brother from another lifetime, the guilt and grief he had stifled for decades to many rippling off him. Hades took in the carnage around him. The dead gammas who would never see their families and his own grief washed over him.

Orion noticed, biting his lip, "I cannot pay enough for what I have done. It is not possible?"

And Hades was inclined to agree and his sudden silence made that clear.

"I can help you prevent...more of...this..." he muttered.

The other vampires gasped, though they were no longer attacking they were not retreating either. "Orion, the bloodoath--" The one that Hades recognized as Lysandra spoke.



But Orion just looked towards the sky, and then back at the bunch of them still there. "You will need to leave. If you want to survive, there is only ten minutes until the bloodmoon passes. The sun will come---"

They shared wary glances, filled with uncertainty.

Orion rose, still sagging against his own weight and sorrow. "I said LEAVE!" he bellowed. "NOW!"

One by one, they obeyed, taking to the skies—but not before eyeing Hades warily.

When the last had vanished into the fading red light, Hades turned back to Orion.

"Tell me how to end this," Hades said. 2