

525 To Finally End It

Orion searched Hades's face, imprinting it, looking for more traces of his brother in this partial stranger. It was bizarre, and it lessened a little bit of the crushing weight on his shoulders. The load remained, but he knew he now had a chance to unload it. 1

"The first thing you need to know—" Orion's expression slowly grew haunted. "Is that Darius is not who you think he is. He is not Malrik's descendant."

Hades's brows knitted with confusion. "You are not making sense. Are you saying he is not a Valmont?"

"He is a Valmont," Orion said. "But he is THE Valmont." He paused, his remaining eye boring into Hades's. "He is not Darius Valmont. Darius Valmont was neutralized decades ago. The person wearing his skin is his great-great-grandfather. Malrik Valmont." 5

Hades went still.

"Malrik Valmont never died," Orion continued, his voice hollow. "He takes the form of his heirs and continues his reign. Body after body."



Generation after generation. For centuries." 1

For a moment, Hades said nothing.

Then—

"The man who killed Vassir," Hades said quietly.

"Yes," Orion whispered.

"The man who stole the Chalyx." 1

"Yes."

"The man who enslaved you."

Orion's face crumpled. "Yes."

Hades exhaled slowly, his mind racing.

Malrik.

Not a descendant.

Not a successor.

The original.

The tyrant who had ended Vassir's life. Who had stolen his Chalyx. Who had twisted Orion's betrayal into centuries of slavery.

And now—

Now he wore the face of Darius Valmont, ruling Silverpine, waging war, still trying to destroy



what Vassir had built.

"How does he do it?" Hades asked, his voice cold.

"How does he take their bodies?"

"It's your Chalyx. Your horn—he uses it." Orion's voice was hollow. "He has wielded every vampiric ability through it. Compulsion. Mind control. And the rest. That includes vampiric immortality. But since he cannot personally attach it or absorb it like you were able to do with Vassir's essence, he requires a proxy. A body to transfer his consciousness. A sacrifice—because his personal body will naturally age."

His voice cracked.

"I helped him. Using the horn and forbidden alchemy to perform the ritual. Body after body. Heir after heir." Orion's remaining eye closed. "I damned them all. Generation after generation of Valmonts—murdered by their own ancestor. Wearing their faces. Living their lives. And no one ever knew." 2

Hades felt sick.

"How many?" he asked quietly.

"Seven," Orion whispered. "Seven bodies. Seven heirs. Seven lives I helped him steal."



Silence.

"And Darius?" Hades asked. "The real Darius Valmont?"

"Was a good man," Orion said, his voice breaking. "Strong. Just. Wanted to end the feud with Obsidian. Wanted peace." He opened his eye. "Malrik killed him after his twins were born. Took his body. And has been wearing him ever since." 3

Hades's jaw tightened.

Twenty-three years.

Malrik had been Darius for twenty-three years. Every interaction. Every battle. Every betrayal. It had never been Darius.

It had always been Malrik .

"How do I kill him?" Hades asked, his voice like ice.

Orion hesitated. "You don't. Not easily. The Chalyx—your horn—sustains him. Protects him. As long as he has access to it, he's nearly immortal. Even if you destroy the body he's wearing, he can transfer again. To another heir. Another vessel."



"Then how do I stop him?" Hades demanded.

Orion met his gaze.

"You take back the Chalyx," he said. "Reclaim it. It's yours, Vassir's—it will recognize you. Respond to you. But you have to get close enough to sever his connection to it. And—" He stopped. "You have to do it now. There is chaos now. There is no better time to infiltrate."

"He will be in Silverpine. In his stronghold."

Orion shook his head. "That was not the plan. By now, he will be making his move toward Dawnstrike."

Hades's heart sank. "My wife is there."

Orion's expression was contrite. "Then you have to go now and sever his power before he kills them all. Because if you think that the Silverpine pack has been hard to defeat before, you have no idea what you all have coming. You are not going to survive his final army. And even if you do, there will be very little of your loved ones left to celebrate any victory. You have to go now. The horn is in the central tower of the Malrikian Eden. You have to go now."

The red had begun to recede, the first rays of sunlight breaking through the crimson haze.



Hades turned to a gamma nearby. "I am leaving now. Get him to shelter—"

"NO," Orion cut Hades off, before doubling over and retching thick, blackened blood. He wiped his mouth. "I broke the Blood Oath by betraying Malrik, so I am going to die even if I find shelter. I am dying tonight, but I have to make sure—"

He shifted back—but only a column of his head, his horn protruding through the bone. With a single, sickening snap, he broke it off. Blood gushed from the wound, his face contorting into a grimace.

He handed it to Hades, who accepted it with trembling hands.

"When you absorb it, you will get my memories to guide your way. And give you the strength you have depleted. You will need it."

Then he pushed Hades away as he vomited more blood, his body convulsing as he retched.

But Hades grabbed him, cradled his face. "You will go out by your own terms," he whispered to Orion.

Orion's eyes widened as another wave racked his body. Then he managed a smile and nodded,



closing his eyes as a bloody tear escaped.

Hades wiped away the tear. "May we meet again in another life, Orion."

A wave of something akin to grief washed over him—a tamer kind, but grief nonetheless.

With a deafening crack, Hades broke his neck. 3

Orion's body went limp.

Hades held him for a moment longer—this brother from another lifetime who had betrayed him, enslaved himself, and finally found redemption in death.

Then he laid him gently in the snow.

Around them, Ironwall's gammas stood in silence.

Witnessing.

Hades looked down at the horn in his hand—Orion's horn, covered in blood, still warm. 1

He didn't hesitate.

He pressed it to his chest—

And absorbed it.

The effect was immediate.

Energy flooded through him. Not just physical strength— memories .

Orion's memories.

Centuries of them.

Vassir's death. The betrayal. The enslavement. The rituals. The bodies. The horror.

And—

The Malrikan Eden.

Hades saw it now. Through Orion's eyes.

The central tower. The hidden chamber. The Chalyx—Vassir's horn—suspended in chains, pulsing with stolen power.

And Malrik.

Standing before it.

Preparing for the final assault.

On Dawnstrike .

On Eve .

Hades's eyes snapped open—blazing red, infused with new power.



His wounds were healing. His strength returning. His exhaustion— gone .

He looked up at the sky.

The Bloodmoon was fading. The sun was rising.

Five minutes.

Maybe less.

He turned to Voss. "Hold Ironwall. Protect the domes. I'll return before full dawn."

"Alpha—where are you going?"

"To end this," Hades said.

He shifted—his massive vampire form erupting through his skin, faster now, stronger.

Hades took to the skies. 1

