

## 533 The Horn's Vessel

### *Hades* 1

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Clammed his large gaping mouth over the first noble he could get his one, ripping his forelimb with a single motion. The rest followed like a swarm of demons raining down on hearthens.

The nobles were gobsmacked as their ranks were torn into like fresh meat in a buffet. Their formation crumbled at the speed of light as horror and panic ensued, all of them trying to escape their fate as the vampires that were once statues in their secret city turned into their executioners.

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same moment, the sight of it sent a spike of cold satisfaction through my chest. I was close. The horn had to be nearby just like in the vision that my inherited memories from Orion had shown.

Something pulled at my chest.

Like a hook had been set behind my sternum and someone was reeling in the line, dragging me forward with an urgency that made my teeth ache. Orion's chalyx—the fragment still lodged inside me—was responding to something ahead. Recognizing what I sought. Calling to me.

I followed the pull.

The corridor ended at a door.

It was massive, reinforced steel wrapped in silver wards that hummed with enough concentrated magic to kill a normal wolf on contact. The kind of door you built when you wanted to make absolutely certain no one could get through without your permission.

I didn't slow down.

My hands hit the door at full speed and the silver screamed where my skin touched it, burning through flesh down to bone in seconds. I didn't care. I dug my fingers into the seam where the two halves met and pulled.

The metal resisted. Of course it did. It had been built to withstand a siege, reinforced with blood magic and silver and probably half a dozen other failsafes Malrik had layered on over two centuries of paranoia.

My fingernails tore off.

The pain was bright and sharp and completely irrelevant. I pulled harder, feeling bone scrape against metal, feeling the joints in my fingers pop and then break as I forced them to grip what they were never meant to hold. Blood made my hands slick, made my grip weaker, but I didn't stop.

A tear appeared.

Small. Barely the width of my head. But it was there.

I wedged my broken fingers into the gap and ripped.

The door gave way with a shriek of tortured metal, peeling back like the lid of a can, and I shoved myself through the opening before it could seal again. Too narrow. My shoulders scraped through, wings catching on the jagged edges, and I felt the membrane tear, felt the delicate bones snap as I forced my body through

a space half the size it needed to be.

I fell through to the other side and hit the floor hard, my ruined hands unable to catch myself. For a moment I just lay there, breathing hard, blood pooling beneath me from a dozen wounds I couldn't spare the attention to heal.

The room was dark.

Then the lights came on.

Fluorescent. Harsh and white and completely at odds with the rest of the palace's aesthetic. They hummed as they flickered to life, illuminating a space that was more laboratory than throne room. It felt too sterile, so fucking wrong.

And in the center, on a simple stone pedestal—

Not the horn.

Lyra.

She stood perfectly still, her hands at her sides, her face blank. Eve's mother. The woman who we had just discovered had been marked for probably the longest time, now she was standing in the middle of this sealed room like a display piece in a museum.

I pushed myself to my feet, wings dragging

uselessly behind me, and approached slowly. Carefully. Because even from here I could see the mark on her neck, black and ugly and fresh. Malrik had her. Was using her. And I had no idea what he'd commanded her to do if someone breached this room.

"Lyra," I said quietly, keeping my voice steady despite the pain still radiating from my broken hands. "I'm here to help. I'm going to—"

She screamed.

Not words. Just sound—raw and agonized and full of something that might have been warning or might have been rage. Her body convulsed, shifting rippling through her in a wave, and then she was lunging at me in her wolf form, claws extended, teeth bared, moving with the kind of desperate violence that had nothing to do with skill and everything to do with needing to hurt something.

I dodged.

Barely. Her claws caught my shoulder, tearing through what was left of my shirt and scoring lines across already-damaged flesh. I didn't strike back. Couldn't. This was Lyra. Eve's mother. Just another victim of Malrik's machinations like Eve and Ellen had both been. 1

"Stop!" I shouted, ducking under another wild swing. "Lyra, I'm not going to hurt you! Just—"

"RIP ME APART!" Her growl was hoarse, cracking on every word, and when I looked at her face I saw tears streaming down her cheeks even as she came at me again. "Please! Please, you have to tear me apart! It's the only way to stop this!"

I caught her fore legs, careful not to break it despite my strength advantage, and tried to pin her without causing damage. "What are you talking about? The horn—where is it? Just tell me where—"

"I CAN'T!" She thrashed in my grip, strong enough that I had to shift my weight to keep her contained. "He made sure I couldn't help! But you can feel it, can't you? Your chalyx—it knows! It's calling to what's inside me!"

The pull in my chest intensified.

Oh god.

"No," I breathed. "No, he didn't—"

"He DID!" Lyra's laugh was bitter and broken and utterly resigned. "The chalyx you're looking for, the horn that's the source of all Malik's power—it's inside me! He put it inside me and marked

me and locked me in this room so that anyone who came for it would have to—would have to—"

She couldn't finish. Just sobbed once, hard, and then came at me again with renewed desperation.

I let her go and she stumbled back, breathing hard, still crying. "Kill me," she whispered.

"Please. End this. Get the horn and stop Malik and just—just make it stop."

My hands were shaking. Not from the pain. Not from exhaustion. From the sheer magnitude of the horror settling over me like a physical weight. "I can get it out," I said, even though I had no idea if that was true. "Just—stay still. Let me try to extract it carefully, I can—" She was going to be a grandmother. Our pups only grandmother...

"You can't." Lyra's voice went flat. Dead. "Do you really think Malik would make it that easy? The biggest piece is in my chest. Wrapped around my heart. Another piece in my skull. More in my arms, my legs, scattered through my body like shrapnel." She looked at me with eyes that had given up everything except this one last purpose. "You want the horn? You're going to have to tear me apart to get it."

I couldn't move. Couldn't speak. Just stood there while my mind tried and failed to process what she was telling me.

Malrik had put the horn—the source of his power, the thing controlling thousands of wolves—inside Lyra's body. Had turned her into a living vault. A final insurance policy that meant anyone who came for the horn would have to commit an act of absolute brutality to claim it.

He'd counted on that stopping us. Counted on mercy, on hesitation, on the basic fucking humanity that would make someone pause before butchering an innocent woman.

And he'd almost been right.

I thought of Eve, bleeding out at Dawnstrike. Thought of Ellen, burning herself to ash to buy us time. Thought of Kael and Silas and every other wolf fighting and dying while Malrik's compulsion drove his army forward. Thought of our pups, my daughters... 2

I had names for them, ones we would choose. I could see our little girls, who looked like their mother, it was why I wanted girls so much.

Thought of all the people waiting for this nightmare to end.

My hands stopped shaking.

"I'm sorry," I said, and meant it with everything I had left.

Lyra closed her eyes. Nodded once. "Tell Eve I love her. Tell her I was already dead. That this doesn't—doesn't count."

I grabbed her.

She didn't fight this time. Just held still, trembling, as I sliced open my own arm with my remaining claws. The blood welled up immediately, dark and thick, and I remembered Maya's words about my blood and hoped against all hope that somehow it would work in its rawest form

Then I drove my hand into her chest.

Lyra screamed.

The sound tore through the room, through my head, through every part of me that was still capable of feeling horror at my own actions. Her body convulsed in my grip but I held her steady, my claws ripping through flesh and muscle and bone until my fingers closed around something solid. Something that pulsed with its own terrible light.

The first piece of my chalyx.

It saw me.

I felt it recognize what I was, felt it reach for me with something that was almost consciousness, almost joy at being reunited with the vampire who'd once wielded it. The glow intensified, bleeding through the gaps between my fingers, and Lyra's screams peaked and then cut off entirely as her body went limp in my arms.

I pulled the fragment free.

It came out trailing blood and tissue, a shard of bone carved into the rough shape of a horn, and the moment it left her body the compulsion mark on her neck flared once—bright and burning—and then went dark.

Three more pieces to go.

I lowered Lyra's body gently to the floor, even though she was past caring about gentleness, and got to work. 2