



412 Another Way?

Hades 1

My muscles tightened, my skin burned, every nerve in my body screaming for the familiar rush of transformation—but it was as if I were pressing against a locked door. My claws didn't break through. My bones didn't yield.

I staggered, clutching at my chest as if sheer will could tear the block apart. "No," I rasped, breath tearing from my throat.

Kael's wolf stared at me, ears pinned back. "Hades?"

Cain's wolf prowled closer, his golden eyes narrowing. His muzzle dipped to sniff, his breath cold against my skin. Then he growled low, the sound rumbling through the clearing.

"It's not wolfsbane," I whispered, horror clawing through me as my throat closed. The air felt heavier, like something pressing from inside and out. "Something's—something's blocking me."

The silence that followed was brutal. Maera's gaze sharpened, torchlight glinting off the scar that split her face. The fugitives behind us began



to murmur again, a sea of whispers rising like a tide.

My lungs strained for air that wouldn't come. The silence around me thickened until even the wind seemed to die.

Cain's wolf let out a guttural sound, then his massive form began to bend, shrink, twist. Fur receded, bones cracked back into place. When he stood upright again, breath steaming in the night, his eyes hadn't softened.

He snapped his fingers once. The sharp crack cut through the murmurs.

"That's enough speculation," he said, voice iron. "It's not poison. It's not weakness." His gaze skewered me, unblinking, as if he were driving a spear straight through my chest. "It's your wife."

My throat closed. A hundred denials clawed at me but refused to make it past my lips.

Cain tilted his head slightly, a wolf's gesture still lingering in his human posture. "The Fenrir's chain," he said, slow, deliberate, each word landing like a hammer on an anvil. "It doesn't just bind your blood. It binds your beast. The longer you're separated—by distance, by time—the more it starves you of what you are." 1



The words were smoke and fire, filling my lungs until I thought they would burst.

I staggered back a step, shaking my head. "No... no, that's—"

But even as I spoke, my claws still refused me. My wolf howled somewhere deep, locked behind a wall I could not breach.

Cain's lips curved in grim certainty that made my stomach churn. "You've felt it, haven't you? The slow drag, the way every shift has grown heavier. That's not chance, Hades. That's the chain tightening. You can't outrun it. Not when she's gone."

The air around us rippled with unease. Maera's grip on Sage tightened; Kael's wolf growled low, confusion and fury bleeding into the sound. The fugitives whispered louder now, fear infecting the ranks.

My chest cracked open with the realization.

Eve.

That was why I was seeing her face on every surface while my body felt stranger. Something was missing—and it was Eve. It was not just about missing her, it was about needing her.



I looked through the back door, dread churning my gut. The journey had not even begun and already there was an obstacle at the starting line.

Kael shifted back. "This can't be happening now," frustration colored his voice.

But my mind was already spiraling with what this meant. As if the stakes weren't already high, as if we weren't already running out of time. As if every waking moment I was away from my family didn't already weigh heavily on me.

I clutched my chest, dragging air into my lungs, my mind whirling uncontrollably with scenarios that could play out. In every single one, I saw Eve's face distraught and disappointed because I had failed her, failed our family, our people, the innocent fugitives of Silverpine.

> "Hades, you are not without power," Cerberus' growl laced through my harrowing thoughts. "The emotions you experience now belong to Eve. Her anxiety and fear are feeding into you through the chain that binds you both. Push it aside, Hades, and focus. The answer has been inside you all along. Right now, you can feel her lowest moment through the link. You have to save her. You owe it to her after everything."



> "I am trying, but I can only think of going by foot and secretly hitching rides through public transport until we are close enough to the border to attempt a sprint to our destination." I was strategizing again, making compromises with my previous plan. The stakes would be impossibly higher, but I had to try. Without communication with Obsidian, we were utterly on our own.

> "No." Cerberus' voice was an echo that drowned every other thought in an instant. "You know you have another way. You are avoiding it." 1

A thrill crawled up my spine and I quickly shoved away the idea that had haunted me longer than I would have liked to admit.

Kael's voice pulled me back, a knowing twinkle in his darting eyes. "I know that look. You have a plan."

Cain's voice was sharpened with urgency. "Spill it."

I shook my head, looking ahead at the path forward. "I will go on foot. The rest—"

The words weren't even fully out of my mouth before they cut me off with deathly glares, Maera included, her mouth twisted with



disapproval. They looked prepared to barricade the backdoor just to keep me from attempting it.

"There is no other way—"

Kael shook his head, his expression steely with conviction. "I have known you long enough to read you. You have another way but you don't want to try it, for whatever reason. But you have to do this."

I swallowed, the memory forever fresh in my mind. The red leathery mottled flesh that had burst from my skin, the long fleshy bat-like wings with digits of their own. The lack of control that seemed to come with every horrible transformation. The words came out choked as I whispered to them.

"I will have to shift into a full vampire." 5

"What?"

