



414 Stay

Hades 1

Even as Cain tried to break the tension with his enthusiasm, Kael was frozen stiff where he stood, his eyes pinned on me for a worrying amount of time. He didn't blink—for a long while he looked trapped, as if frozen in time.

Cain noticed this, and we all stopped. With bated breath, we waited for his reaction.

Kael swallowed audibly, his lips finally moving as his gaze shuttered. "It's uglier than I remember," he whispered.

We didn't speak as we let him land.

"And as big as a shifted Lycan..." His gaze was so focused, but he looked like he was far away, blown apart by what he was seeing. His eyes shifted, flickering with both fear and a strange curiosity. "The wings..." he muttered, swallowing again. "They're bat-like?" He wrinkled his nose. "But fleshy. And bloody."

He took a step, then another, reaching out his hand tentatively to touch me—whatever I had become.



He cringed as he made contact before his face slowly smoothed over. He tilted his head, fear slowly receding, giving way to open curiosity. "It's not sticky," he murmured, slowly raising his head to meet my eyes. I could see every pore on his face, every minute freckle, the faint stubble along his jaw. It was like looking through a microscope.

Kael did not pull away. His hand lingered. It trembled against the strange taut appendage I never thought I would have. I caught the way his pupils dilated, as though he was caught between awe and revulsion.

He traced his hand over the span, his hand small by comparison. He looked trapped in that liminal space where fear and fascination were one.

Then—before I could register it—Cain moved.

"Fuck it, no more tiptoeing," he barked, and with one sudden, jarring shove he grabbed Kael by the collar and hauled him up, tossing him onto my back like a sack of flour.

The gasp that ripped through the gathered crowd was sharp enough to cut. Mothers clutched their children closer, fugitives staggered back in horror, and even Maera's



stony mask cracked into the faintest flicker of surprise.

A guttural growl tore from my chest, wings flaring wide as instinct screamed to throw Cain into the dirt for his insolence. My head snapped toward him, eyes burning with warning.

But before my fury could hit its mark, Kael's voice cut through.

"It's okay!" he shouted, gripping tightly to the rise of my shoulder blades. His laughter was breathless, half in shock, half in exhilaration. "It's —" He looked around from his new height, hair whipping in the gust stirred by my wings. "It's actually pretty damn cool up here."

The crowd's gasps softened into uneasy murmurs, disbelief flickering like torchlight among them.

Cain smirked, entirely unbothered by the growl still rumbling from deep within me. "See? Told you. Perfect transport."

Kael leaned forward, his hand pressing firm against the base of my neck. His green eyes, still wide but no longer only with fear, met mine.

"You've got this," he murmured, voice low



enough for me alone. "Let's show them."

Cain slapped his palm against my wing with a laugh that grated against my instincts. "If Kael can do it, so can I. Move over, brother."

Before I could snarl my refusal, a few of the fugitives stepped forward, their faces lit with a strange mix of fear and eagerness. One cupped his hands, offering Cain a boost. Another grabbed his arm and hauled as Cain braced himself, clearly enjoying the absurd spectacle.

"Up you go, High Lord of Bad Ideas," someone muttered, pushing with their shoulder. 5

Kael chuckled, breathless, and leaned down to extend a hand. "Don't break your neck before we even take off."

Cain grabbed it with a grin. "Thanks, little fox." With a grunt, he was shoved and pulled upward until he clambered across the ridges of my spine, settling heavily just behind Kael.

"See? Room for a whole cavalry," Cain announced, clapping Kael's shoulder as though this were all some grand joke.

Then—sharp, piercing—the sound of crying cut through the moment.



Every hand stilled. Every voice hushed.

We all turned.

Little Sage stood at the edge of the crowd, her small fists rubbing furiously at her eyes, her cheeks wet with tears. The sight of her trembling frame carved a silence heavier than any roar of mine ever could.

Her voice cracked, but it carried. "When will I see you again? Will you come back?" She sniffled, furiously rubbing her eyes.

The silence bent and fractured beneath Sage's crying. It carved me open worse than claws could.

I turned, and so did Cain. His shoulders stiffened, his smirk faltering as though the weight of her voice pressed down on him harder than gravity. 1

Before I could say anything, I heard it. Barely more than breath, but it was there—"Sophie..." Cain whispered, the name breaking raw from somewhere deep. His eyes flinched shut a fraction of a second too long before he caught himself. "Sage," he corrected quickly, almost too quickly, voice rough, covering it with a forced chuckle. 1



But I heard it. Who was Sophie? Another question I would investigate when we returned to Obsidian Pack—if we did.

The dilemma gnawed at him like fire and frost, tearing him between past and present, between ghosts and the little girl trembling before us. His jaw flexed, his eyes blazing with something unspoken, and for the first time in years, Cain looked... breakable. Vulnerable.

The Flux inside me stirred, recognizing weakness.

I shifted my wings closer around him, turning with my elongated neck, lowering my voice so only he could hear. "Stay."

Cain's head snapped toward me, disbelief flashing in his face.

"You're not coming with us," I said, firm enough to still the air between us. "A Lycan is worth more here than on my back. The rebellion needs more teeth if it's to survive the coming Bloodmoon. And if anything happens here..." My throat scraped over the words, my chest tightening. "...then you keep Ellen out of Darius's bloody hands. Promise me." We didn't need Darius shortening our time even more.



The crowd was still silent, all eyes on us, but in that silence I felt Cain's breath hitch. For once, his swagger failed him. He nodded—slow, heavy, reluctant.

With a fluid movement, he jumped down, boots slamming into the dirt.

Sage's sobs cracked louder, and Maera put her down. Sage tore away, small legs pumping as she ran with all the clumsy desperation of a child straight into Cain's arms.

He caught her instantly, knees bending to absorb the impact. She clung to his neck, tiny fists twisting into his shirt, sobbing her heart out.

She had witnessed Ellen reveal how little time we had left, and I guessed it was only now fully weighing on her scarred little mind. The end was coming, and holding on to what we loved was a reasonable response—even if it was a stranger who had held her through most of our brief stay. 4

Cain buried his face in her hair, his grin gone, his laughter gone, everything stripped away until only the raw truth remained.

I braced for my exit, my flight. Kael's grip tightened, I felt him steel himself, shifting his hands to claws to hold on.

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Cain carried Sage and turned to me, a wry smile on his face. "I know you heard her name," he murmured. "When you see her, tell her I will be back home soon. Tell her daddy loves her." 4

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