



418 Hunger

Hades 1

The sun bled over the horizon, and I felt the drag in my wings—too exposed, too bright. Kael's hand pressed harder against my shoulder, a silent agreement.

We dropped lower, circling once before I forced the descent. The landing jarred through me, talons gouging earth before folding tight against my back. Dust rose, quick and sharp.

"Here," Kael said, already pulling me toward the cover of the trees. His voice was clipped, urgency replacing wonder.

The forest swallowed us, shadows wrapping tight. I hunched my wings in, muscles burning, and let the canopy close overhead. The sky could wait.

For now, we had to disappear until nightfall.

Controlling my new wings to launch turned out to be far easier than the landing. The uneasy sensation—like the feeling of falling—held me back from fully tucking my wings so my feet could touch the ground.



"Easy..." Kael muttered, the edges of his words strained with fear, one he tried to hide.

I forced my wings tighter, the joints aching as the membranes scraped bark and brush. Every instinct screamed to keep them half-spread, to resist the drop, but the ground rushed up regardless. My feet struck hard, knees buckling, claws gouging lines through the soil before I steadied.

Kael's grip lingered at my shoulder until he was sure I wouldn't topple. Only then did he let out a breath, sharp and shaky.

The trees loomed close around us, branches netting the first rays of dawn, muting them to fractured light. I folded myself into the shadows, tucking the last gleam of wing out of sight.

"Good," Kael murmured, though his jaw stayed tight. His eyes flicked to the open stretch behind us, to the distant roofs of the village barely visible beyond the treeline. "Too many eyes in daylight. We wait here."

I gave a short nod, chest heaving. The muscles along my back throbbed, wings twitching with every pulse of blood, restless against concealment.



The weight of the wings pressed heavy against me, straining against the cage of trees. My body wasn't made to be sky and earth at once. The forest wanted me smaller, hidden. Human.

I braced my hand against a trunk, bark biting my palm, and willed it. The change.

Heat lanced through my spine, sharp enough to drag a snarl from my throat. Bone ground against bone, joints wrenching as if my own skeleton were fighting itself. The wings shuddered, then curled in violently, folding until the membranes tore back into nothing but skin.

I collapsed to my knees, chest heaving, sweat slicking my face. My claws split, retreating into fingers that shook with the aftermath. The world shrank with me—shadows less vast, the air no longer carrying me but pressing down heavy.

Kael crouched close, his hand catching my shoulder as though to anchor me through it. He didn't speak. He only watched, green eyes dark with the fear he tried so hard to keep buried.

When it was done, I was left kneeling in the dirt, bare and trembling, the forest closing tight around me like it had been waiting for me to fall back into place.



I spat blood into the soil, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, and forced myself upright. My voice was rough, raw from the strain.

"Nightfall," I rasped. "We move again at nightfall."

Kael nodded once, wordless. But his grip stayed, firm on my arm.

He shifted, the leather strap creaking as he swung the pack off his shoulder. He dug through it with quick, practiced movements, then pressed a battered water bottle into my hand.

"Drink," he said simply.

I twisted the cap with fingers that still shook and brought it to my mouth. The first swallow burned dry down my throat, metallic and stale, like rust scraped from old iron. I forced down another gulp, but the taste only worsened, turning sour in my mouth.

It wasn't what I wanted. Not what I needed.

The thirst coiled low in me, deeper than exhaustion, sharper than hunger. Every vein hummed with it, every heartbeat rattling against the craving. The memory of the wind and the sky was already slipping, replaced by the gnawing want for something thicker, richer. Sanguine.



I lowered the bottle, jaw tight, swallowing the bile of it. Kael was still crouched in front of me, green eyes steady, waiting for me to take more. I forced another swig, the water tasting like ash against my tongue.

"Better?" he asked.

I gave a short nod and shoved the bottle back into his hand. My throat worked, but I said nothing of the hunger clawing inside me.

Because I knew the truth. I had leaned too deep into it—the winged strength, the sky, the survival—and now the part of me that wasn't wolf had woken with teeth.

I had used my vampiric ability of flight throughout the night, and I had been alive long enough to know that part of my hybrid nature would want something in return.

Blood.

I caught my thoughts before they could consume me.

"We need to find somewhere to hide," Kael muttered, looking me over like he could detect that something was wrong. "But first, I will survey the area to see just how far from civilians



we are or how alone we can be in these woods. You need to rest—you flew all night."

I dipped my head and watched him shift and disappear into the surrounding foliage.

I took a huge gulp of air, muscles aching and nerves burning. I shuffled, making sure I was completely hidden. Everything throbbed, the familiar tang of blood scorching my throat as I doubled over and regurgitated blood and the water I had just drunk.

This could be bad—or normal. It was possible my body was rejecting the water because of extreme strain and exhaustion, or... it was rejecting it because it was not blood.

As a Lycan, craving blood was nothing new, but a small diluted quantity from good quality wine always staved off the hunger. This was different.

I needed it straight from the source.

My ear twitched at the sound of footfall. I straightened instantly, a red haze clouding my vision. Blood roared in my ears, hunger momentarily blinding me. I closed my eyes, letting the sensation wash over me.

