



419 Bounty

Hades 1

The air burned cold through my nostrils as I dragged it in, sharp and raw. The hunger painted everything red. My nails lengthened, black creeping over them like ink bleeding through parchment.

I knew what it was. I wasn't supposed to—not with the wolf part suppressed, not with the vampire whispering louder—but instinct screamed the truth.

Deer. 1

Its scent was vivid, thick on my tongue as though I'd already torn into its hide. My vision shifted, the forest trail unfurling before me in strange, unnatural clarity. Each bent blade of grass, each broken twig gleamed like arrows etched into the earth, pointing me forward.

I stalked through the undergrowth, every step soundless despite the pounding in my ears. The path pulled me toward a pond, its surface silver with the touch of dawn.

And there it was.



The deer grazed, head bowed, unknowing. My muscles coiled, fangs pressing against my lip as I readied myself. The hunger roared louder—then froze.

Footsteps.

Not the soft, clumsy tread of prey. Heavy.
Human.

I stilled, senses split as voices floated through the trees.

"...Alpha Darius' men are back at it again," a man muttered, low but sharp. "The barricades—gods, they've never been this bad. Arrested civilians yesterday, all because they broke curfew. Came back this morning like ghosts, traumatized out of their wits. The Alpha's losing it."

A hiss of breath. Then a woman's voice, urgent, slicing his words.

"Quiet! Someone might hear. You'll have us both reported for treason."

The man scoffed. "Treason? More like they'll cash in. What's the bounty again? A million? At least they'll get their share."

Her laughter was bitter, cracking like twigs underfoot. "And for what? The message was



vague at best. Foreigners, he said. Foreigners? Obsidian Pack has never once crossed our borders. Only the trading routes. Except..." She lowered her tone, hesitating. "...the Fangs. And I wouldn't even know what a Lycan was, if not for their fangs."

My jaw clenched, heart rattling with more than hunger now.

So Darius was losing his mind. Throwing money, spreading fear, turning his own people into spies with coin dangling before them. If he was branding us as foreigners and beasts, then he was desperate enough to gamble everything.

And worse—he was looking for me. For us.

I backed into the shadow of the trees, forcing the hunger down my throat, forcing the wings still. The deer still lingered by the pond, but I no longer saw it. My eyes were fixed inward, mind burning with what I had just learned.

Darius wasn't just building barricades.

I stayed crouched in the brush, every muscle strung tight until the voices thinned into the trees and were swallowed by distance. Their bright hiking gear—jackets slick with neon strips, boots crunching the undergrowth—



marked them as civilians. Not soldiers. But they'd take the same path back, and I would need to be careful. Careless meant discovered. Discovered meant war before we were ready.

When the forest stilled again, my ears twitched toward the pond. The deer still lingered, unknowing, muzzle dipping to drink from the silver surface.

The predator in me moved before thought could follow. I lunged.

The impact was silent but final—the deer thrashed once, twice, then stilled beneath my weight. My fangs sank deep, and the first rush of blood burned across my tongue.

It wasn't refined. It wasn't the dark, potent richness of wolf or Lycan blood, nor the rare vintage I'd once mixed with wine. This was different. Thin, gamey—like horrible beer bought too cheap, lacking depth, but strong enough to hit the spot all the same.

I drank, the fire spreading through me, steadying the tremor in my hands, easing the throbbing behind my eyes. Not satisfaction, but reprieve.

I stopped before greed could sink its claws in. The deer sagged, heavy and lifeless, its glassy



eyes fixed on nothing. I swallowed down the last bitter taste, jaw clenching.

It wasn't mercy that pulled me back. It was control.

With a grunt, I hauled the carcass up over my shoulder. Blood still slicked my lips, metallic against my teeth, but my stride steadied with each step.

At least, I thought grimly as I angled back toward the thicket where Kael would return, we had food.

I had just set the deer down against a tangle of roots when Kael emerged from the shadows, shaking leaves from his shoulders. His green eyes caught the carcass instantly—and narrowed.

He stopped short, lips parting as his gaze swept over the animal. The silence stretched, his stare moving from the pallor of its hide to the punctures at its throat.

"...that was fast," he said finally, but his tone wasn't admiration. His head tilted, brow furrowing. "Strange, though. For a fresh kill, it's pale. Bloodless."



His eyes flicked toward me, just once, sharp and searching. Then back to the carcass. He crouched low, brushing his hand across the torn fur, his fingers hovering over the bite marks. His nostrils flared.

"These aren't claws." The words were barely muttered, more observation than accusation.

I tensed, jaw clenching, but he didn't push it. Not yet. Instead, he rose smoothly, letting the matter hang in the damp air between us.

"There are hikers," he reported, voice clipped back into soldier's rhythm. "Three of them, headed downstream. Civilian by the look of it." He pulled out the map and unfurled it. "He pointed at the dense vegetation that represented our current position." If we move away from the river path, toward the ridge, we should stay clear of their trail."

I gave a sharp nod, grateful for the shift in subject. But I wasn't about to let the rest go unsaid.

"Kael." My voice was low, rough. He glanced over, waiting.

"Darius is unraveling," I said. "His people are restless. Barricades are up, civilians are being



arrested for breaking curfew. He's throwing coin to turn neighbor against neighbor. A bounty, one million, for anyone who reports us."

I could have laughed at the fact that the Alpha was losing the reins.

Kael stilled, green eyes flickering, the muscle in his jaw tightening. "You got lucky with the info, hope you didn't savage them though?"

I gave him a dead look.

And he raised his hands in mock surrender. "I am just being cautious," he gestured to the carcass.

"He called us foreigners," I ignored him.

Kael exhaled through his nose, slow and sharp. He glanced once more at the deer, at me, but this time he said nothing. Only nodded once, tightly, and shouldered his pack.

"What is the plan?" he muttered.

"We have to move faster—before he unravels completely and makes it impossible to escape. We have a fucking bounty on our heads."

