

425 Freeze

Hades 1

Her words stole our voice, and for a long minute, no one spoke—until she filled the silence, pointing downward.

"We are here," she announced, her voice too loud before she slapped a hand over her mouth. She muffled an apology as I descended onto the parking lot of what looked like an elementary school.

It would a few miles from where we got her, that was pretty far if he had ran from home and hid in school. How would he have gotten here on his own?

Did he take a bus or something?

The pricking on my skin amplified.

The moment my talons touched the ground, she rolled off too quickly, nearly hitting the coarse gravel. Kael caught her just in time, gripping her before she kissed the dirt.

He pulled her back up with one hand, setting her gently on her feet.

"You werewolves are light," he muttered as he threw himself down, her arms clinging to him for dear life.

They both landed, and Daliah was on the move in an instant—limping forward toward a location only she seemed to know.

Kael and I shared a look. He understood immediately.

Kael was on her tail in seconds, easily catching up.

"I'll help you look," he offered.

We didn't have time to waste. It would be smarter for her to have help.

They disappeared around the corner, behind the main building, and I simply waited.

I finally let my shoulders slump. My talons folded beneath me as I panted freely. It felt like gravel had shredded my lungs from the inside. Exhaustion latched onto me, and my eyes drooped closed for a moment.

But it was funny.

Five months ago, I might not have bothered with a limping stranger. But now? Now I had derailed

my plans for her sake. After the amount of high-speed aviation I had forced my still-odd shifted form into, I was going to be knocked out cold during the day.

Hopefully, we'd find a safe enough place for me to lay like a log for a few hours.

Based on hundreds of assessments of Silverpine Pack over the years—and Maera's mapping—I knew that if we were in Eldon, then we were just a stretch of woods away from Halem. Once we cleared the forests around the industrial, population-dense city of Silverpine—second only to the capital where Lunar Heights was situated—we'd be in the clear.

The stupidest and most audacious option would be to go through the capital city. It was a straight line to Obsidian Pack... but crawling with Darius' eyes.

I barely had time to catch my breath before I heard Kael's boots scuff against gravel.

He came into view, one arm curled protectively around the frame of a child—no older than six or seven. A boy. Small. Sunken cheeks. Barefoot. His face was blank in that way only trauma could carve. His arms were stiff at his sides, but he

clung to Kael's coat like it was instinct.

He was supposed to be ten.

Daliah limped behind, breathing hard, hands shaking. Her expression was frozen somewhere between disbelief and relief.

Kael's eyes met mine as he approached, grim.

"Found him behind the cafeteria bins," he said.
"Still warm. Still breathing. Covered in blood that's not his."

I stood.

The boy blinked at me. Unreadable. He didn't move. Didn't speak. Just stared.

Daliah stepped forward, reaching with both hands before stopping herself. Her voice cracked.

"Micah..."

The boy didn't answer. Didn't even flinch.

She dropped to her knees anyway, curling her arms around him like she could shield him from the world.

Kael let go carefully, glancing at me.

She placed her brother on the ground and put

her ear to his chest.

Time stretched so far it might've snapped—then she raised her head.

"He is breathing," she gasped.

She pulled something from her coat pocket with trembling fingers—a small bun, partially crushed, wrapped in thin wax paper. She peeled it open, broke off a piece, and gently waved it beneath the boy's nose.

He twitched.

His nostrils flared, just slightly, before his dry lips parted—and with a breath so faint it barely existed, he whispered, "...Sister?"

Not mother.

Sister.

Daliah's shoulders crumpled. Relief strangled her posture for a heartbeat—but only a heartbeat.

Because before I could exhale, she moved.

Fast.

She pivoted clean on one foot, lifting the boy into her arms like a soldier rescuing a fallen comrade. Her speed was jarring—nothing like

the limp she'd been wearing seconds ago. Her posture, the way she carried her weight—it was wrong. Trained. Too smooth.

Kael caught it too.

Instantly, he began to shift—but like someone trained to dodge bullets...

She was faster.

The moment he reached, she had a knife already at her own throat—angled not for a kill, but a standoff. Not hers. Ours.

"Stop!" she hissed. "All of you. Right there."

Kael froze mid-step.

So did I.

Her eyes flicked between us, manic but sharp. "One more move and I drop him."

"You're bluffing," Kael growled, voice low, taut.

"Am I?" she countered. "This blade's laced with wolfsbane. I'll paint the air with your lungs before you shift."

The smell hit me then—pungent, acrid, bitter like burnt leaves and copper. My throat seized.

She wasn't bluffing.

Kael's jaw locked, but he didn't advance. My wings flinched, coiled like a spring—but I held steady.

"You planned this?" I asked quietly—more to gauge her than accuse.

"No." Her voice trembled—not with fear, but fury. "I planned to survive. And now I will."

She tightened her grip on the blade. "Step back, both of you. Shift down. Do it slow."

"I don't want to hurt you," I bit out through clenched teeth. "Think of your son—or brother."

The gods forbid I do a good deed. Maybe my father was right about a couple of things.

"There is nothing you can do to us that hasn't been done before," she growled, though I could hear the apprehension underneath.

My eyes narrowed. "I will take much more if anything happens to my partner."

It was obvious—she had no idea who I was.

"You'll find that I don't care."

"We both know that's a lie," I replied flatly.

The silence was pulled taut.



"You have a brother."

"He's the reason I'm doing this," she snapped back. "Darius is not taking him, not on my bloody watch."

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