

444 Welcome Home

Eve 1

"Yes, dear," I played along.

She pulled back slightly, her face dirt-streaked. "Can you please, save..." she paused, her eyelids already drooping from exhaustion. She paused, pointing at the creature, her brows knitting as if she was not sure what to say or call it. "Micah and my... lycan friends. I promise they are good. They saved us... the big one is... Hades..."

My heart jumped into my throat, gasps rippling through the crowd of Gammas around us.

Her words slurred, her lids drooping more. She would pass out. "Micah and Kael are under his wing..." then she slumped, passing out against me. I supported her weight, which was nothing as she was frighteningly thin. 2

I rubbed her back to make sure she was completely relaxed just as a Gamma came with a stretcher and carefully lifted her. "Take good care of her," I ordered, my voice hoarse with emotion.

The words felt strange on my tongue, but they

rang with truth. Whatever had happened to her, whatever my father had done, she had risked everything to bring Hades home to me.

I turned toward the creature, my legs trembling as I approached. The Fenrir's chain around my heart was singing now, a painful harmony of recognition and relief that made breathing difficult. The massive form before me was a nightmare made flesh—crimson membrane stretched taut over impossible muscle, those terrible wings that could blot out the sky, claws that could rend stone.

But underneath all that monstrous exterior, through the bond that connected our souls, I could feel him. Hades. My husband. Transformed into something that defied nature itself, but alive.

"Everyone stand back," I commanded, my voice carrying the authority of a Luna even as it shook with emotion. "Lower your weapons. This is your Alpha."

Murmurs of shock and confusion rippled through the gathered Gammas, but they obeyed, creating a wider circle around us.

I knelt beside the massive head, close enough to

see the rise and fall of his chest, to feel the heat radiating from his transformed body. One burning red eye cracked open, fixing on me with an intelligence that was both alien and heartbreakingly familiar.

"Hades," I whispered, reaching out with trembling fingers to touch the crimson membrane of his face. "I'm here. You're home." 1

His eyes drooped closed again. I rose, my hand still on his strange skin. I turned to the Gammas still waiting for a command. "Under his wing," I said. "Get the Beta and... Micah." I made my way there, not removing my hand from his skin. 1

The Gammas surrounded the wing and carefully began to lift the massive membrane. My heart hammered against my ribs as I held my breath, hoping against hope that what Ellen had said was true. 1

And there they were.

Kael lay unconscious, his usually pristine blond hair now caked with blood and dirt, his face bearing the marks of whatever ordeal they'd endured, but his chest rose and fell steadily. Beside him was a small form that made my throat tighten—a child, no more than seven

years old, with dark hair matted against his pale forehead. Micah.

Both were breathing. Both were alive.

Relief flooded through me so powerfully that my knees nearly buckled. The Gammas immediately moved with practiced efficiency, bringing stretchers and carefully extracting both unconscious forms from beneath Hades's protective wing.

I watched as they gently lifted Kael first, his head lolling to one side as they secured him to the stretcher. Then came the child—Micah—so small and fragile-looking that one of the Gammas hesitated before lifting him, as if afraid he might break. 1

"Careful," I whispered, though I knew they were being as gentle as possible.

As they carried both stretchers away from the scene, I remained beside Hades, my hand still pressed against the warm crimson membrane of his transformed body. The Fenrir's chain around my heart pulsed with a complex mixture of relief, fear, and overwhelming love.

Whatever had happened in Silverpine territory, whatever nightmare they'd endured, Hades had

brought them all home. Even in this monstrous form, even transformed beyond recognition, he had protected them all. 2

"Thank you," I whispered against his skin, feeling the steady rhythm of his breathing beneath my palm. "For coming back to me."

His large lids fluttered open again, weak but still darting to take in his environment. But instead of the calm recognition I'd hoped for, panic flashed in those burning red eyes. His racing heart sent tremors through the ground beneath us, a thunderous rhythm that made the earth itself shake.

One massive wing raised weakly, then crashed back down. He was like a wounded bird trapped in a cage, powerful but helpless, confused and afraid. The membrane of his wing scraped against the frost-covered ground as he tried to lift himself, tried to escape whatever nightmare still haunted his transformed mind.

"Move back, Luna!" Montague's voice cut through the morning air from behind me, urgent and commanding. "He might accidentally hurt you!"

But I couldn't move. I wouldn't leave him like



this, trapped in his own body, lost in fear and confusion.

"Hades," I called out, my voice cutting through his panic like a blade through silk. "Hades, look at me."

Those burning red eyes, wild with terror, found mine. The recognition that flickered there was immediate and profound—shock first, then overwhelming relief washing over his monstrous features like dawn breaking over a battlefield. 3

The tremors in the ground stopped. His wing settled. The panic drained from his eyes as they locked onto mine with an intensity that made my breath catch.

And then, slowly, impossibly, he began to shift.

The crimson membrane pulled inward, the massive frame condensing, those terrible wings folding and disappearing as bone and muscle restructured themselves back into familiar human form. The transformation was gradual, almost gentle, like watching time reverse itself.

When it was complete, Hades—my Hades—curled into my lap, naked and vulnerable and blessedly human again. The gathered Gammas stared in awe as their Alpha, the man they'd

thought lost forever, rested his head against my chest where the Fenrir's chain sang with joy.

I wrapped my arms around him, holding him close as tears I didn't know I'd been holding back finally fell. The constant ache that against my ribs faded away, the lightness heady in the relief it brought. The Fenrir's chain slowly released its painful grip on my heart and I could finally take a deep breath. 2

"Welcome home," I whispered into his dark hair. 5

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