



## 408 Secret Route

Hades 1

The weight on my chest refused to recede, the ringing in my ears amplifying with every second that passed.

The Bloodmoon was less than two months away.

Two months.

Though in my head I had long begun to calculate the supplies and contingencies, the scale of what lay before me now demanded sharper precision. Food caches, rationing schedules, and water reserves—all of it would be useless without ensuring transport, storage security, and the ability to outlast a siege when and how Silverpine turned their hunger outward.

Weapons. I saw their silhouettes behind my closed eyes—blades, firearms, silver stockpiles, and the reserves of wolfsbane gas that still lay dormant beneath Obsidian Tower. Not enough. Never enough. We'd need to forge more, refine more, and test what could hold against a body maddened by lunar corruption. Every man and woman who could bear arms would need to be outfitted, trained, and drilled until obedience

became instinct.

An army. My army. Already stretched thin across the borders, already bloodied from too many months of keeping the factions from splintering. I would need to recall them, consolidate, strip down to the soldiers who could endure night after night without sleep, without faltering. Deltas for the wounded. Shadow units for reconnaissance. But to fight a people who could not be reasoned with, who would rise and feast without distinction meant we would have to kill them before the hunger killed us.

Plans. Layered and merciless. Every possible strike, every breach, every corridor of retreat had to be drafted in duplicate, triplicate. If Obsidian fell, the survivors had to scatter with purpose, not chaos. Safehouses. Transit routes. A network of fallback points to prolong survival by days, hours, even minutes. Time would become the most valuable weapon of all. And it just turned out we didn't even have it all along.

I might have predicted the war that Darius would wage during the period of the bloodmoon, knowing that he would take advantage of any moment of weakness just like the bloodmoom would pose. Fighting on two fronts would take



more than just finesse or planning and I knew Darius to know he would see it precisely as what it was; an opening. <sup>1</sup>

I wanted to smack myself upside the head, because why the hell had I not paid enough attention to the prophecy that was the grinding gears for the war to come. I refused to see all of its moving parts for what it was; tools for Darius to exploit. Ellen's ability to 'wield' the bloodmoon had given her the ability to pull it faster and closer than precedent. Now, the window of time was barely enough to squeeze through.

Eve had already been harvest, though I already knew that she had, still hearing of its details and the degree of exploitation illicitated another wave of pain and dread.

Eve. Her blood. Her body made into a reservoir of survival, her pain bottled and repurposed. Even now, the thought of it made my teeth grind so hard the echo carried into my skull. The strategy would demand her involvement whether I willed it or not. And that—more than the hunger, more than the cataclysm—was the weakness Silverpine would exploit.

And then there were survivors of Darius' sinister



plans and insidious deeds. The civilians rescued from what could only be described as concentration camps. I forced down the lump in my throat. They were Obsidian's responsibility now. They had to survive what was to come.

I forced the red haze from my vision, only to find Kael watching me. His eyes said he knew exactly where my mind had gone—too far, too violent.

"Breathe, Hades," he said lowly, a warning disguised as brotherly counsel. "This isn't a war you win by bleeding early. Save it."

Save it. As if rage could be rationed like gunpowder.

Ellen was still in front of me, staring blankly, waiting.

I head snapped to Maera who was still trying to collect herself. Smoothing her trembling hands down her uniform. "Commander have yourself more an alliance," I walked out of Ellen's room, and out to her. 1

Her eyes widened.

"The Eclipse Rebellion and Obsidian..." I extended my hand, the oath tangible in the air. "Not as factions circling their own graves, but as



one front. You will fight beside me. And I will fight beside you."

For the first time since she walked into the room, Maera's mask cracked. She stood, too fast, and before I could process it, her arms were around me. A soldier's hug, rough, desperate, clinging like someone who had been holding her breath for years and finally found air. 2

Her body stiffened as she realized what she had done, and she jerked back, her lips already parting to stammer out apologies.

But I caught her wrist, and drew her back into the embrace.

She saved us, fed our men and pulled Kael from the jaws of death. A hug was nothing. Especially when it was obvious she had been holding herself up by a thread

Cain gasped and laughed as if he had no just learnt that would our deadline had been shortened by more than 70%.

I bent close enough for only her to hear. "I swear on my life, Maera, you will not stand alone. Not in this war. Not ever."

Her breath hitched and she nodded.



We had to go back home.

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Maera's hand skimmed the jagged wall, fingers brushing moss-slick stone until she found the concealed ridge. A faint click sounded, and the slab shifted just enough to reveal the backdoor of the Underspine. A cold draft swept through, smelling not of earth but of distance—open air, rain, and the faint tinge of smoke from settlements too far above to see.

"This is it," she said, her voice steady though her eyes betrayed reluctance. "The front is too dangerous for most of our operations, so we use this."

The door groaned open and the night beyond stretched like an abyss. Rolling plains under pale, fractured moonlight. In the distance, the faint glow of a city pulsed—neon and floodlamps breaking against the horizon. Roads threaded between towns and farmlands, thin veins of civilization humming faintly with traffic, the occasional echo of an engine carrying across the grass.

I drew in the air. Too open. Too loud. Every step would expose us, and yet this was faster than circling through mountain passes.