



## 409 High Stakes Escape

"You'll have to cut through," Maera continued. "Fields, suburbs, industrial strips. Keep to the shadows when you can. Even then..." Her mouth pressed into a grim line. "The closer you get to Obsidian, the more watchful Darius' agents will be. They've rooted themselves in every checkpoint. I know that bastard." 1

Her words settled like stones in my gut. Obsidian's borders weren't just contested—they were riddled with eyes, informants, and opportunists feeding Darius every scrap of movement.

We had escaped his Cauterium but not his pack and he knew that. Security and surveillance would be thorough.

Kael stepped forward, already bracing his shoulders like the weight had been handed to him. "Then we don't take an army. Not through this. The men are too many."

My mind had already turned the blade of the thought over and over. Every gamma or Cain's men we marched across cities and grasslands would paint a target too large to hide. Men could

hold Underspine, buy us time, guard the civilians and wounded. They would help Maera and the rest of the Underspines command and defence rescue more civilians while we got things in order from Obsidian pack.

We would send supplies soon to aid with efforts and increase efficiency. We had eaten through some of their supplies and resources and I planned to pay it back ten fold.

But to reach Obsidian fast enough to fortify before the Bloodmoon's tide rose? That required something smaller. Faster.

"Cain. Kael." I looked each in the eye, "You're with me. The rest will stay and help. I turned to Cain. Let it be known what their responsibility to this place will be. They must not misbehave and watch for anyone who is less than pleased with the arrangement. We don't need anyone pulling us back, a war is coming."

Cain gave a low, humorless chuckle, tilting his head and adjusting a now exhausted Sage on his shoulder. She was already dozing.

He left without a word, his boots carrying him toward the mess hall where the men were still eating. His low voice would be enough to set



them straight, to make sure no one forgot the weight of their orders.

I turned to Kael and Maera. "Office. Now."

She didn't argue. Maera's eyes sharpened, though a faint tremor clung to her fingers as she pulled open the folded map. The desk light caught the glossy surface of the printout, every crease like scar tissue.

"This is Silverpine's eastern stretch." Her voice was steady, but too steady—the kind of discipline you force over a shaking core. She tapped at the arterial roads marked in bold digital ink. "Darius has eyes here, here, and here. Border towns—surveillance towers, drone sweeps, biometric checkpoints. March an army across, and you'll light up every scanner before you hit the next ridge."

Kael leaned forward, but Maera's hand slammed flat over the map, stopping his line of thought. "Secret routes? Smuggling lanes? I've sent people through them before. Some never came back. The lanes collapsed, patrols closed in, whole rescue teams were dragged out in cuffs and executed on camera feeds. One convoy made it three towns deep before they were mauled at a checkpoint—civilians included. Don't





underestimate how quickly he locks jaws once he smells movement."

The room tightened around her words. The air felt heavier, hotter.

Kael braced his forearm on the table anyway. "Then what's left?"

Maera's lips pressed thin. She dragged her finger across a shaded ridge. "This cut here—still breathes, barely. If you move small, three at most, you might slip under the monitoring net. But it runs straight past Halem."

I narrowed my eyes at the dot. "Civilian density?"

"High," she said, too quickly. "Factories, dormitories, constant sweeps. They're not looking for Lycans there, but..." She exhaled, her hand hovering over the map as though afraid to press it again. "Darius knows you're still in these borders. He'll double the eyes, flood every choke point, turn even the drains into traps. You blend too hard, you'll trip alarms. Push too soft, you'll vanish in the crowd and never re-emerge."

Kael nodded grimly. "Stealth through the ridge. Blend in Halem. And after?"

Her hand traced the drainage roads west,



though her voice carried the weight of futility. "They're old service paths—civilian trucks, low patrols. But don't fool yourselves. If Darius predicts this path, he'll bait it, like he's baited the rest. If you make it to Obsidian's southern wall before the Bloodmoon, you'll have hours, maybe, to brace. If you're caught... it ends here."

No one moved. The hum of the air system roared louder than breath.

I leaned into the map, flattening its edges with my palm, burning every ridge, every weakness, into memory. "Then we'll do what your men couldn't."

Kael's jaw locked. Maera swallowed hard.

My finger hovered over the map's scarred fold, tracing the ridge she had marked, then dragging west toward the thin line of Obsidian's wall.

"At full speed," I said, "three days. Four, if Halem closes her doors and we're forced to double back. That's the longest we can afford."

The weight of my words sank into the room. Maera's throat bobbed as she swallowed. Kael's knuckles pressed deeper into the table's edge.

I exhaled, slow, controlled. "Within the week, I'll



send resources from Obsidian to ease what we've eaten through here—food, ammunition, med-tech. More than that, I'll send the kind of machines that will cut your workload in half."

I caught the hope and relief Maera's gaze until she faltered. "But that's if we live long enough to send anything back. Don't forget that part. Every move from here until the wall is a gamble—and Darius is the kind of man who rigs the dice before you ever sit at the table."

The silence that followed wasn't empty. It was taut, humming, like the string of a bow drawn to its limit.

I straightened, tugging the map's corners tighter under my palms, as though pinning fate itself. "So we don't stumble. We don't blink. Three men. Three days. We cut clean."

In three days I had to be with Eve and Elliot. 5

