



## 472 Tunnel Squad

Hades 1

He paused, his voice heavy. "I know she's a child. But she loves this place second only to how much she loves the Don. The Don himself would prefer to take a more dangerous route than to trample on her mother's final resting place." His gaze drifted off into the distance. "It's made even more complicated knowing this place is alive."

"It would be synonymous with desecrating a grave," Freddie finished quietly. "Even if it's to save people just like her."

I looked at Sophie, kneeling by her mother's grave with Eve sitting quietly beside her.

The little girl's hands rested on the shifting flowers, and they pulsed softly beneath her touch.

She's just a child. She shouldn't have to make this decision.

But war never cared about shoulds.

I walked forward and knelt beside her. For a while, I said nothing—just watched the flowers glow and shift color.



472 Tunnel Squad



"Sophie," I said gently. "I need to ask you something. And whatever you say, I'll respect it."

She turned to me, those ancient eyes steady and unflinching.

"You want to use Mami's tunnels," she said simply.

"Yes. For refugees—people who need to escape before the war begins."

"How many people?"

"Eight thousand, maybe more."

Sophie was silent for a long moment. "That's a lot of people walking through Mami's garden."

"It is."

"They're all like Mami? The people in Silverpine?"

I swallowed. "Some of them, yes. The bad Alpha—Darius—hurts his own kind. He's done terrible things to them. To mothers, to children. Some might be from the Cauterium. Others are trying to escape before they're taken there."

Her small hand tightened on the flower, and its pulse flared brighter.

"Papa is with them," she said. Not a question.

< 472 Tunnel Squad

"Yes. Your father is in Silverpine right now, waiting for us to send help. Without the tunnels, it will be much more dangerous."

Sophie looked at Eve. "Did the bad Alpha hurt you too?"

Eve nodded, tears glimmering. "He did, little star. He locked me away for years."

Sophie turned back to the grave. Her voice was soft but steady.

"The people will hurt the flowers when they walk through. I know that." She stroked one of the shifting petals. "But Mami always blooms again. The bad Alpha hurt her, but she was still beautiful—"

"Is still beautiful," Eve whispered.

Sophie nodded, gazing at the glowing chamber around us. "She is still beautiful. And she would want to help people like her."

She placed both hands on the flower, and the entire chamber pulsed in answer. Light brightened, vines stirred.

"You can use the tunnels, Uncle Luci."

I pulled her close and kissed her forehead. She

let me, then leaned forward to press her lips to one of the great flowers.

"I love you, Mami," she murmured. "I'll visit you every day while the people come through. I'll make sure you stay beautiful."

The flower pulsed once—warm and bright.

Eve gathered Sophie into her arms to soothe her.

I stepped back beside Freddie, whose scarred face was wet with tears.

"The Don would be proud," he said quietly. "She made the choice he couldn't."

"She shouldn't have had to," I said.

"No. But she did. And she chose mercy over grief. Just like her mother."

I looked at the grave, at the glowing vines winding through the stone. "We'll honor this. Everyone who walks these tunnels will know they're on sacred ground."

Sophie wiped her eyes and whispered, "I know you will, Uncle Luci. That's why I said yes."

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The next day, the rescue mission moved into full swing.

I'd assembled a team—hand-picked, trained, and equipped with everything we hadn't had when we foolishly ventured into Silverpine the first time.

Twenty men.

"With even poor reception, you'll still be able to radio for updates or emergency aid," I said, watching them double-check their suits.

"Yes, Alpha," they chorused.

I nodded, scanning each of them in silence, trying to figure from where we now stood just how much things could go horribly wrong. That if they are caught right by the Underspine and the HQ of the Eclipse Rebellion's operation is discovered---the disaster that it would be.

I had to mentally shake my head from burrowing too far into the worse case scenario.

Each soldier carried anti-feral ammunition—precaution, not invitation. Hopefully, they wouldn't face the creatures or the Caulterium Gammas, but hope wasn't strategy.

Eve rested her hand on my shoulder. She didn't

she speak. Her touch alone cut through the heaviness pressing on my chest.

"So," she said quietly, handing a manila envelope to the squad leader, "the next item—maps."

He unfolded the papers carefully. Inside were detailed sketches of the Cauterium to the hidden cavern and what existed beneath—the Underspine.

With my direction, our cartographer had recreated a rough map from memory, enough to guide them through the perilous terrain cloaked in dense verdure. And the secret cave they would have to find but that had been somehow cloaked like Maera had informed me.

The leader distributed the copies, and I spoke.

"The tunnels you'll enter are sacred. You'll understand once you see them. Remember—this isn't just about rescuing my brother or the Gammas left behind. You're saving survivors—mothers, fathers, children. Some of them belong to a pack we were raised to despise. You will not let prejudice compromise this mission."

I let my gaze move over them. "These people will not trust you. They may lash out. Treat them as you would a wounded animal—hurt, frightened,

and defensive. Do not provoke. Do not respond in kind. Cain will guide you."

I paused, then added, "You'll also take orders from a woman named Maera—their commander. She's an ally."

The team saluted in unison. "Understood."

When we reached the garden, ten more men were waiting—veterans who had traversed the tunnels years ago.

Freddie stepped forward. "These are the men who've been through before. They'll lead the first section."

Eve and I shook hands with the middle-aged man at their front.

"Alpha," he said, bowing slightly. "I never thought I'd see these tunnels again. But we'll do our best to serve the mission."

I nodded. "That's all I ask."

We watched as they descended through the hatch, one by one, disappearing into the glowing dark.

In a week or two, we'd know whether they made it through.



In the meantime, we had other fish to fry. <sup>1</sup>

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