



475 Alternative Contingency

Hades 1

"Striking the Cauterium accomplishes multiple objectives," Montague continued, his voice steady and measured. "One: we potentially rescue Ellen before she can be fully utilized. Two: we rescue our captured Gammas and any Eclipse Rebellion members held there. Three: we destroy Darius's experimentation facility and cripple a major strategic asset."

"And four," Kael said grimly, "we send a message that we're not waiting to be attacked. That we'll come for our people."

"The pushback will be severe," Silas warned. "Darius won't take an assault on the Cauterium lightly. It could trigger the full war immediately, before we're ready."

"We're as ready as we'll ever be," I said, the decision crystallizing in my mind even as I spoke. "The domes are nearly complete. Our Gammas are trained. The refugees are being integrated. If the Blood Moon accelerates, it means our timeline is already compromised. We'd be reacting to Darius's move, not initiating



conflict ourselves."

Montague nodded. "Exactly. It's a defensive offense. We're protecting our strategic position."

"What's the threshold?" Gallinti asked. "How do we measure if it's moved?"

"Our analysts will monitor it continuously," I said. "Any deviation from the projected path—even a fraction of a degree closer than expected—triggers the protocol. I want eyes on that moon every hour. If it moves, I know immediately."

"And if it doesn't move?" Kael asked. "If the Blood Moon stays on its current trajectory?"

Montague answered before I could. "Then we wait ninety-six hours."

I looked at him sharply. "Ninety-six?"

"Four days," Montague clarified. "If nothing changes—if the Blood Moon maintains its current acceleration, if we receive no communication from the squad, if there's no indication of escalation from Darius—then after ninety-six hours, we send a rescue team for the rescue team." 3

"Why four days?" Silas challenged. "Why not sooner?"



"Because," Montague said, his voice heavy with the weight of command decisions he'd clearly been calculating before this call, "if they've been captured and Darius is interrogating them, it takes time. Time to break someone. Time to extract useful information. Time to set traps based on that information."

He paused, letting that sink in.

"If we rush in immediately, we walk into whatever Darius has prepared. But if we wait—if we let him think he has all the time in the world to work on our people—then strike when he's confident... we have a chance."

The logic was sound. Cold, brutal, but sound.

"Four days of torture," Gallinti said quietly. "For twenty Gammas."

"Four days to plan a proper rescue instead of a suicide mission," Montague countered. "I don't like it either. But I'd rather save some of them than lose even more trying to save them all immediately."

I closed my eyes briefly, feeling the weight of command settling even heavier on my shoulders.

Twenty Gammas in enemy hands. Possibly Cain.



Possibly Ellen. Possibly the entire Eclipse Rebellion.

And I was being asked to wait. To watch. To let them suffer while we calculated odds and trajectories.

But that was what command meant. Making the calls no one else wanted to make.

"Agreed," I said, opening my eyes. "We monitor the Blood Moon continuously. Any acceleration beyond current projections, we strike the Cauterium immediately—damn the consequences."

I met each of their eyes through the screens.

"But if it holds steady—if there's no change—we wait ninety-six hours. Then we send a rescue team with full support. Aerial coverage, heavy weapons, the works. We're not sending another scouting party. We're sending an army."

Nods around the screens. Grim acceptance.

"Kael, coordinate with analysts on Blood Moon monitoring. I want hourly reports."

"Done."

"Silas, start pulling together options for the



rescue team. Who, what equipment, what routes."

"On it."

"Gallinti, I need the eastern and northern quadrants on high alert. If Darius knows we sent people in, he might probe our defenses."

"Understood."

"Montague..." I paused, looking at the man who'd just proposed we might have to assault the Cauterium with everything we had. "Start planning the strike. Full tactical breakdown. I want to know what it would take to breach that facility, extract our people, and get out alive."

His scarred face was unreadable. "It'll be bloody, Alpha."

"I know."

"We'll lose people."

"I know."

"But we might save more than we lose."

"That's what I'm counting on."

Montague nodded slowly. "I'll have preliminary plans by tomorrow."



"Good." I took a breath, feeling the exhaustion trying to drag me under again. "Ninety-six hours. Four days. If nothing changes, if the Blood Moon holds steady, we go get our people."

"And if it doesn't hold?" Kael asked quietly.

I met his eyes through the screen. "Then war starts early. And we make Darius regret ever touching what's mine."

The call ended, screens winking out one by one until I was alone in the war room again.

Alone with a dead comm unit, a countdown that might accelerate at any moment, and twenty Gammas whose screams I'd never hear but would carry with me forever.

I looked at the holographic map still displayed on the table. Obsidian in blue. Silverpine in red. And somewhere between them, in those tunnels we'd thought were secret, twenty of my people were either dead or wishing they were.

Hold on, I thought, knowing they couldn't hear me but needing to believe it anyway. Just hold on. We're coming.

Four days.

Ninety-six hours.



And if Darius forced our hand sooner, we'd bring him hell itself.

I grabbed my jacket and headed for the door. Eve would be done with the donation soon. And despite everything—despite the catastrophe unfolding—I needed to see her. Needed to ground myself in something real before I drowned in worst-case scenarios.

But I wouldn't tell her. Not yet.

Not until I knew for certain what we were facing.

Please, I thought, looking up at the ceiling as if I could see through it to the sky beyond. Please let the Blood Moon hold steady. Please give us those four days.

But prayers and pleases had never stopped wars before.

And I had a sinking feeling they wouldn't start now.