



477 72 Hours in

Hades 1

Fuck.

I tried to school my features into neutrality, to summon that cold, unreadable mask I'd worn for decades.

Her eyes narrowed.

"You're not that man anymore, Hades. You're not the cold, unfeeling, carved-out statue you once were." Her voice was steel wrapped in silk. "Like everyone else, you have tells now. You have emotions that leak through the cracks. And who better to read them than your mate?"

She pressed her hand against my chest, right over my heart.

"Not to mention Fenrir's Chain between us, filtering your thoughts no matter how jumbled or wrecked they are. I can feel your dread. Your fear. Your guilt for keeping something from me."

The bond. Of course. The fucking bond that tied us together, that let emotions bleed across the connection even when I tried to lock them down.



477 72 Hours in



I'd gotten so used to it during normal circumstances that I'd forgotten it would betray me when I most needed control.

"Eve—"

"Tell me." Her voice cracked slightly. "Whatever it is, tell me. Don't make me torture it out of you."

I looked at her—at this woman who'd seen through every defense I'd ever built, who'd stripped away my masks and forced me to be human again. Who was now holding my face with hands that had given blood for hours to save thousands, demanding the truth with eyes that promised violence if I didn't give it.

She deserved the truth.

But the truth would terrify her.

"The squad we sent through the tunnels," I said quietly. "They went dark."

Her hands went still. "What?"

"Six hours ago. They were entering the Underspine cavern when we lost contact. There was... gas. An ambush. The line went dead." 4

I watched the color drain from her already pale face.



477 72 Hours in



"How many?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Twenty Gammas. Plus whatever Eclipse Rebellion members they'd made contact with. Plus—"

"Ellen." She said it like a death sentence. "If they captured Ellen—"

"We're monitoring the Blood Moon. If she's being forced to pull it closer, we'll know within hours."

"And if she is?"

"Then we strike the Cauterium immediately."

Eve released my face, her hands dropping to her lap. She stared at nothing, processing.

"That's why you've been..." She trailed off. "That's why you didn't want to tell me. You thought I was too weak from the donation to handle it."

"You are weak from the donation."

"I'm strong enough to handle the truth!" Her voice rose, anger flashing in her eyes. "I'm strong enough to stand beside you, Hades. I'm strong enough to—"

She swayed suddenly, the burst of emotion draining what little energy she had left.



I caught her before she could fall, pulling her against my chest. "You're strong enough for anything," I murmured into her hair. "That's not the question. The question is whether I'm strong enough to watch you carry this burden when you're already carrying so much."

She was quiet for a moment, her breathing evening out against me. Then, quietly: "We carry it together. That's what mates do."

"I know."

"So no more hiding things from me. Even when you think it's for my own good."

"I'll try."

"You'll succeed." Her voice was muffled against my chest. "Or I really will snap your neck."

Despite everything, I almost smiled. "Noted."

We sat like that for a while, her curled against me, my arms wrapped around her fragile frame. The weight of the day pressed down on both of us—twenty Gammas lost, Ellen possibly captured, a war that might start any moment.

But here, in this quiet room, with Eve's heartbeat steady against mine, I let myself believe we might survive it.



"Ninety-six hours," Eve said finally. "If the Blood Moon doesn't move, we wait ninety-six hours before sending a rescue team."

I stiffened. "How did you—"

"Fenrir's Chain, remember? I got fragments of your earlier meeting." She pulled back to look at me. "It's the right call. Montague's reasoning is sound."

"It means leaving our people in Darius's hands for four days."

"It means not wasting more lives on an impulsive rescue." Her eyes were hard. "I hate it too. But it's right."

She really was my equal in every way.

"Four days," I agreed quietly. "And if nothing changes, we bring them home."

"We bring them home," she echoed.

Then she sagged against me again, exhaustion finally winning. "I should check on the children before I sleep."

She forgot she already put them to bed...

She was stressed and now with blood donation, it was taking its toll. At least this was her last day



477 72 Hours in



of donation for the week.

"They're fine. Lucinda has them."

"I should—"

"Eve." I tightened my arms around her. "Rest. Just for a few hours. The world will still be falling apart when you wake up."

She let out a weak laugh. "That's a terrible comfort."

"It's all I have right now."

"Then I'll take it."

Within minutes, her breathing deepened, sleep claiming her despite her protests. I held her, staring at the wall, my mind racing through contingencies and strategies and prayers to gods I wasn't sure existed.

Twenty Gammas.

Ninety-six hours.

A Blood Moon that might accelerate at any moment.

And a mate who could read me like a book, who wouldn't let me carry this alone even when I desperately wanted to protect her from it.



We carry it together, she'd said.

So I held her tighter and let myself believe that maybe—just maybe—together would be enough.

A knock at the door made my pen halt on the paper I was analyzing. I glanced back at Eve—she'd just fallen asleep after returning from the construction site of the new safehouse we still hoped would house the people of Silverpine.

I stood, still holding the last hourly report from our analyst. The Blood Moon's path remained constant, as did its speed. Nothing had changed except for the tunnel squad going dark.

No ransom letter had been left in Felicia's monitored room. No communication. No demands.

Everything was quiet. Just crickets.

In three more hours, we'd hit the seventy-two-hour mark. And if nothing changed, we'd deploy the rescue team at the approaching the ninety-six-hour mark

I walked to the door and opened it, rubbing my eyes against the bright hallway light that nearly blinded me.



477 72 Hours in



No one was there.

"Uncle Luci?"

A small voice made me look down. Sophie stood there, her hair rumpled from sleep, but her eyes were alert. Her lips quivered.

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