



498 Twisting Vines ¹

71:45:23 ¹

Dawnstrike

Gallinti eyes were zeroed in on the no man's land, the dust settled, calm before the chaos. The enemy were on the other side, the red haze that had taken over the world held no consequence over our position.

It simply was no there.

But Darius' gammas were, in this case. His created monsters; ferals.

Then it happened.

The first feral broke from the tree line.

Not cautiously. Not with strategy. It simply charged—a hulking mass of twisted muscle and rage, its eyes burning red in the Bloodmoon's light. Its roar split the night, primal and raw.

And behind it came the others.

Dozens.

Hundreds.

A living tide of teeth and claws and mindless



hunger, pouring out of the darkness like a plague unleashed. They didn't move like soldiers. They moved like a swarm—chaotic, feral, unstoppable.

Gallinti didn't flinch.

"Steady," he said into his comm, his voice calm. Almost bored. "Let them close the gap."

Around him, his soldiers held their positions along the defensive line—a series of reinforced barriers and foxholes dug into the scorched earth of no-man's-land. There was no forest here. No cover. No traps.

Just open ground.

And that was exactly how Gallinti wanted it.

The ferals charged across the barren field, their claws tearing up dirt, their howls echoing across the expanse. Two hundred meters. One-hundred. One hundred.

Gallinti raised his hand.

His soldiers tensed, fingers on triggers.

Seventy-five meters.

Fifty.

"Fire," Gallinti said.

The line erupted.

Automatic gunfire tore through the night—a continuous, deafening roar of lead and fury. Tracer rounds lit up the darkness in streaks of green and red. The first wave of ferals was cut down instantly, bodies jerking and collapsing mid-stride as bullets ripped through flesh and bone.

But more came.

They trampled over their fallen, driven by instinct and rage, closing the distance even as their numbers thinned. Thirty meters. Twenty.

"Grenades," Gallinti ordered.

His soldiers pulled pins and hurled them in synchronized arcs. The explosives landed in clusters—whump, whump, whump—and detonated in rapid succession, sending shockwaves and shrapnel tearing through the horde.

Limbs flew. Blood sprayed. The ferals screamed.

But still they came.

Ten meters.

"Brace!" Gallinti barked.



The first feral reached the barrier and leapt—a massive, snarling beast that cleared the sandbags in a single bound. It landed in the trench, jaws snapping—

—and Gallinti put three rounds through its skull before it could take a step.

It collapsed at his feet, twitching.

Then the rest hit.

The line became a melee—close, brutal, desperate. Ferals poured over the barriers, clawing and biting. Soldiers met them with bayonets and combat knives, with rifle stocks and sheer desperation. The trench became a slaughterhouse, slick with blood and mud and the wet sounds of tearing flesh.

Gallinti moved through it like a machine. He fired until his magazine was empty, reloaded without looking, fired again. A feral lunged at him from the side; he sidestepped, drove his knife into its throat, kicked it back into the horde. Another came from above; he shot it mid-leap, and it crashed into the soldier beside him.

"Hold the line!" he roared. "Do not break formation!"



His soldiers rallied, forming a tighter wall of steel and bullets. They fought in pairs—one shooting, one covering, rotating as needed. It was chaos, but it was controlled chaos. Disciplined. Trained.

A feral broke through on the left flank. Gallinti saw it in his peripheral—too fast, too close. It tackled a young soldier, jaws snapping toward his throat—

Gallinti was there in an instant. He grabbed the feral by the scruff, yanked it off, and emptied half a magazine into its spine. It went limp.

The soldier gasped, wide-eyed. "Sir—"

"Get up," Gallinti snapped. "You're not dead yet."

The soldier scrambled to his feet, rejoining the line.

Gallinti scanned the battlefield. The ferals were thinning now—most of them dead or dying, their bodies piled in grotesque heaps across the no-man's-land. A few stragglers still charged, but they were picked off easily by his marksmen.

The assault was breaking.

"Cease fire!" Gallinti ordered. "Conserve ammunition! Medics, triage the wounded!"



The gunfire tapered off, replaced by the groans of the injured and the wet, labored breathing of dying ferals.

Gallinti surveyed the carnage.

His line had held.

Barely.

"Casualties?" he asked his lieutenant.

The man checked his tablet, his face grim.

"Twelve dead. Twenty-three wounded, seven critical."

Gallinti's jaw tightened. Twelve. In the first ten minutes.

And this was just the opening move.

He activated his comm. "Dawnstrike to Command. First wave repelled. Feral assault neutralized. We took losses."

Hades's voice came through, steady but tense.

"Understood. Status of defensive line?"

"Holding," Gallinti said. "But we burned through a third of our ammunition. If Darius sends another wave like that—"

"He will," Hades said. "Reinforcements are en route. ETA twenty minutes."



Twenty minutes.

Gallinti looked out at the no-man's-land. The bodies of the ferals were already starting to rot in the Bloodmoon's heat, the stench rising in waves. Flies were gathering.

And beyond the corpses, in the darkness on the far side of the field, he could see movement.

Heat signatures. Hundreds of them.

Not ferals this time.

Soldiers.

"Command," Gallinti said quietly. "We've got incoming. Human signatures. Looks like Darius is sending his regulars."

A pause.

"Can you hold?" Hades asked.

Gallinti looked at his soldiers—exhausted, bloodied, reloading their weapons with shaking hands. They'd just survived a feral assault. Now they had to face trained soldiers.

In an open field.

With no cover.

"We'll hold," Gallinti said. "We don't have a



choice."

"Good. Dawnstrike, you are authorized to fall back to secondary positions if the line is compromised. Do not let them break through to the domes."

"Understood. Dawnstrike out."

Gallinti lowered his comm and turned to his soldiers.

"Listen up!" he shouted. "That was the warmup. Darius is sending real soldiers next—trained, armed, and pissed off. We've got twenty minutes to dig in, reload, and prepare. I need every able body on the line. Wounded stay in the rear trench. Dead..." He paused. "We'll honor them when this is over. Right now, we fight."

A chorus of exhausted affirmatives echoed back.

Gallinti grabbed a shovel and started reinforcing the sandbags himself.

Because in twenty minutes, the real battle would begin.

And Dawnstrike would hold.

Or die trying.



69:32:17

Dawnstrike

Two hours.

Two hours of tense silence, broken only by the groans of the wounded and the quiet commands of the Deltas as they moved through the trenches, hands glowing with healing energy. Two hours of checking ammunition, reinforcing barriers, and trying not to look at the row of bodies laid out behind the line—twelve soldiers, their faces covered with tarps, dog tags collected.

Twelve names Gallinti would have to remember.

He stood at the forward position, scanning the no-man's-land through his scope. The feral corpses were still there, rotting in the Bloodmoon's heat. Flies had given way to carrion birds, circling lazily overhead.

But beyond the corpses, the darkness was still.

Too still.

Gallinti's instincts prickled.

"Movement," one of his spotters said quietly. "Far side. Multiple contacts."



Gallinti adjusted his scope.

There.

A line of figures emerging from the tree line—
not charging this time, but walking. Slow.
Deliberate. Confident.

Soldiers.

"All units," Gallinti said into his comm, his voice
steady. "Enemy forces approaching. Hold your
fire until my mark."

His soldiers tensed, weapons trained on the
advancing line.

The figures drew closer—fifty meters, forty,
thirty—and Gallinti could make out details now.
Silverpine tactical gear. Standard issue rifles.
Moving in formation.

Professional.

But something was wrong.

His eyes narrowed.

At the front of the formation walked a single
figure—tall, broad-shouldered, wearing a black
combat mask. Flanking him on either side were
two others, but they moved... strangely. Stiffly.
Like puppets on strings.



Gallinti shifted his scope to the flanking figures and his breath caught.

What the hell—

They weren't quite human anymore.

Their skin had a greenish tint, mottled and rough like bark. Their hair wasn't hair at all—it was vines, thick and twisting, cascading down their backs. Their fingers ended not in nails but in sharp, woody points that looked more like thorns than anything real. 1

And their eyes.

Gods, their eyes.

Empty. Vacant. Lost.

Gammas. They had to be. But twisted. Changed into something else. Something unnatural.

Gallinti's stomach turned.

"Hold steady," he said quietly, forcing his voice to remain calm even as unease crawled up his spine. "Wait for my command."

The masked leader stopped twenty meters from the line.

His soldiers halted behind him in perfect synchronization.



Silence fell over the battlefield.

Then the leader reached up and pulled off his mask.

Gallinti's blood went cold.

Morrison.

Ambassador Morrison—the man who had sat at their council tables, who had smiled and shaken hands and sworn oaths of loyalty. The man who had sold Obsidian's secrets to Darius. The traitor.

He looked different now. Leaner. Harder. His once-soft aristocratic features had sharpened into something cruel. But it was unmistakably him.

Morrison smiled—wide and smug, like a man who'd already won.

"Gallinti," he called out, his voice carrying easily across the distance. "It's been a while."

Gallinti said nothing, his rifle trained on Morrison's chest.

Morrison spread his arms in a mockery of welcome. "Still the silent soldier, I see. That's fine. I'll talk. You listen." He gestured to the



carnage around them—the feral corpses, the bloodstained trenches, the exhausted soldiers. "Look at this. All this death. All this suffering. And for what?"

"Treasonous bastard," someone muttered behind Gallinti.

Morrison's smile widened. "Treason? No, no. I prefer the term pragmatism. Obsidian is dying. It will be crushed under Malrik's heel, Gallinti. You know it. I know it. Hades knows it. This war? It's not about territory or pride. It's about survival. And Darius? He's offering something Hades never could."

"Paradise," Morrison continued, his tone almost conversational. "Safety. Prosperity. A future without bloodshed. All you have to do is submit. Lay down your weapons. Swear fealty to Darius. He is magnanimous, Gallinti. He will forgive. He will welcome you."

Gallinti's expression didn't change.

"No?" Morrison tilted his head. "Still loyal to the losing side? How noble. How stupid."

Gallinti's finger moved to the trigger.

"Shift," he said quietly into his comm. "Prepare to



engage on my—"

Morrison raised one hand lazily.

The ground erupted.

Vines—thick, thorned, alive—burst from the soil like serpents, tearing through dirt and rock.

They moved with impossible speed, lashing out in all directions. Soldiers shouted in alarm, trying to dodge, but the vines were everywhere. ¹

One wrapped around Gallinti's throat. ¹

He gasped, dropping his rifle as the vine yanked him off his feet, lifting him into the air. The thorns dug into his skin, drawing blood. He clawed at it, trying to tear it away, but it was like trying to rip through steel cable. ²

"It's no use," Morrison said, stepping closer. His voice was calm. Almost bored. "You can't fight what you don't understand."

Gallinti struggled, his vision starting to blur at the edges. Around him, his soldiers were tangled in vines, pinned, unable to move. The two twisted gammas flanking Morrison stood motionless, their vacant eyes staring at nothing.

Morrison stopped a few feet away, looking up at Gallinti with that same infuriating smile.



"This is what Darius offers," he said. "Power. Real power. Not the hollow words of kings and councils, but the ability to reshape the world." He gestured to the gammas. "These two? They were Obsidian soldiers once. Loyal. Brave. Stupid. Now they're mine. Extensions of my will. And soon—" he looked pointedly at Gallinti's struggling soldiers, "—so will you be."

Gallinti's hand scrabbled at his belt, fingers searching, finding—

—the combat knife strapped to his thigh.

Morrison didn't notice.

"Last chance, Gallinti," Morrison said. "Submit. Serve Darius. Live. Or resist—" his smile turned cold, "—and become fertilizer for my garden."

Gallinti's fingers closed around the knife handle.

He looked Morrison dead in the eye.

And with the last of his strength, he ripped the knife free and slashed upward, severing the vine wrapped around his throat.

He dropped to the ground, gasping, blood streaming from the cuts on his neck.

Morrison's smile vanished.

"Kill him," he said flatly.

The two twisted gammas moved, large vines splitting from their body, racing towards Gallinti and his men.

Gallinti's wolf ripped out of his fragile flesh, dark fur bursting at the seams of his skin, nails morphing to claws until he stood whole as a wolf ready to fight creatures he did not understand. 2

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