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Command Centre

The hardened high gamma gasped as thick tendrils, vines erupted from the convulsing ground, thorned things of nightmares they were. Vines that lashed around like a whip, hissing as they hit the Obsidian gammas.

Even as they shifted, the tendrils coiled around them, crushing effortlessly as if bones and flesh were made out of mush. Sap drowned some, slowly, horrifically.

Thorns shredded through clothes, skin and hide alike, no one and nothing was impervious to them. The blood of the gammas quickly met sap, pale crimson fluid leaking.

"What are those things?" Victoriana asked, gripping the console, the horror in her voice mirrored everyone's.

Nothing worked against them, not the grenades, not the anti-feral artillery, not the normal rounds. And with every slash or injury to them they healed rapidly. 1



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Morrison only watched, smug, not a touch of blood or dirt on his pristine suit. He looked almost bored, his men all ready for the command to attack but for now they let the vines do the work.

Gallinti continued to battle, shifting from wolf to man and back to evade the vine beasts of destruction but they could all see that he was growing tired and with every new gamma that was killed, drowned, crippled or torn, with every man he lost, scales of the battle tilted in favour of Morrison and the division he led.

Gallinti's soldiers would soon join the fray and soon there would be nothing left of the Dawnstrike division.

Hades spoke into the comm. "Reinforcements are on the way," he said, and hated himself for the lie. They were ten minutes out. Gallinti had five.

Gallinti replied in short bursts as his men tried to cover him. "We will hold the line until then," But even he seemed unsure.

The Command centre had grown into a cacophony of strategies to save Dawnstrike. The info and video of the creatures in action had



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already been sent out to the lab, to Thea and Maya.

"This is a new threat, we need a new method of neutralization,"

"Fire won't work—vegetation that dense would need napalm and we'd burn our own soldiers—"

"Acid,"

"And let our men melt and die horribly?"

"What about silver rounds? Wolfsbane?"

"Those are for shifters, not plants—"

"Then what the hell do we—"

"Enough!" Hades's voice cut through the chaos like a blade.

The command center went silent.

Hades stood frozen, staring at the screen. At Morrison. At the vines. At the two twisted gammas standing vacant-eyed beside the traitor.

At the garden of corpses spreading across Dawnstrike's line.

"If we don't think quickly, there will be nothing but a cursed garden of vines and corpses," Eve's voice was laced with dread.



Hades stopped dead in his tracks, he had seen this before, more likely heard of something like this. From Cain about Sophie's mother. The woman's body continued to grow flowers years after her death. 1

"Hades?" Eve's voice cut through his ringing ears.

The woman who had been experimented on in Darius's labs. Spliced with plant DNA. Tortured. Twisted. Her body had been more flora than flesh by the end—roots growing through her veins, flowers blooming from her skin even after she'd stopped breathing.

"Hades," Eve said again, her voice tight. "What is it?"

"I have someone that can help."

He activated his comm, his voice sharp. "Cain, over?"

The line crackled.

Then Cain's voice, tense and wary. "Command, this is Aegis Actual. What's the emergency?"

"Cain," Hades said, his jaw tight. "I might be facing something like Angela,"



Silence.

Silence.

The kind of silence that carried weight. Memory. Pain.

When Cain spoke again, his voice was carefully controlled. Too controlled.

"What do you mean, 'something like Angela'?"

Hades looked at the screen—at the vines tearing through his soldiers, at the two twisted gammas standing vacant-eyed beside Morrison, at the garden of corpses spreading across Dawnstrike.

"Twisted gammas," Hades said. "Part human, part plant. Vines growing from them. Vacant eyes. They're controlling vegetation—massive vines erupting from the ground, killing our soldiers. And they heal from every injury. Nothing's working against them."

Another pause.

Then Cain's voice, colder than Hades had ever heard it: "He's making more of them."

"Yes."

"How many?"



"Two confirmed at Dawnstrike. Morrison's using them. But if he has two—"

"There could be more," Cain finished. "Where they're deployed. How they're being controlled."

"Morrison," Hades said. "He's standing back, watching. The vines respond to him. The twisted gammas flank him like bodyguards, but they're... empty. Like puppets."

He heard Cain exhale slowly through the comm.

"Angela," Cain said quietly, "when she was alive—before she became the garden—the plants were eating her from the inside out. We'd see it. Vines breaking through her skin. Roots sprouting from her fingers. Her hair wasn't hair anymore, it was... living vegetation."

Hades gripped the edge of the console. "How did you stop it? How did you keep her alive as long as you did?"

"We couldn't stop it," Cain said. "We could only slow it down. And there was only one thing that worked."

"What?"

"Verdantin."

The word hung in the air.



"Verdantin?" someone behind Hades repeated.
"That's an herbicide. Highly toxic—"

"I know what it is," Hades said, not taking his eyes off the screen. "Cain, explain."

"It's a plant killer," Cain said. "Disrupts cellular growth in vegetation. In large doses, it's lethal to any organic plant life. But in small doses—tiny, controlled doses—it slowed Angela's transformation. Kept the plants from consuming her completely."

"How small?" Hades asked.

"A single drop," Cain said. "Mixed into her food every day. Like medicine. Any more and it would've poisoned her. Any less and it didn't work. It was a tightrope. But it bought her two years she shouldn't have had."

Hades's mind was racing.

Verdantin.

An herbicide.

The twisted gammas were part plant. Morrison's vines were organic.

"If Verdantin slowed Angela's growth," Hades said slowly, "then in concentrated doses—"



"It could kill them," Cain finished. "The vines. The twisted gammas. Anything with plant biology." 3

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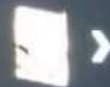


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