



500 Luna Deployed

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Command Center

"Would it work?" Hades pressed.

"I don't know," Cain admitted. "Angela was still mostly human. These things—if they're further along in the transformation, if they're more plant than person—" He paused. "But it's your best shot. Verdantin targets plant cells. It should work."

Hades turned to the room. "Get me through Thea. Now." 1

"Already patching her through," one of the officers said. "We already sent the footage too."

A moment later, Thea's voice crackled over the comm, slightly breathless. "Command, this is Thea. What do you need?"

"Verdantin," Hades said. "Do we have any in stock?"

There was a pause—typing, searching.

"Yes, the herbicide is currently in stock." Maya spoke instead. "We have a small supply in the



hazmat storage. It's restricted-use, highly regulated. Why—" She stopped. "Wait. You want to weaponize it?"

Thea clicked her fingers in the background. "Herbicide to kill plants."

"Can we?" Hades asked.

Silence.

Then: "Theoretically, yes. Verdantin disrupts photosynthesis and cellular regeneration in plant tissue. If Morrison's vines are organic, and if those twisted gammas have plant biology integrated into their systems, then Verdantin should be able to kill them. Or at least severely weaken them."

"But?" Hades prompted.

"But it's not stable in its raw form," Thea said. "It evaporates quickly. We'd need to bind it to something—something that keeps it active long enough to penetrate deep into the tissue and reach the root systems."

"What do you need?" Hades asked.

"A stabilizing agent," Thea said, and Hades could hear her moving, pulling up files. "Something inert that won't neutralize the Verdantin but will

anchor it. Platinum. Platinum nanoparticles would work."

"Platinum?" Eve said from her video screen, her eyes sharp now, focused.

"It's non-reactive," Thea explained quickly. "It won't interfere with the herbicide, but it'll keep it from dissipating. And—" she paused, "—the twisted gammas were lycans before they were turned, right?"

"Presumably," Hades said.

"Then platinum's perfect," Thea said. "Platinum is toxic to werewolf shifters. So we'd be hitting them with a double strike—Verdantin targeting the plant biology, platinum targeting the residual werewolf physiology." 2

Hades felt something sharp and cold settle in his chest.

Hope.

"How long?" he asked.

A pause.

"Three hours," Thea said. "Maybe less if I pull the entire biochem team. We need to synthesize the compound, stabilize it, run tests to make sure it



won't corrode our ammunition or blades, then manufacture enough to deploy across all fronts."

Three hours.

Gallinti had minutes.

But if they could get this weapon to the other divisions—

"Do it," Hades said. "Full authorization. Whatever resources you need, take them. I want Verdantin-laced rounds and blade coatings ready for deployment in three hours."

"Understood," Thea said. "I'm on it. Thea out."

The line went silent.

Hades turned back to the screen, to Gallinti fighting for his life, to Morrison watching with that smug, infuriating smile.

"Victoriana," Hades said.

The High Gamma stepped forward, her amber eyes gleaming.

"Sir."

"Deploy to Dawnstrike," Hades ordered. "Take your rapid response unit. Your mission is to punch through Morrison's line."



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We already had reinforcements coming for Gallinti but adding Victoriana would be a game changer.

"With pleasure," Victoriana said, already moving.
"Rapid Response, on me! We deploy in ninety seconds!"

Her unit scrambled, grabbing weapons and gear.

Hades activated the comm to Gallinti.

"Dawnstrike, this is Command. Reinforcements inbound, ETA eight minutes. High Gamma Victoriana is en route with a kill team to neutralize Morrison. Your mission is to survive. Fall back if you need to. Conserve your forces. Once Morrison's down, the vines die. Do you copy?"

Gallinti's voice came through, ragged and breathless.

"Copy... that. Eight... minutes. We'll... hold."

Hades stared at the screen.

At the bodies piling up.

At Gallinti, bleeding and exhausted, still fighting.

At Morrison, pristine and untouched, watching.



Eight minutes, Hades thought grimly. Hold on, Gallinti.

He looked at Eve on the video screen. Her face was pale, her turquoise eyes burning with fury and helplessness.

"We're going to stop him," Hades said quietly.

Eve's jaw tightened. "I am going too." 4

He stopped dead, but Eve was already moving, putting on the gear that Victoriana offered her. "We just have to hold them back for three hours," she murmured more to herself than to anyone else. She tightened the strap around her chest with a yank. "All hands on deck."

Victoriana looked at her, watching as this girl who had never been in the heat of a war would easily leave the comfort of the command center earlier than planned. 1

Hades could tell what his high gamma was thinking, it was plain on her face.

"Eve, we already strategized that you will come in after twenty-four hours to conserve your strength. You have donated a lot of blood so you can't strain yourself early," he protested, cupping her face. He would not order her to step down,

that would undermine her.

Her gaze softened. "Back then we didn't have contingency for mutant vines of death in the strategies. So if things don't go according to plan, which they barely ever do when war is involved, we regroup." There was not a single fleck or speckle of trepidation in her eyes. Not a hint of doubt but a gaze lit up by nothing but cold, hard, determination. "I will be okay."

Hades' fingers flexed as he looked down at her, his jaw grinding. "Be careful, Red,"

She nodded and then she turned on her heel. The helicopters were on the helipad, waiting. His gaze shifted back to the monitors displaying the Dawnstrike Division's status. Mildly put, it was a carnage even as Gallinti severed a thick vine, sap gushing out like blood, the vine only healed while the lurid liquid drowned more men.

Soon he heard the rotors whirling, fast and hard somehow in sync with his own pounding heart.

I pulled open a drawer, and my clammy hand gripped the neck of the bottle. The scent of blood hit before I even unclamped it.

I opened it and brought it to my lips, taking gulp after gulp until I swallowed air. 1

