

501 Sap

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Eve

The whirling blades of the chopper were deafening as we reached the command centre of the Dawnstrike division.

My comm crackled and I pressed it as a voice came in. "Reinforcements have reached and joined the Dawnstrike division, over." The voice informed.

"Understood, over," I replied.

My body recoiled where I sat suddenly as a stench assaulted my nose, so pungent I could have sworn I felt my nostrils shrink to avoid the smell.

"That's new," Victoriana said beside me. "They smell too."

I looked down from the chopper to see the carnage that we were now approaching and where the source of the malodor was. Bile rose quickly in my throat, and I had to swallow it down hard.

The no-man's-land below was a graveyard.

Bodies—Obsidian soldiers, ferals, twisted things that might have once been human—littered the scorched earth. But worse than the bodies were the vines. Thick, thorned tendrils writhed across the battlefield like living serpents, coiling around corpses, crushing soldiers mid-shift, dripping with sap that looked too much like blood.

And the smell.

Gods, the smell.

Rotting flesh mixed with something sickeningly sweet—like overripe fruit left to ferment in the sun. The sap. It was decomposing even as it oozed from severed vines, releasing a stench that made my eyes water.

"Luna," the pilot said, his voice tight. "We're approaching the LZ. Thirty seconds."

I nodded, forcing myself to breathe through my mouth.

Below, I could see Gallinti—barely. He was in his wolf form, massive and gray, tearing through a cluster of vines with his teeth. But he was slow. Injured. Exhausted. Around him, his soldiers fought desperately, some in human form with



blades, others shifted and snapping at the tendrils with their jaws.

But the vines kept coming.

And standing behind it all, pristine and untouched in a white suit that somehow had not a speck of blood on it, was Morrison.

My vision sharpened, narrowing on him.

The traitor.

The man who had sold Obsidian's secrets. Who had betrayed his own people. Who was standing there smiling as soldiers died.

Something cold and sharp settled in my chest.

"Victoriana," I said, my voice calm. Too calm.

"Luna?"

"When we land, you go for Morrison. I'll clear a path."

She looked at me, her amber eyes gleaming. "And if his vines get in the way?"

I smiled, and it wasn't kind.

"Then I'll rip them apart."

The chopper touched down with a jolt, the



landing skids scraping against the blood-soaked earth. The side door slid open, and the stench hit me full-force—thick, cloying, wrong.

I didn't hesitate.

I leapt out, my boots hitting the ground, and the moment my feet touched soil, I shifted.

The change ripped through me—faster than it had ever been before. Bones cracked and reformed, muscles stretched and expanded, fur erupted across my skin in a wave of raven black. The Bloodmoon's light washed over me, and I felt its power surge through my veins like fire.

My wolf was massive, and for a moment It felt like I could not carry my own weight

It was larger than any other on the field. Larger than I'd ever been before.

And under the Bloodmoon's red glow, I looked like something out of a nightmare.

I threw my head back and howled.

>"On your call," Rhea growled in my head.

The sound cut through the chaos—a long, piercing cry that echoed across the battlefield. Heads turned. Soldiers—both Obsidian and



Silverpine—froze for a heartbeat, staring.

Then I moved.

The world slowed around me.

I could see everything—every vine lashing out, every soldier stumbling, every drop of blood hitting the ground. My senses were sharper than they'd ever been. My body moved with a speed and precision that felt otherworldly.

A vine whipped toward me, thorns gleaming.

I dodged—so fast it didn't even graze my fur—and sank my teeth into it, tearing through the thick tendril like it was nothing more than grass. Sap exploded into my mouth, bitter and foul, but I didn't stop.

I ripped through another vine. And another. And another.

Soldiers were tangled in the tendrils, choking, bleeding. I dove toward them, my massive body shielding them as I tore the vines away. One soldier—a young gamma, barely older than Sophie—was being crushed, his ribs cracking under the pressure. 2

I bit down on the vine and yanked, my jaws powerful enough to snap it in half.

The soldier gasped, collapsing to the ground. I nudged him with my muzzle, and he scrambled to his feet, eyes wide with shock.

"Get to the medics!" I snarled—or tried to. It came out as a growl, but he understood.

He ran.

I turned back to the battlefield.

More vines. More soldiers trapped.

I moved through them like a storm—ripping, tearing, shredding. My claws tore through the tendrils like they were made of paper. My teeth snapped through them with ease. And every time a vine tried to grab me, I was already gone, moving too fast for it to catch.

I could feel soldiers clinging to my fur—wounded, desperate, trying to hold on as I carried them toward the Delta and medics at the edge of the field. I didn't slow down. I couldn't.

Behind me, Victoriana had landed and was cutting a path toward Morrison, her blades flashing silver in the red light.

Gallinti saw me and shifted back to human form, blood streaming from a gash across his chest.

"Luna!" he shouted, his voice hoarse. "The vines—they heal too fast! We can't—"

"I know!" I barked back, still in wolf form.
"Verdantin's coming! Hold the line!"

He nodded, gritting his teeth, and shifted back into his wolf.

The vines kept coming—faster now, thicker, as if sensing that we were gaining ground. They erupted from the soil in waves, lashing out with renewed fury. Every vine I tore through was replaced by two more. Every soldier I saved was immediately targeted again.

My muscles burned. My lungs screamed for air. But I didn't stop.

I couldn't stop.

Across the battlefield, Victoriana was a blur of silver and shadow, cutting her way toward Morrison with lethal precision. She was close—so close—but the vines seemed to know she was the threat. They converged on her, a writhing wall of thorns and sap.

She slashed through them, her blades coated in blood and green ichor, but there were too many.

"Victoriana!" I snarled, charging toward her.



But before I could reach her, Morrison's voice rang out across the battlefield—smooth, mocking, infuriating.

"Is this the best Obsidian has to offer?" he called, his tone almost bored. "A little girl playing Luna and a pack of mongrels?"

I skidded to a halt, my eyes locking on him.

He stood at the center of the vine growth, hands clasped behind his back, that pristine white suit still somehow untouched by the carnage. The two twisted gammas flanked him like statues, their vacant eyes staring at nothing.

Morrison smiled.

"You can't win, Luna," he said, and the title dripped with contempt. "You're a stain on your bloodline. A pretender. And when Darius is done with you, there won't be anything left of Obsidian but ash and memory."

Rage surged through me—hot, blinding, primal.

Rhea snarled in my head. Let me at him. Let me tear his throat out.

Not yet, I told her, though every instinct screamed to charge.

But Morrison wasn't done.

"Look at you," he continued, gesturing lazily at the battlefield. "So desperate. So weak. You think saving a few soldiers will change anything? You're just delaying the inevitable."

A vine lashed out at Gallinti, catching him off-guard. He yelped, twisting mid-air, but the tendril wrapped around his hind leg and yanked him to the ground.

"Gallinti!" Victoriana shouted, abandoning her advance on Morrison to sprint toward him.

No—

But she was too late.

The moment her boots hit the patch of ground where Gallinti had fallen, the earth shifted.

The soil wasn't soil at all—it was sap. Thick, viscous, pale green sap pooling like quicksand. And the moment Victoriana's weight pressed down, it grabbed her.

She sank.

Fast.

"Victoriana!" I roared, charging toward them.

Gallinti was already half-submerged, thrashing, his wolf form struggling against the sucking pull



of the sap. Victoriana tried to pull herself out, her hands clawing at the edges, but the more she moved, the deeper she sank.

The sap was drowning them.

I reached the edge of the pool and lunged, my jaws clamping around Gallinti's scruff. I pulled—hard—but the sap held him like a living thing, sucking him down with a force that made my teeth ache.

Victoriana's head dipped below the surface.

No.

I let go of Gallinti and dove for her, my claws digging into her armor, trying to haul her up. The sap clung to her, thick and sticky, pulling her down inch by inch.

My muscles screamed. My claws scraped against her chest plate, slipping.

I'm not strong enough—I

Then I heard them.

Footsteps. Dozens of them.

I looked up, and my heart lurched.

Gammas—Obsidian gammas, freshly healed by



the Deltas—were charging toward us. Some shifted into wolves, others stayed human with ropes and grappling hooks.

"Luna, hold on!" one of them shouted. ¹

They reached us in seconds. Two wolves bit down on Gallinti's legs while another looped a rope around Victoriana's torso. Together, we pulled.

The sap fought back, but there were too many of us now.

With a sickening schlurp, Gallinti came free, collapsing onto solid ground, gasping and retching. A moment later, Victoriana was hauled out, sap dripping from her hair and armor, coughing violently.

She was alive.

They were both alive.

I staggered back, panting, my limbs trembling with exhaustion.

But then I felt it—a shift in the air.

The vines were retreating.

All across the battlefield, the tendrils pulled back, slithering toward Morrison like serpents



returning to their master. They coiled around him in layers, thickening, twisting, until they formed a massive dome—impenetrable, thorned, pulsing with that same sickly green light.

Morrison's voice echoed from within, distorted but clear.

"Until next time, Luna."

I snarled, lunging toward the dome—

—but the vines lashed out, forcing me back. I snapped at them, tearing through two, three, but more replaced them instantly.

It was a stalemate.

Morrison and his twisted gammas were sealed inside. Untouchable.

And slowly, slowly, the dome began to sink into the ground, burrowing like a living thing.

"Luna, stop!" Victoriana rasped, grabbing my fur.

"You can't—he's retreating. Let him go."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to tear through that dome and rip Morrison apart.

But she was right.

The Silverpine forces were retreating too—

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pulling back into the tree line, dragging their wounded with them. The battlefield was emptying.

We'd survived.

Barely

I shifted back to human form, my legs shaking, my lungs burning. Blood and sap streaked my skin. My hair was matted with dirt and worse. 3

But I was alive.

"Get them to the medics," I said, my voice hoarse. "Now."

The gammas moved immediately, lifting Gallinti and Victoriana—both too weak to walk—and carrying them toward the medical tents at the edge of the field.

I followed, my eyes never leaving the spot where Morrison's dome had disappeared.

My comm crackled.

"Eve."

Hades's voice. 2

I pressed the receiver, my hand shaking. "I'm here."

A pause. Then, quietly: "Thank you."

My throat tightened.

"Just... stay alive, Red," he said. "Please."

I closed my eyes briefly. "You too."

Behind me, the medics were swarming Gallinti, cutting away his blood-soaked armor, checking his wounds. Sap had seeped into the gashes across his chest and legs, and he was coughing—wet, rattling coughs that sounded wrong. 2

"Sap in his lungs," one of the Deltas said grimly. "We need to flush it out or he'll drown from the inside."

Victoriana was in better shape, but barely. She sat on a cot, staring at her hands—still coated in green slime—her expression unreadable.

I sank down beside her, exhausted.

"We held," I said quietly.

She looked at me, her amber eyes sharp despite the exhaustion.

"We held," she agreed. "But Morrison's right about one thing."

I frowned. "What?"



"This was just the beginning."

I looked back at the battlefield—at the bodies,
the blood, the sap-soaked earth.

She was right. 1

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