

502 A Father's Hesitance

Shadowhunt 1

Then Felicia's finger tightened on the trigger again.

—and Montague moved.

Not away. Toward.

He lunged left, low and fast, decades of combat training overriding everything else. The shot cracked past his ear, so close he felt the heat of it, and then he was inside her guard, one hand slamming her rifle barrel upward. 1

"Felicia—"

She twisted, vicious and fast, driving her knee into his ribs. Pain exploded through his chest, but he didn't let go. His other hand caught her wrist, trying to wrench the weapon away.

"Don't—"

She headbutted him.

Stars burst across his vision. His grip loosened. She ripped free, stumbling back, blood streaming from her nose where it had connected with his forehead.



For a heartbeat, they stared at each other.

Father and daughter.

Both bleeding.

Around them, the woods had erupted into chaos. Silverpine gammas poured through the trees, and Montague's forces engaged—steel meeting steel, claws tearing into flesh. Gunfire cracked through the darkness. Someone screamed.

Felicia raised her rifle again.

Montague didn't.

"I won't fight you," he said quietly. He had not meant for the words to escape.

Her eyes widened momentarily with shock, softening before it blazed. "Then you'll die."

She fired.

Montague threw himself sideways, rolling behind a tree as the round splintered bark inches from his head. He came up into a crouch, breathing hard, pain lancing through his ribs.

He could hear Korvan shouting orders, his gammas moving with practiced efficiency. The Silverpine forces were pushing hard, trying to overwhelm them with numbers—

—and then the woods started killing them.

The first Silverpine gamma stepped wrong, his boot catching a tripwire Montague's forces had set after the feral attack. A spiked log swung down from the canopy, slamming into two soldiers at once. Bones crunched. Bodies flew.

Another gamma lunged at one of Montague's lieutenants—and fell screaming into a pit trap, impaled on sharpened stakes hidden beneath a layer of leaves.

A third tried to flank left and triggered a snare that yanked him off his feet, leaving him dangling upside-down, an easy target.

The Silverpine advance faltered.

Felicia's head whipped around, her expression darkening as she took in the carnage. Her forces were dying—not from Obsidian's gammas, but from the woods themselves.

"Fall back!" she snarled into her comm. "Regroup at grid eight-seven! Now!"

Her soldiers hesitated, caught between the enemy in front of them and the traps all around.

"Now!" Felicia roared.

They broke.

Not a rout—Felicia was too disciplined for that—but a fighting retreat, her forces disengaging in pairs, covering each other as they pulled back into the darkness.

Montague stepped out from behind the tree, rifle raised, watching them go.

He could have ordered his gammas to pursue. Could have chased them down, cut them apart while they ran.

But he didn't.

"Hold position," he said into his comm, his voice flat. "Let them go. We have men to tend to. Dead to count. We have crippled their forces. Let's prepare for the next wave."

Korvan appeared at his side, breathing hard, blood streaking his jaw. "Sir—we can finish them. They're vulnerable—"

"I said hold," Montague repeated, his tone leaving no room for argument. 1

Korvan's jaw tightened, but he nodded. "Understood."

Montague scanned the tree line. The Silverpine forces were ghosts now, melting into the shadows. And at the rear, just before she



vanished, Felicia turned back.

Their eyes met across the distance.

She didn't smile this time.

She just stared at him—cold, hard, unreadable.

Then she was gone.

The woods had fallen silent.

Montague stood in the center of the carnage, surrounded by bodies—ferals from the first wave, Silverpine gammas from the second. The air stank of blood and cordite and something worse, something that clung to the back of his throat and wouldn't let go.

Around him, his gammas were checking the dead, pulling their own wounded back toward the medical tents set up deeper in the woods. Someone was coughing wetly. Someone else was crying.

Korvan approached again, slower this time. "Casualties?"

"Three dead," Montague said quietly. "Seven wounded, two critical—severed limbs. The Deltas say regrowing the bones will take time and energy. Two and a half hours for each. The rest were flesh wounds."



Korvan's expression tightened. "We held."

"We held," Montague agreed.

But it didn't feel like a victory.

"Sir," Korvan said carefully, "the woman leading them. Is that—" He didn't bother completing the question.

Montague said nothing.

Korvan waited, then nodded slowly.

"Understood. I'll inform the division to rotate shifts. Two hours on, two hours off. We'll hold the perimeter until the return."

"Good."

Korvan hesitated, then asked, "Do you think they'll come back?"

Montague looked at the darkness where Felicia had disappeared.

"Yes," he said quietly. "She will."

But it wouldn't be for a long time. They had to reassess. Felicia would have to lick her wounds. Judging by how wholly defeated her gammas were in the battle, even with insider's knowledge she had underestimated their sync with the terrain and how they could have used it



as a resource.

But he had doubts if the western flank would be where they would concentrate their forces for this war. The foliage was far too dense and the territory, hard to navigate.

And with the thorough defeat, it would be solidified that Shadowhunt would only waste their forces. They would focus on other fronts.

Montague looked around at the bloody aftermath, most casualties being from the Silverpine side.

They would not be back in a while.

His comm cracked.

"Shadowhunt, this is Command. Status report."

Hades's voice—calm, measured, but with an edge that said he'd been watching the feeds, knew exactly how close it had been.

Montague keyed his comm, his gaze still fixed on the tree line where Felicia had vanished.

"Shadowhunt holding. Two waves repelled. First wave—ferals, sixty-plus neutralised. Second wave—Silverpine gamma assault force,



approximately forty to fifty combatants. They retreated after taking heavy losses from terrain traps."

A pause. Then: "Casualties on your side?"

"Three KIA (KIA- Killed in action) . Seven wounded, two critical. Deltas are working on them now." Montague's jaw tightened. "Estimated two and a half hours for limb regeneration on the critical cases."

"Understood." Another pause. Montague could hear voices in the background. Then Hades again: "The assault was led by—"

"Yes," Montague interrupted quietly.

Silence on the other end.

Montague closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, his voice was flat, emotionless. "She's with them. Fully committed. Leading their forces. She won't be a problem for Shadowhunt going forward—they'll redirect to softer targets. The western flank is too defensible. Darius won't waste resources here."

"Are you—" Hades stopped himself. Started again. "Can you continue to hold your position?"

But Montague could hear the question he



wouldn't ask "Will your emotion cloud your judgement?"

"Yes, we can hold position."

"Montague—"

"I can hold," Montague said, his tone sharper than he intended. He forced himself to breathe, to steady. "Shadowhunt is secure. We have the advantage here. Terrain, traps, discipline. They won't try this front again. Not for a while."

A long pause.

Then Hades said quietly, "Understood. If you need relief—"

"I don't."

"—or if the situation changes, you report immediately. That's an order."

Montague's jaw worked. "Understood."

"Dawnstrike is under heavy assault," Hades continued, his tone shifting back to tactical. "Morrison's deployed twisted gammas and weaponized vines. Eve and Victoriana are en route. We've identified a potential countermeasure—Verdantin, an herbicide. Thea's synthesizing it now. ETA (Estimated time of arrival) three hours."



Montague filed the information away. "Do you need reinforcements?"

"Negative. Conserve your forces. You've done your part. Hold the line and rest your people. The next sixty hours are going to be hell."

"Copy that. Shadowhunt out."

The line went silent.

Montague lowered his hand, still gripping the comm. Around him, his gammas moved like ghosts through the carnage—dragging bodies, securing the perimeter, murmuring quiet words to the wounded.

Korvan reappeared, wiping blood from his hands. "Command?"

"Dawnstrike's getting hit hard. Twisted gammas, vines—something new. Luna's deploying."

Korvan's brows rose. "The Luna's going into combat?"

"Apparently." Montague's gaze drifted back to the darkness. "Hades says we're to hold position and rest. They don't expect another assault on this front for a while."

"Makes sense," Korvan said. "We bloodied them



badly. They'll lick their wounds and try somewhere easier."

"That's the assessment."

Korvan studied him for a moment, then said carefully, "You should rest too, sir. You took a beating."

Montague touched his ribs—bruised, possibly cracked—and winced. "I'm fine. It will heal like normal. It is only a flesh wound." But with the little energy, he had felt, his body's cellular regeneration would be slower. But the adrenaline pumping through his vein might just aid. Might.

"With respect, you're not. And if she comes back —"

"She won't," Montague said flatly. "Not for hours. Maybe days. And when she does, I'll be ready." 2

Korvan didn't look convinced, but he nodded. "I'll set the watch rotation. Two on, two off. We'll keep thermals running and scouts at the perimeter."

"Good. And Korvan—"

"Sir?"



Montague met his eyes. "Make sure the wounded are priority. I don't care if we have to pull every Delta from the other divisions. No one dies because we didn't have enough healers."

Korvan's expression softened slightly.
"Understood."

He turned to go, then hesitated. "Sir, if I may—"
"Speak."

"You didn't fail her." Korvan's voice was quiet but firm. "Whatever she's become, whatever choices she made—that's on her. Not you." 1

Montague said nothing, but clenched his jaw as it began sinking in against his will that one of them would have to die in this war. One of them will be the other's killer. One will be childless, the other without a father. He doubted she saw him as a father, but the heart was a treacherous organ: forcing you to feel, replaying memories of the past, one would rather douse in diesel and set on fire. 1

Korvan waited a moment longer, then nodded and walked away.

Montague stood alone in the clearing, surrounded by the dead.



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He thought of Danielle—her smile, her laugh, the way she used to tease him about his seriousness. He thought of Felicia as a child, clinging to his hand, asking him to promise he'd always play with her.

Always, he'd said.

He looked down at his hands. They were shaking. ¹

He clenched them into fists until they stopped.

Then he turned and walked toward the command post, leaving the bodies behind.

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