



503 Canisters

(65 hours and fifty minutes) 1

65:50:00

Dawnstrike

The chopper in the distance caught Eve's ear instantly. After waiting for almost four hours—coordinating the healing of the injured based on priority, recording deaths, collecting bodies, tagging them, and of course restructategizing with Victoriana on how they were going to administer the platinum-infused herbicide for maximum effectiveness—they had finally arrived.

She had grown impervious to the atrocious odor of the sap that still littered no-man's land. She exchanged a wordless glance with Victoriana. They stepped out of the command post, the casualty report still weighing a ton in her hand.

The deafening sound of the incoming chopper drowned out the groaning and howling of injured gammas as it approached.

Eve shielded her eyes against the downdraft, watching the bird descend—careful, precise, avoiding the patches of sap that still bubbled and



oozed across the scorched earth. The pilot was good. Had to be, to land in this hellscape.

The skids touched down fifty meters out, and before the rotors had fully stopped, the side door slid open.

Soldiers emerged—two squads of fresh reinforcements, weapons ready, eyes scanning the carnage with barely concealed horror. They'd heard about Morrison's vines. Hearing and seeing were different things.

Behind them, carried carefully, were the crates.

The Verdantin.

Victoriana moved first, striding toward the chopper with the efficiency of someone who'd done this a thousand times. Eve followed, the casualty report still clutched in her hand.

One of the soldiers—a senior gamma—stepped forward and saluted. "Luna. High Gamma. Thirty canisters as requested. Twenty in liquid form, ten vaporized for aerial dispersal."

"Aerial's not an option," Victoriana said flatly, gesturing to the remains of a drone half-melted in blackened vines at the edge of the field. "Vines will shred anything that flies low enough."



"Understood, ma'am. The liquid canisters can be deployed manually or via ground-based launchers."

Eve nodded, scanning the crates. Each canister was about the size of a fire extinguisher, matte gray, with bright yellow warning labels: VERDANTIN - TOXIC TO ORGANIC MATTER - HANDLE WITH EXTREME CAUTION.

"Get them distributed," Eve ordered. "Priority to those on the front line. Make sure they understand—pop the seal, aim for the vines, and stay upwind."

"Yes, ma'am."

The soldiers moved quickly, hauling crates toward the staging area where Dawnstrike's battered forces were regrouping.

Eve turned toward the Delta tent—a large canvas structure near the rear, glowing faintly from the bioluminescent healing wards inside.

And there, stepping out into the red light of the Bloodmoon, was Gallinti.

He looked wrong. Pale. Moving stiffly. But alive.

Relief hit Eve like a punch to the chest.



Gallinti saw her and straightened, trying to mask the wince. "Luna."

"Gallinti." Eve closed the distance between them, her eyes sweeping over him. "You should still be resting."

"I'm fine," he said, his voice rough. "Deltas cleared me. Said the sap's out of my system."

"That doesn't mean you're ready to fight."

His jaw tightened. "With respect, ma'am, my division is barely holding. I'm not lying in a tent while—"

A crack split the air.

Eve's head whipped around.

The vine dome—the massive, writhing structure Morrison had retreated into hours ago—was moving.

Not sinking.

Expanding.

"Get down!" Victoriana shouted.

A vine lashed out—thick as a tree trunk, lined with thorns the size of daggers—and slammed toward the Delta tent.

Toward the wounded.

Toward Gallinti.

Eve didn't think.

She shifted.

The change ripped through her in a heartbeat—
bones cracking, muscles expanding, black fur
erupting across her skin. The world sharpened.
Slowed.

And she moved.

Her massive wolf form lunged between the vine
and the tent, jaws clamping down on one of the
Verdantin canisters mid-leap. The metal canister
crunched between her teeth—

—and she slammed into the vine.

The canister popped like a blister, spraying thick
green liquid across the writhing tendril.

The effect was instantaneous.

The vine shrieked, so the ones around it—a
sound that shouldn't have been possible,
high-pitched and agonized—and began to
wither. The green turned black. The thorns
crumbled. The flesh shriveled, collapsing in on
itself like paper in a fire.



In three seconds, the vines were dead, it was like one vines spread the Verdantin like a disease.

Eve landed in a crouch, the ruined canister falling from her jaws, she grew light headed for a second.

Behind her, soldiers stared.

"It works," Victoriana breathed.

Then the dome exploded.

Vines erupted outward in every direction—dozens of them, hundreds, a writhing forest of thorned death. And standing at the center, stepping through the carnage like a king surveying his domain, was Morrison. 1

But he wasn't alone.

The two twisted gammas flanked him—hulking, malformed things that barely looked human anymore. Their skin had a greenish tint, veins bulging black beneath the surface. Their eyes were vacant. Dead. Fully.

Whatever happened when they were shelled in that dome...

They were growing.

Vines sprouted from their backs, their arms,



their mouths, turning them into walking nightmares.

"Verdantin!" Eve roared—or tried to. It came out as a howl that shook the air.

Soldiers scrambled, grabbing canisters, popping seals. Liquid sprayed. Vines withered. The battlefield became chaos—gammas dodging, slashing, drowning vines in herbicide while Morrison's twisted soldiers charged.

Eve shifted back to human, grabbed two canisters, and ran.

Victoriana was already engaged, shifting only her hands and moving between vines, spraying Verdantin like she had been trained for it. One of the twisted gammas lunged at her—she sidestepped, slashed its throat, and doused it in herbicide.

It collapsed, convulsing, vines shriveling from its body as it died.

"Focus fire on the plants!" Victoriana shouted.

"The gammas are secondary!"

But the vines kept coming.

And then Morrison moved.



He didn't charge. Didn't attack.

He raised his hand—and the vines responded.

They converged on him, wrapping around his arms, his legs, his torso. He screamed—not in pain, but in ecstasy—as his skin began to change.

Turning green.

"No," Eve whispered.

Morrison's body convulsed. His muscles bulged. Thorns erupted from his shoulders, his spine. His eyes turned black, then green, glowing with sickly light.

He was becoming the vines.

"Kill him!" Gallinti roared, firing round after round into Morrison's transforming body.

The bullets hit. Sank into green flesh.

Morrison laughed.

And then he attacked.

Vines exploded from his body—thicker, faster, stronger than before. They moved with intelligence, dodging Verdantin sprays, crushing soldiers, hunting.

Eve dodged, rolled, came up spraying. A vine



withered. Another took its place.

"We're running out!" someone screamed.

Eve's heart sank.

She glanced at the staging area. The crates were nearly empty.

Four canisters left.

Out of thirty.

"Fall back!" Victoriana shouted. "Regroup at secondary line!"

Soldiers retreated, dragging wounded, covering each other. Eve and Victoriana held the rear, spraying the last of their Verdantin to keep the vines at bay.

Morrison advanced slowly, his green form towering, vines writhing around him like a crown.

"You can't win," he said, his voice distorted, echoing. "I am the forest now. I am inevitable." 4

Eve raised her last canister.

Morrison smiled.

And then he stopped.



The vines pulled back, coiling around him, forming a new dome—thicker this time, layered, impenetrable.

"Another time, Luna," his voice echoed from within. "Another time."

The dome solidified.

And went still.

63:20:00

Silence fell over the battlefield.

Eve stood panting, covered in sap and blood, the empty canister in her hand.

Around her, soldiers collapsed, exhausted. Some were crying. Some were just staring.

Victoriana appeared at her side, breathing hard. "We held."

"Barely," Eve said.

"It's still a hold."

Eve looked at the vine dome. It was smaller this time—Morrison had pulled back, conserved his forces.

Smart.



"He'll come again," Eve said quietly.

"I know."

"And we're almost out of Verdantin."

Victoriana's jaw tightened. "We'll figure something out. We always do."

Eve wanted to believe that.

But her head was swimming. The world tilted slightly, just for a moment.

She caught herself, forced her legs to steady.

Adrenaline. Just adrenaline wearing off.

"Eve?" Victoriana's hand was on her arm. "You okay?"

"Fine," Eve said quickly. "Just tired."

Victoriana didn't look convinced.

But before she could press, Gallinti approached, limping, his face pale. "Casualties?"

"I don't know yet," Eve said. "But not as many as before. The Verdantin leveled the playing field."

Gallinti nodded, his expression still grim. "We need to regroup. Set a new perimeter. Get the wounded stabilized."



"Agreed." Eve forced herself to focus. "Victoriana, coordinate with the Deltas. Gallinti, pull back anyone who's been on the line more than four hours. We rotate now, before he comes back."

They both nodded and moved off.

Eve stood alone for a moment, swaying slightly.

The dizziness was getting worse.

She pressed a hand to her temple, forced herself to breathe.

Not now. Not yet.

She keyed her comm. "Dawnstrike to Command. Second engagement with Morrison. We held, but at cost. Verdantin effective but almost expended. But we will find a way." She eyed, Morrison's division across the no man's land.

Hades's voice crackled back. "Acknowledged. How bad?"

Eve looked at the bodies. The blood. The soldiers barely standing. It could have been worse.

"Bad," she said quietly. "But we can hold."

"Hold the line, Red. Reinforcements are coming."

"Copy. Dawnstrike out."



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+5

Eve lowered her hand.

The world tilted again. 3

She gritted her teeth and walked toward the command post.

One foot in front of the other.

She could rest later.

After Morrison was dead. 1

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