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62:06:45 1

Command Center

It was quiet on all fronts. Shadowhunt had defeated two waves, Dawnstrike, three and by what he could see from where he stood, it would soon be four. Morrison's vines were still writhing—fewer now, less intimidating, but still moving. He would attack again soon. It was only a matter of time.

The hum of the computer and the glow of the monitors. The images and videos drowned in a red haze that Hades had already grown accustomed to. The red glow was everywhere, so much so that it didn't matter anymore.

The other fronts, Ironwall and Frostfang remained on high alert despite the lack of action. Darius was saving those fronts for later. Building tension. Waiting for exhaustion to set in.

Aegis had also reported no combat. The only issue worth noting had been Ellen's health but the shield had still stayed stable.

For a breath of time, there was peace. Perfect,

loaded peace. 3

Hades zoomed into Delta's tent where Eve remained, refusing to rest. She had involved herself in aiding with healing and wrapping up the wounds of the injured Gammas.

He knew there was no point in telling her to rest.

The gnawing in his chest had not relented since the moment she deployed herself. It was longing, he knew that because it had become as familiar as his own pulse but somehow he felt like it was more than that. 1

Perhaps it was the adrenaline—the constant edge of violence—that made the feeling impossible to ignore.

The stale smell of coffee permeated the air, mixing the odour of sweat and the sour tang of tension that never seemed to let go of the space.

"Alpha, you should go rest," One of the officers offered, ripping Hades out of his thoughts. "We will keep watch."

He glanced at the empty vials of blood in the trash bin. He'd been preparing for the inevitable—the moment Darius's vampires would take to the skies and he'd have to meet them in the air.

Conserving his strength for that fight.

This time it would not be one vampire, they would be numerous. So Hades knew that he ought to rest even for a little while, but he could not for the life of him close his eyes.

His gaze shifted to Dawnstrike again, to the Delta's tent and he shook his head. "I will patrol."

He wanted to go there, to Dawnstrike, to her, pull her into his arms, and demand that she rest. He had watched her fight for hours, the longest hours of his life.

He could fly there.

But he wouldn't.

She had chosen to deploy and fight and help.

Like the Luna that she was. It was a dagger between the ribs to watch.

So instead he stepped out, walked around the perimeter even as the gnawing in his chest turned to stinging. Telling himself that it was worry.

It was only worry. 2

60:56:30

Dawnstrike

Eve was up the moment she heard the crack of the first vine. She didn't wait. Neither did the others. Victoriana was already coordinating, positioning gammas to minimise casualties, but Eve knew where she needed to be.

Front and centre.

She shifted mid-sprint—the change tearing through her in a heartbeat. Bones snapped and reformed, muscles expanded, black fur erupted across her skin. Her wolf was massive, dwarfing every other lycan on the field, and under the Bloodmoon's red glow, she looked like vengeance incarnate.

The vine dome exploded.

Tendrils erupted outward in every direction—thick, writhing, thorned death. One whipped toward a cluster of soldiers. Eve intercepted it, jaws snapping down, tearing through the vine. Green sap sprayed across her muzzle, bitter and foul.

Another vine lashed toward the Delta tent.

Eve was already moving—leaping, slamming into the tendril, driving it into the ground. She bit down, ripping, and the vine withered.



But more kept coming.

Morrison stepped through the carnage, flanked by his two twisted soldiers. They were worse than before—bigger, greener, vines growing from their backs and arms like parasitic growths. Their eyes were glazed, empty.

And Morrison—

Morrison had changed.

His skin had taken on a sickly green hue, veins bulging black beneath the surface. Thorns jutted from his shoulders and spine. Vines wrapped around his arms like living armour, and when he moved, they moved with him—extensions of his body.

He raised a hand, and every vine on the battlefield responded—converging on him, sinking into his flesh, merging. 1

"Still fighting?" Morrison's voice was distorted, layered with something that sounded like wind through trees. "Still hoping?"

"Always," Eve snarled—or tried to. It came out as a growl that shook the air.

Behind her, Victoriana appeared at the command post entrance, eyes scanning the battlefield with

tactical vigilance.

"We can't get through the vines!" one of the gammas shouted. "Even with Verdantin, he regenerates too fast! He is putting in all he has. He won't let us have an opening."

Eve shifted back to her form, breathing hard. Blood streaked her arms from where thorns had grazed her. "Then we don't try to get through."

Victoriana's eyes sharpened. "What are you thinking?"

Eve looked at the staging area—at the four remaining Verdantin canisters. Four. That was all they had left.

An idea formed. It was desperate and risky but it was all her mind could conjure up in the moment.

"We cluster them together," Eve said. "Add explosives. Create a bomb big enough that Morrison can't regenerate from it."

Gallinti approached, rifle slung across his back, face pale, brow creased. "That'll use everything we have. If it doesn't work—"

"It'll work," Eve said. "But someone has to draw him out first. Pull the vines away from his centre

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so the blast hits him, not just his outer defences."

Silence fell.

Everyone understood what that meant.

"I'll do it," Gallinti said immediately.

"No." Eve's voice was firm. "I'm faster in wolf form. Stronger. I can keep him engaged long enough." Gallinti was still weak from his injuries, he would be torn to shreds.

Victoriana's jaw tightened. "And get clear before detonation?"

Eve met her eyes. "That's the plan."

"Eve—"

"It's the only way." Eve turned to Gallinti. "Rig the explosives. I'll give you the opening. When I howl, you detonate. Understood?" 3

Gallinti hesitated, then nodded. "Understood." 1

