

532 Charge!

For a single heartbeat, the entire battlefield froze again. Every wolf, everyone, every conscious being within sight of that fallen form went still, staring at the broken thing that had just saved them all. 1

Behind Malik's defensive formation, the Silverpine Alpha stood protected by the wall of his own wolves, James and Felicia flanking him on either side. All three of them were breathing hard, faces pale but unharmed, shielded by the dozens of bodies that had burned in their place. Malik's eyes were locked on the fallen form, his expression unreadable, and when he finally spoke his voice carried across the sudden silence with cold authority.

"Regroup," he ordered, already turning away from the smoking corpse as though it were nothing more than an inconvenience. "Reform the lines. We finish this."

But his forces were slower to respond now. The wolves that remained—those that hadn't been incinerated or scattered—moved with less certainty, their formations loose and disorganized, and more than one gamma kept

glancing back at the charred body lying in the dirt as though they couldn't quite process what they'd just witnessed.

On Obsidian's side of the battlefield, Kael and Victoriana had finally managed to drag Eve behind the relative safety of a collapsed section of the defense. Kael's entire body was shaking with exhaustion, his muscles screaming in protest, but he forced himself to shift back to human long enough to check Eve's breathing.

Shallow. Too shallow. But steady.

"Stay with her," he rasped at Victoriana, his voice barely more than a croak. "I'm going back for—"

Movement caught his eye.

Across the scorched earth, near where the three Prime Ferals had buried him under their combined weight, Silas was emerging from the pile of bodies. His fur was matted with blood—some his own, most not—and he was limping badly on his left foreleg, but he was moving. He shook himself once, hard, dislodging the corpse of a Silverpine gamma that had been draped across his shoulders, and his eyes swept across the battlefield with the methodical assessment of a warrior who'd seen too many wars to let shock slow him down.

And then his gaze landed on the smoking form lying in the center of the camp.

He went still.

For a moment he just stared, his body frozen mid-step, and even from this distance Kael could see the way Silas's ears flattened against his skull, the way his tail dropped, the way every line of his body radiated something that looked almost like recognition.

Then Silas was moving.

He limped across the battlefield with single-minded determination, ignoring the chaos still swirling around him, ignoring the Silverpine wolves beginning to regroup, ignoring everything except that charred, broken thing lying motionless in the dirt. When he reached it he stopped, lowering his head to sniff carefully at what remained, and even from fifty feet away Kael could see the way Silas's entire body went rigid.

The massive cream wolf shifted back to human in a blur of motion, and when Silas knelt beside the body his hands were shaking so badly he had to clench them into fists to keep them steady. His face had gone gray, his eyes wide and

horrified as he took in the full extent of the damage, and for several long seconds he just stared, his mouth working soundlessly as though his brain couldn't quite form the words for what he was seeing.

"Fuck," he finally whispered, and his voice cracked on the words. "What the fuck."

There was no skin left. None. What remained was charred black, the flesh burned away completely to reveal bone that looked less like calcium and more like charcoal, brittle and fragile and wrong. The face was unrecognizable, the features melted into something that barely looked there, and where the eyes should have been there were only empty sockets, dark and weeping. The hair had burned away entirely, leaving only a scorched scalp that cracked like dried earth. The hands were twisted claws of blackened bone. 1

It looked like a corpse that had been left in a fire for days. Like something that should have been dead hours ago. Like something that couldn't possibly be alive.

The chest moved.

Just once. A shallow, rattling inhale that barely

lifted the ruined ribs, so faint that Silas almost missed it.

But he didn't.

"Oh fuck," he breathed, and his hands hovered helplessly over the body, terrified to touch, terrified not to. "Oh fuck, you're still—" His voice broke. "You're still breathing."

He looked up wildly, scanning the battlefield for help, for medics, for anyone, and when he opened his mouth to shout his voice came out raw and desperate.

"MEDIC! I need a medic here now! She's—" He choked on the words. "She's still alive! Someone get the fuck over here!"

Footsteps thundered toward him—Deltas, responding to the urgency in his voice—but Silas didn't wait for them. He couldn't leave her lying in the dirt like discarded waste, couldn't let her stay exposed and vulnerable while Silverpine's forces regrouped for another assault.

Very, very carefully, he slid his arms beneath the charred body. The bones felt impossibly light, impossibly fragile, like they might crumble to ash at the slightest pressure, and he forced himself to breathe slowly, steadily, as he lifted



what remained of the person into his arms.

She weighed almost nothing.

That terrified him more than anything else.

Silas rose to his feet, cradling the ruined body against his chest with the same careful reverence he might show a holy relic, and he could feel the faint, stuttering beat of her heart against his forearm. Still alive. Still fighting. After everything her body had been through, after literally burning herself from the inside out to save them all, some stubborn core of her refused to die.

"Hold on," he whispered, and he didn't care that his voice was shaking, didn't care that tears were cutting tracks through the dirt and blood on his face. "Just hold on. Help is coming."

The charred mouth fell open slightly, as though trying to speak, but no sound emerged. Only a faint wheeze of air, hot against Silas's chest, and then even that faded into silence.

But the heart kept beating.

Weak. Irregular. Barely there.

But beating.



Silas turned and began making his way toward the medical tents at the rear of the camp, moving as quickly as he dared, and with every step he could feel more pieces of charred skin flaking away from the body in his arms, crumbling to dust and scattering in his wake like macabre snow.

Behind him, the battle was beginning to shift again. Malik's forces were regrouping, James and Felicia barking orders to reform the lines, but the coordination was gone now, the perfect discipline that had nearly overwhelmed Obsidian shattered by their sacrifice. The Silverpine wolves moved sluggishly, uncertainty written in every hesitant step, and more than one kept glancing toward the retreating figure of Silas carrying that impossible burden.

The woman who had burned like the sun itself to save them.

The woman who had rained hellfire on their enemies.

The woman who had given everything.

And Silas, limping through the carnage with her weightless body cradled against his chest, could only pray that everything would be enough. 3

532 Charge!

"Charge!" Malik ordered again.

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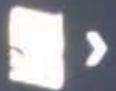
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