

535 Running Dogs

Beyond No Man's Land 1

"This cannot be fucking happening!" James growled, his heart beating out of his chest. Malik could not be defeated. He had been operating for centuries. Why did it have to be this particular war, while he fought by his side, that fate decided to intervene and let him fall? James could not wrap his mind around the turn of events. One second, they were close, finally overwhelming the Obsidian gammas, only for this—

He dared a look behind him, hoping it was all a cruel hallucination and not reality deciding to crash into carefully laid plans. He had sacrificed everything to be Malik's right hand man. His love, his family, his morality, only to be on the side that loses. 2

"Stop looking behind you!" Felicia snarled, yanking him back into the moment just as they reached a copse of trees. "Just keep running. They can't get their hands on us. Create as much distance as you can so they can't track us down."

The first question that popped into his mind

was, "Then what?" He looked ahead, into the land just past the border that they were threading. Would they enter Silverpine again and become fugitives? Would they be dodging capture for the rest of their ruined lives? What about the luxury and power he had been promised, the whores he was owed, the portal to the other worlds that he had been exposed to, the other world domination he was told he would lead? The other realms he would explore and own? 3

He shook his head, as if he could shake off the truth about what his fate had become. But the truth was not going away. It stared him right in the face and cackled at him.

"James!" Felicia's voice cut through his spiral. She had stopped running, her chest heaving, sweat and blood mixing on her skin. "Get your head out of your ass. We need a plan."

"A plan?" He laughed. Bitter. Sharp. "What plan? Malrik is dead. The compulsion broke. Every wolf we marked is free and they all know our faces." He gestured wildly back toward Dawnstrike. "We're fucked, Felicia. Completely, utterly fucked."

"We're not fucked if we get to Silverpine first." Her eyes were hard, calculating. Already moving

past the loss, already trying to salvage something from the wreckage. "We get to the palace. Secure what resources we can. The vaults, the weapons caches, the—"

"The what?" James cut her off. "The empire that no longer exists? The wolves who were only loyal because of compulsion? They're free now, Felicia. Free. And they're going to remember every order we gave, every punishment we dealt out, every—"

A sound cut him off.

Footsteps. Heavy. Multiple sets. Coming from the direction of Dawnstrike.

They both went still.

"Move," Felicia whispered, already backing deeper into the trees. "Now."

They ran again. Branches whipped at their faces, roots threatened to trip them, but they didn't slow. Couldn't slow. Behind them, the footsteps grew louder. Closer.

Not pursuit. Hunt.

James's wolf surged forward, demanding to be released, but he shoved it down. Shifting would make them easier to track, easier to identify.

They needed to stay human, needed to—

A figure stepped out from behind a tree directly in their path.

They skidded to a stop.

It was a Silverpine gamma. Young. Maybe twenty-five. His neck still bore the faded mark of compulsion, the skin there raw and red where the magic had burned out. He looked at them with eyes that held no anger, no rage. Just cold, empty recognition.

"You," he said quietly. "You were there. When Malrik marked me. You held me down."

James took a step back. "Listen, we were just following orders. We didn't have a choice. Malrik controlled—"

"Liar." The word was flat. Final. "I remember. I remember everything. Every order you gave. Every time you smiled while doing it." The gamma's hands curled into fists. "I remember you enjoyed it."

More figures emerged from the trees. Five. Ten. Twenty. All Silverpine. All freed. All bearing the same raw marks on their necks.

All looking at James and Felicia with the same



cold recognition.

Felicia's hand went to her weapon, but one of the wolves—an older female, her face scarred—shook her head slowly.

"Don't." Her voice was almost gentle. "You'll only make it worse."

James's mouth went dry. His heart, which had been pounding with exertion, now hammered with pure terror. "Wait. Wait, we can—we can explain. We can make this right. We have information, we know things about Malrik's—"

"We don't want information," the young gamma said, taking a step forward. Then another. The circle of freed wolves tightened. "We want justice."

Felicia shifted. Fast. Desperate. Her wolf form erupted and she lunged for the gap between two wolves, trying to break through, trying to—

Three wolves tackled her mid-leap. She hit the ground hard, snarling and snapping, but they held her down. Pinned her.

James tried to run.

Made it three steps before his legs were swept out from under him. He hit the dirt face-first,

tasted blood, and then hands—so many hands—were grabbing him, holding him, forcing him to his knees.

The young gamma crouched down in front of him, studying his face with detached curiosity. "You know what the worst part was?" he asked conversationally. "It wasn't the pain of the marking. It wasn't even losing control of my body." He leaned closer. "It was knowing what I was doing. Watching myself kill people I cared about. And not being able to stop." 1

James opened his mouth. To apologize. To beg. To offer something, anything that might make this stop.

The gamma didn't let him speak.

"I had a sister," he said quietly. "Compulsion made me kill her. Made me tear out her throat while she begged me to stop." His eyes never left James's face. "You watched that happen. You laughed."

"I didn't—I wasn't—"

"You laughed." The gamma stood. Looked at the other freed wolves. "What do we do with them?"

The scarred female spoke first. "Obsidian will

want to question them. They were Malik's lieutenants. They might have information about —"

"Fuck Obsidian." Another voice. Male. Rough with barely controlled rage. "They're ours. We were the ones enslaved. We decide." 2

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the group.

James's bladder released. The warmth spread down his legs, soaking through his pants, and he didn't even care. Couldn't care. Because he understood now, with crystal clarity, exactly how this was going to end.

Felicia was still struggling, still snarling, refusing to accept what was coming. But James had already given up. Already accepted it. 1

This was justice.

And they had earned every second of it.

The young gamma looked down at him one last time. "Any last words?"

James thought of all the things he could say. Apologies that would mean nothing. Explanations that would change nothing. Pleas that would save nothing.

In the end, he said nothing.

Just closed his eyes.

And waited for it to be over.

"Wake the hell up!" The slap landed on his face, hot and stinging as his eyes snapped open. 3

His eyes darted around the space, only to see no one else but Felicia. No Silverpine gammas, nobody but her still looking at him with a disgust so visceral that it polluted the air of their hiding place. He didn't even remember when they got there. 1

"Get a grip, we are screwed enough already. If you piss yourself like your old man, I am leaving you to die here."

James stared at her.

The only person he had left.

His mind worked through it. Fast. Desperate. Obsidian would be hunting them. The freed Silverpine wolves would want blood. There was nowhere to run, no one to turn to, no resources left to bargain with.

Except one.



Felicia was wanted for both war crimes and treason.

Felicia was valuable.

He could give her up. Trade her for immunity. For leniency. For a chance—any chance—at survival. 1

The thought crystallized into decision in less than a second.

James lunged. 1

His fist caught her across the jaw before she could react. Her head snapped to the side, blood spraying from split lip, and she went down hard. He was on top of her before she could recover, his hands closing around her throat, his weight pinning her down.

"You bitch!" he screamed into her face, spit flying. "You pathetic, traitorous bitch!"

Felicia's eyes went wide. Shock. Confusion. Then rage. She bucked under him, trying to throw him off, her hands clawing at his wrists. But he was bigger. Stronger. A man with the weight advantage and the element of surprise. 1

He squeezed harder.

"You betrayed your pack!" His voice cracked, pitched high with hysteria. "Obsidian was YOUR pack! You turned on them for power and look where it got you! Look where it got us!" He laughed. Wild. Manic. The sound of a mind that had finally snapped. "What goes around comes around, Felicia! What goes around—"

Her knee came up, slamming into his groin. Not hard enough to make him let go, but enough to loosen his grip. She gasped in a breath, her face purple, veins standing out on her forehead.

"James—you fucking—coward—"

"Coward?" He squeezed again, watching her face turn darker. "I'm a survivor! I'm going to give you up! Going to march right into Obsidian territory and hand you over! Tell them everything! Every order you gave, every wolf you marked, every—" His laugh turned into a sob. "They'll give me immunity. Leniency. They'll let me live if I give them you!"

Felicia's struggles were weakening. Her eyes starting to roll back. Her clawing hands losing strength.

James leaned closer, his tears dripping onto her face. "I'm sorry," he whispered, and meant it. "I'm

so sorry, but I want to live—"

Something grabbed him from above.

Not hands. Claws. Sharp and cold and impossibly strong, closing around his shoulders and lifting. His hands were ripped away from Felicia's throat as he was hauled straight up into the air, his feet leaving the ground, and for a moment all he could process was the wrongness of the angle, the impossible strength required to lift a grown man like he weighed nothing.

He looked up.

And froze.

The vampire holding him had crimson eyes that glowed in the dim light of their hiding place. Pale skin. Dark hair. Features that James recognized even through the haze of panic because he'd seen them before—in briefings, in reports, in Malik's furious rants about the one Alpha who'd refused to fall in line.

Hades.

The Obsidian pack Alpha.

"No," James breathed. "No, no, no—"

Hades looked down at him with eyes that held

no warmth, no mercy, no humanity. Just cold assessment. The way a scientist might look at a particularly interesting insect before pinning it to a board.

Then those eyes shifted to Felicia, who was still on the ground, gasping and coughing, one hand at her bruised throat.

Hades's other hand—the one not holding James—reached down and grabbed Felicia by the back of her neck. Lifted her just as easily. Held them both dangling in the air like children caught misbehaving.

"Found you," Someone above said, someone riding on the Vampire Alpha. "Let's go back."

James's bladder released for real this time. The warmth spread down his legs, soaking through his already-filthy pants, and he didn't even have the capacity to feel shame about it anymore. Because he understood now. Understood with perfect, crystal clarity.

The nightmare hadn't been a vision of the future.

It had been a preview.

And the real thing was going to be so much worse.

