

19 | Sisterly Love

The days go by in the blink of an eye, and soon a week has passed. We repaired the house to the best of our abilities, although the holes are still in the walls and the claw marks in the floors.

We still sleep in separate rooms, although there's an unspoken discomfort there. Riot's wolf has calmed down substantially, making the nights more peaceful. The days have been spent fixing the house. Now it finally looks lived in and not abandoned, nor the target of a tornado.

I've grown used to random, inconsistent acts of affection from Riot. We still aren't close physically, but he's stopped fighting it as much. On any occasion it's become normal for him to touch me in the smallest of ways. Like appearing out of the blue just to put his hand on my arm, or hovering near me while I do whatever task is at hand.

If Alpha Andre or his son are angry at my disappearance, they haven't made it known. Which has only puts me more on edge. With every noise I hear outside I expect to see the door I just put back up to come crashing down again. But it hasn't yet.

My dreams have become hell and it's always the same one. Where I'm back on Visari territory with faceless people staring at me silently. Every time it occurs, I resort to the cigarettes to calm me down. I don't tell Riot; about the dreams or the smoking. If he's ever smelled the smoke—which I've gone to great lengths to hide—he hasn't mentioned it.

I've spent so much time in the cabin that I start hating the view of it. Back home I took to the trails as much as possible just to get away. I know that's exactly what I need right now.

I step out onto the front porch and strip down. The early morning air is crisp and chilled, just the right temperature to be invigorating. I leave my clothes hanging on the inside of the door for Riot to see in case he wakes up while I'm gone.

Considering that I just got done running damage control from last time, I'm not looking for a relapse.

I step onto the porch and shiver, having missed the feel of being on four legs. I trot through the quiet forest, dawn just now breaking over the horizon. Cool shades of purple and blue paint the sunrise, the light not yet reaching through the trees.

The sky, like everything else here, is beautiful. When midday sets it turns to a clear, extravagant blue. Although it's no different than the one above Visari, it feels different. Untouched.

I remember a couple of days ago when I asked Riot how this land got by without being claimed by a pack. How an entire mountain had slipped by unattained by anyone.

He told me about a legend that it kept long ago, one that drove everyone away from it. Something about a bleeding sky and monsters coming out at more than just night. He kept it vague and I didn't bother to press any further.

Not a single bird chirps, being too early even for them. The silence is noticeable, making the crunching of leaves under my paws all the louder. Which is why, when I stop walking, the scratching of tree bark sticks out like a sore thumb.

Right as my ears perk up, a weight drops on my back. Once the air is knocked from my lungs an arm slips around my neck, not giving me the chance to get it back.

Irritation shoots through me in an instant and a fighting instinct takes over. I'm kicking, jumping, and shaking frantically, trying anything at all to throw whatever asshole is on me off. My attacker's legs slide down to squeeze my sides, hanging on tighter with a readjusted grip. The whole time, snarls are tearing from my throat as fast as my heart is pounding.

"Stop struggling, dammit!" A stentorian female voice barks hatefully in my ear.

"I'm the one irritating, he?"

Instead of obeying, I slam my back against a tree, proving to be a fantastically ineffective way of breaking her hold.

Adrenaline pumps through my veins, but it's not enough to block out the pain. My deep, guttural growls turn into high-pitched canine screaming. A hot substance runs down my side, setting it on fire.

It feels like my flesh is melting on contact, like acid is burning all the way through my body. In an instant my attacker is plucked off of me, though it's barely noticed. I collapse onto the ground, convulsing violently. The stinging, burning pain racks my every nerve.

I find myself unable to swallow, resulting in saliva puddling by my open jaws. My eyes start to dry out and glaze over, unable to blink. Through unfocused vision I try to make out the blurry movement in the distance.

I sense Riot's presence. He's one of the two figures I see. A more agile one dodges every lunge and swing that he makes, flipping backwards like it's a gymnastics competition.

"Aw, I missed you, too," the same strange voice coos, "But if you care about her, you better hurry. They bleed out quick."

My breathing is so shallow that I begin to wonder if I even am. My muscles still try to spasm uncontrollably, but it's a lazy attempt.

Riot's presence is near me, but I can't see him. Everything has become a smear of faded colors.

"Baby, shi—" I recognize his desperately gentle voice. The more he talks, the more distraught it becomes. "Adrienne? Adrienne, can you hear me?"

I think he's touching me, but I can't be sure. A long, dull ringing fills my ears, like I'm submerged in water. When it goes away, I hear Riot again. He sounds... defeated.

"...Force shi—her."

Something thin and sharp sticks into my neck. No feeling follows.

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My awareness comes in fragments from there. One minute I'm cradled against Riot's chest and the next I'm sitting on a kitchen counter, his scent clouding my senses.

I realize I'm slumped over, head laying on his shoulder. I'm like a boneless doll that he has to hold up. He's pressing something gingerly against my burning side.

A blanket is wrapped around me, Riot's hand slipped beneath it to hold pressure on the wound. I wince sharply when I move.

"Shh. You're okay," he whispers, his other hand rubbing up and down my back. The shock of hearing him sound so gentle helps to distract from the pain.

"You've really let the place go downhill," the same suave voice from earlier comments. The same voice I heard right before my flesh started melting off.

A girl strides into the kitchen, looking all around the room. Her body is slender, every movement she makes somehow seeming graceful. Her hair is such a light shade of blonde that it looks white. It's tied up in a high ponytail on her head, a few strands hanging down on either side of her face. Her nose, cheekbones, jawline, and even eyes contain a sort of sharp quality about them. Somewhat lithe and chiseled.

She's dressed in black, all the way from her spiked boots and skin tight jeans to her tank top and unzipped hoodie jacket. There are various strange items strapped around her legs and her waist, all of them giving off lethal auras.

"I told you to fucking leave," Riot growls as he pulls a wad of dark red gauze away, allowing me to wrap the blanket tighter around me.

He tosses them in a nearby trash can as he turns around to face her. He stands in front of me, as if hiding me from her.

He knows she's dangerous.

"I've spent weeks tracking you down," she says as she strolls along, observing the paintings of wintery mountains and snow covered wolves on the walls. "I'm not leaving until I get what I came for."

She cranes her head to observe another picture. When she does her hair moves to the side, exposing the back of her neck. My heart leaps into my throat at the sight of what's inked into her skin.

A dire wolf's snarling head.

She turns around suddenly, my gaze landing on the metallic yellow ring in the cartilage of her ear.

Yellow. Not one of the tribal packs. Who is this girl?

Her deep-set eyes land on Riot for the first time since she entered the room. Her brown irises seem to carry a shadow over them, hiding her thoughts.

"You have a lot of prices on your head, brother. I think it's time we talked about those."

Did she say... brother?

They look nothing like each other. Completely different except for that black stigma on their necks.

"Romanov sent you," Riot states. It's not a question, but rather an assumption waiting for confirmation.

The girl rounds the corner of the island, taking her time. She acts so disinterested, so apathetic.

"I came on my own merit," she drags her elegant fingers over the earthy granite countertop, watching them intently. "I want to bring you back to Khopeski."

Riot seems to flinch a microscopic amount, tensing up on the spot. I sense danger radiating from him in waves. Just like the vibes you'd feel coming from a cornered animal.

I lay my hand on his back, hoping his wolf will be more reasonable than him.

"You could live normally, like mom and dad wanted in the first place," she pulls herself up to sit on the counter with ease, "Learn to abide by a pack instead of acting like a heathen."

"What don't you understand about exile, Senya?"

Riot leans into my touch, his attention never leaving his sister. In any other case I might feel sorry for her for being the target of his anger. But judging by the searing opening in my ribs, she's far from helpless.

"I already pulled those strings," she maintains, her tone confident, "Within Khopeskian walls your rap sheet goes blank. Alot of it. All you have to do is live idly like a good boy."

Riot laughs, bitterly. "What makes you think I'd ever go back to that hellhole of a prison?"

"This is your only second chance," she snaps. Her voice raises an octave, the calm and collect attitude starting to unravel. "The way you're going you'll end up headless on a burning stake in the middle of a street."

A low growl fills the room.

And it doesn't come from Riot.

"He can handle himself fine," I announce, "You should go find yourself a different babysitting job."

For the first time since jumping on my back in the middle of the woods, Senya acknowledges my existence. Her calculating gaze scrutinizes me down to the core. Riot moves even more in front of me, but due to the height boost of the counter, he can't hide me completely.

After an uncomfortable minute of being looked over passes, she jerks her chin towards me. "She your mate?"

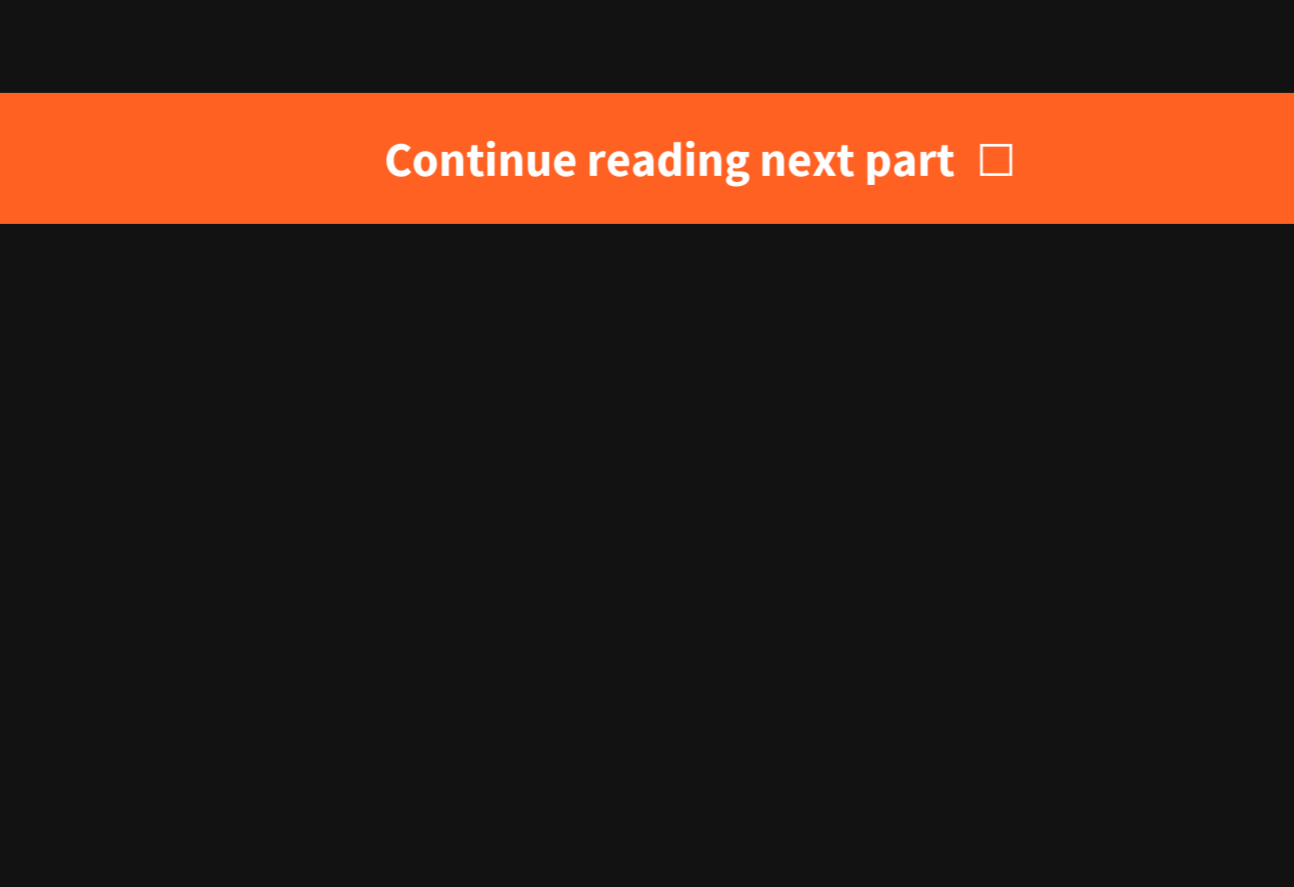
Riot nods. Despite the circumstances, I can't help but to feel a jolt of warmth inside at witnessing him finally admit it.

"I thought so," Senya hums, pleased with herself. She slides off the island, managing to make even that look graceful.

She bends over and plucks a vial from one of the pouches strapped to her thigh.

"What if I told you," she swirls the purple contents around, "That this is the only way to stop that nasty little wound from spreading, and eventually, killing her? And that the only way to get it is by walking through the Khopeski gates."

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