

20 | Humans Stink

"Riot, you don't have to do this," I assure him for the last time. "It'll probably heal on its own. In fact, I feel better already," I lie.

It's not that I'm particularly ready to die. It's more like fearing the tradeo of actually going to this place called Khopeski. I've only ever heard of it before. A city accentuated with white and gold. They aren't tribal, like Visari or Oarca or Bastieel. They live under a different hierarchy. Different laws. Different traditions.

"You're bleeding through your shirt," he growls.

I look down and realize that he's right. There's a growing patch of bright red in the white material, arguing against me so Riot doesn't have to.

Soon he's standing in front of where I sit, picking up gauze o the bed beside me. He gingerly li s up the hem of my shirt, and luckily for me, only at the side. As tenderly as possible he presses the bandage against the open wound.

With a suppressed wince, I take it from him and gesture him away. "I'll do it. Just finish whatever you're packing."

I hate being taken care of. Not that anyone's ever tried before, rather than Aimee. She's a motherly person, and somewhere along the way, I became her pup to protect. A pang of sadness hits me with realizing that I'll probably never see her again.

Riot hesitates a bit before obliging and going back to the dresser.

Reluctantly, I get up and shuffle into the bathroom, walking at a snail's pace. Even the smallest of movements sets my side and the surrounding areas on fire all over again. It takes so much to bare it that an inhabilitating lump forms in my throat.

Don't whine. Just shut up and tolerate it.

Riot has been on edge, to say the least. Ever since his sister showed up, he's stayed tense. And hearing me screaming out in pain wouldn't help his mentality in the slightest, nor my arguing that we shouldn't even go. My only hope is that he doesn't try fighting his wolf right now, or that would be the final match thrown into the gasoline.

I take a better bandage out of the cabinet under the sink. Standing in front of the mirror, I li my shirt up halfway. The giant chunk taken out of my side is le raw and open, the blood oozing out and the flesh gleaming. Whatever concoction Senya dumped on me, it was crad without mercy in mind.

I wrap the thick white material tightly around my abdomen, trying to stop the blood flow. I tie it on the opposite side of the wound and by the time I'm done it feels like I'm wearing a girdle.

When I walk back out, I can't seem to push the burning question away.

"Riot," I say.

He looks up from his packing immediately, his eyes alert. Instead of meeting mine, however, they land on the scarlet stain on my side.

"What's the deal with the Khopeski pack?" I ask, curious.

Khopeski is foreign to me. They're one of the packs who branched o from our ancestors' beliefs in origin and continued evolving their way of life right along with the humans, making them modern rather than tribal.

After hearing the question, Riot goes back to throwing clothes in the bag. It's as if he's entirely uninterested in the subject. Though he feeds me my knowledge anyway.

"My parents took us there to join when we were younger. I didn't like it so I le."

My brow furrows. "You were a rogue before?" Now that I think it about it, that lifestyle seems fitting for him.

"Born one," he mumbles.

That would explain why he didn't have a ring in his ear. Though if he was in a pack at one point, he would have been given one like Senya's. How the hell did he manage to get it o? And with his ear le unflawed?

Before I can ask, he snatches the opportunity away like a carrot on a stick.

"We should go," he zips the bag and tosses it over his shoulder, "Senya's waiting. Can you walk?"

He takes a step towards me then stops himself, uncertainty written all over his face.

I nod, a little too quickly. "I'm fine."

He turns to head out the bedroom door. "Liar."

"Heathen."

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We find Senya outside leaning against a tree near the cabin. Upon seeing us, a smug smile curls onto her lips.

"Don't look overly excited, brother. It's a long trip. Save some for later," she prods as she pushes herself o the tree.

There's a devious gleam in her eye, whereas Riot on the other hand looks like he would pay to die.

He doesn't even acknowledge his sister before going straight o into the woods, me hurriedly following at his side. Senya is quick to catch up and soon takes the lead.

My eyes bounce back and forth between the two of their backsides. Looking at the only article of likeness they share: the threatening black stigma made into their necks, snarling a warning to stay away from their bearers.

"What's it like? Being a dire wolf?" I glance at the two of them.

Riot corrects me almost immediately, his bad attitude still present. "We're not dire wolves," he snaps.

"Descendants of them," Senya clarifies.

"What's the difference?"

Senya takes a deep breathe before answering.

"Dire wolves were more wolf than man. We follow our instincts, they lived by theirs. The ratio of human to animal in them is tipped severely toward the latter. Some dired were even so far feral that when they did manage to shi themselves back, they didn't know how to speak or even function in a human's body. That only happened in extreme cases of isolation though."

As she talks, Senya never once looks back. Almost like she's recalling the story to herself—and enjoying every bit of it. There's a gleam in her eye, a wistfulness on her lithe face. Something tells me she's got a lot of information, and no chances to share it.

I maul over her words and add it to what I've already heard about dire wolves. How looked down upon they were because people were terrified of them. Yet I continue prying.

"Everybody wanted them dead back in the day. What's it like now?"

She shrugs. "It means nothing. The kids in the city have twisted it. They romanticized it." She says the last statement with free flowing bitterness.

The more she talks, the angrier she sounds. "When people see my stigma they assume I'm from a play or something, walking around between scenes." She sighs. "Dire descendants are rare. I've never seen any others as long as I've lived. Nobody would believe you even if you told them ours are real."

I look over to Riot where he'd been listening quietly. He nods slightly, confirming most of what she'd said.

"That's in the cities," he finally speaks. "Out here people treat you like an artifact on display." He sends me a pointed glare from the corner of his eye.

I resist shrinking back at the silent accusation. Instead, I push further.

"If people have seen your stigma, then why haven't I heard any rumors that the Exiled Alpha is a dire wolf?"

"I hid it. After I figured out that nobody would just let it go," he sends a death glare my way. Another warning for me to stop.

With a bit of thought this time, I decide to drop it. This whole Khopeski thing has put him on edge enough. If he's going back to this place he hates so much just to save my life, then the least I can do is leave him alone.

We walk in silence for a while from there. It's maybe a mile before Senya decides to initiate a new subject. She whirls around, walking backwards without breaking pace.

"Have you heard of Bloodrest?" She asks, looking at me rather than her brooding brother.

"Bloodrest?" I arch an eyebrow.

"Bloodrest," she repeats, she repeats, her arms up and out to her sides. She's gesturing to the forest all around us. Does she mean the same legend Riot didn't feel like telling earlier?

Before she can say anything else about it, Riot stops her.

"Did you bring us out here for a fucking history lesson or are you gonna lead the way?" He growls, irritation radiating from him in thick waves.

Senya wrinkles her nose up in a sneer before turning back around. "Maybe this is why I didn't miss you. Because you're so fucking bitchy."

She seems like the kind of person who could insult people and get away with it. But this time, her words hold depth. So much so that I find myself cringing back.

I look over to Riot to check his reaction. His eyebrows are still scrunched angrily and his mouth is a thin line. But his eyes, they don't hold anything anymore. Not anger and not quite hurt.

I move closer to him. Every part of me wants to reach out and comfort him, to let him feel my touch as a sign of encouragement. But I know he'll only push it away.

Nobody speaks from then on.

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It feels like hours before we finally come to something that isn't more trees. In the distance I catch sight of buildings and people moving around everywhere. As we get closer the ground is hard and a light grey color. It reminds me of the stone of the chamber, yet it's different somehow.

Right through the middle of the clump of buildings runs two iron rails, lined with smaller bars going the opposite direction. The rails sit an enormous mass of metal, oblong and heavy looking.

"Go board. I'll get the train tickets," Senya says before breaking away from us.

I look around at the crowd of people, none of which seem to be paying attention to us. I move subconsciously closer to Riot until I realize that my shoulder is pressed against his side.

"What's that smell?" I gag, quickly covering my mouth with my hand. My eyes start to water and my nose burns a bit. So many scents are mixed together, and strongly at that. Some are overly sweet and others like rotted garbage. Merged together, its overwhelming.

"Humans," he answers, his assessing eyes scanning over the crowd. "You've never been around them before?"

I shake my head.

His hand envelops mine, lacing our fingers together. "Just stay with me."

We push our way through the people— well, Riot does while I follow behind and beat down a rising panic attack—until we're climbing up a small deck of stairs where we enter the mass of metal. Inside there are large red booths lining the walls, padded with matching bright red cushioning.

Riot leads me to the one nearest the exit. He gently guides me in first, ushering me to take the window seat. My face heats up at the tingling of his fingertips on my back.

Why is he being so supportive? The only logical answer I can come up with is that he senses my anxiety in the new environment.

He sits down beside me, as if forming a barrier between myself and the other passengers. A sensation of safety washes over me as I get comfortable in my little space. Security feels foreign, yet I think I like it.

With knots in my stomach, I turn to look out the window as a distraction.

It doesn't take long to spot Senya's nearly white hair and slender figure, weaving through the crowd with ease. She squeezes through throngs of people so quickly and fluently that it's almost hard to keep up with her in the sea of bodies. It's like she's used to maneuvering in tight places.

Feeling eyes on me, I look over to find Riot staring at me.

"What's that face for?" He asks, the ends of his mouth starting to curl upward. At first I don't know what he's talking about, and then I realize my nose is stuck in a wrinkled position.

"Humans stink."

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Opinions on Senya?

Also, in case anyone is wondering, Adrienne isn't reacting well to the new environment because, coming from a tribal pack, that means she's spent her life in the forest and henceforth away from the modern human world.

Thanks for reading!

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