

## 21 | Don't Be Petty

Senya settles herself in the booth across from Riot and I. Her eyes are shadowed over again, a stony expression on her face. That's the second thing she shares with Riot: jaded black eyes.

She peers around at the humans taking their seats all around us, filling up the booths. With the mass variety of smells swirling through the room, it's beyond me how she looks so composed.

"You okay?" Riot asks, leaning over so that his mouth is right above my ear.

I shake my head.

My eyes won't stop watering. My nose won't stop scrunching up from trying to keep the foreign smells out. And the gaping bite out of my side is on fire once again. 'Okay' isn't the word I would use to describe it.

"Here." An arm snakes around my shoulders and pulls me against a solid torso. My face presses against the side of his chest, his subliminal scent pushing away all others.

I inhale deeply, relieved to finally breathe again.

"You're tribal, aren't you?" Senya observes, studying me. Not even Riot's embrace can shield me from her sharp eyes. She watches me like a predator watching a predator.

I want to shrink further into Riot, but I stop myself. Her gaze is unnerving. Like she can see everything trapped inside me with one hard look. Finding all of my flaws and storing them away.

I nod. "Visari."

Her brow raises such a small amount that it's almost unnoticeable. Almost. She doesn't say anything else and I wonder if it was a mistake to tell her.

As a yet piercing beep sounds out and the door we'd entered through slides closed. The machine roars to life and lurches forward. The next time I look out the window, the trees are nothing more than a blur.

Minutes later, a young boy approaches our booths. He's wearing over a black vest over a white button down shirt, carrying a classical aura about him.

"How's your ride going today? Does anyone need anything?" He asks politely. He flashes a wide, toothy smile that has 'mandatory' written all over it.

"We're fine," Senya replies frigidly. Her tone is anything but warm and the belligerent undertone is even colder. I'm thankful that I don't actually need anything, because the chances of him returning later seem slim.

As she looks over her shoulder to see the waiter, my eyes fall on the side of her head. More specifically, her ear. It's the one without the metallic yellow pack ring, the one that should be untouched.

It's not.

A small portion of the cartilage is missing at the top. Cut out.

It wasn't taken out by some freak accident, either. It's shaped oddly, almost like a little key.

Any other time I might resist asking such a personal thing. She took an entire chunk out of my side in mere seconds with whatever deadly liquid she poured on me, and I'm not fond of the idea of testing her patience any further. But something about Riot's presence next to me makes me feel untouchable, fueling me with reckless confidence.

"What were you notched for?" The words are out before I can think about regretting them.

Every tribal pack has their own rules, but they all share the same punishment method. Whenever a wolf commits a crime, a small piece is taken from whichever ear doesn't have the ring. The procedure is done by a shard of metal being heated over an open flame until it's hot enough to melt the cartilage. Once it is, a metal pen is used to draw and retrace the shape until eventually the piece falls out. They call it Notching.

Though Notching is only used by tribal packs. Senya comes from a modern pack; Khopeski. It's strange that she would be notched.

The side of her mouth turns upwards into an embittered smirk at my question. "Not everyone looks kindly on bounty hunters."

Bounty hunter?

That would explain the numerous things she has strapped to her body at the ready, and how impossibly graceful every one of her movements are.

"I got caught onetime," she holds up a shaking index finger for emphasis, "And I'm smelling my own flesh burning."

"Wouldn't know what that feels like," I mumble sarcastically. Funny. It's almost like she forgot she intentionally barbecued half of my body.

She rolls her darkened eyes. "Don't be petty," she says as she stretches her legs out across the seat. She leans back and closes her eyes, clearly settling in for a nap. Good. Maybe I'll be able to forget her existence for a short period of time.

I look over only to realize that Riot is doing so as well. I can tell how hard he's trying to stay awake by the way he's batting his eyelids and occasionally jerking his head back up.

My lips curl into a grin as I study him. He doesn't look so tense. Maybe it's just the need for sleep that's dulling his alertness, but I choose to perceive it in a different way. One that tells me that he trusts me enough to doze beside me.

Then it hits me. If he falls asleep on me like this, I'm done for. The static-like pins and needles would overtake my entire body and the odds of me getting him without breaking open my wound again are nonexistent.

But I can't let him be miserable the whole ride.

"You can sleep if you want." I sit up straight, which sends his eyelids shooting open.

He shakes his head frantically, "No, no. It's fine." He glances around at the surrounding booths, as if he expects someone to be plotting our deaths this very instance.

"Riot," I laugh, "If anything happens, I'll wake you up."

Before he can object, I'm re-positioning us so that my back is leaned against the wall and my legs are criss-crossed in the seat. I pull him down so that his head is resting in my lap. He doesn't resist, which only makes my wolf all the more excited.

His hand grasps my arm, reminding me of how one little touch is all it takes to calm him down when he has an episode with his own wolf. Before I realize it, I'm smiling like an idiot and trying to beat down the building desire to hug him as tightly as a koala does its tree.

With this strong of a reaction from such a small gesture, I don't even want to imagine what he felt like after fighting it for so long. The hell he must have went through.

My fingers find his coppery brown hair, running slowly through it. A satisfied growl comes from his throat, almost like a purr.

Across the aisle I catch a man and a woman, both humans, staring. Their lips are pulled back in grimaces. I glare back at them as hard and intensely as I can. As soon as we finally make eye contact, I flash my canines in a silent snarl.

Their faces flush of color as they scramble to get up and hurry towards the front of the aisle.

That's right, go cry wolf to whoever listens. Then we'll see who ends up in the mental asylum.

"This is your idea of handling things?" Riot asks, looking up at me with a raised brow.

"It worked, didn't it?"

He snorts as he closes his eyes again.

"Savage tribal," he mumbles.

"Exiled tyrant," I retort.

...

Riot clings to me the entirety of his nap. Every time he would squeeze me tighter, I would squeeze his hand in return to prove that I'm still here. The simple action always seemed to satisfy him.

It's hard to believe that at one point in time the entire population was so scared of these creatures that they wanted them slaughtered. I'm sitting here with possibly the only two dire wolf descendants alive and both of them are out like lights—one even using me as a teddy bear.

But those eyes? They match perfectly with all of the stories.

I shudder at the mere memory of obsidian irises, the background of which glowing a dark, ruby red. That wave of danger they sent out... I don't want to remember it.

A man stands up at the front of the room and announces that we've reached our destination. The humans all begin to flood out, their chattering creating a low hum in the atmosphere.

"Riot," I give him a slight shake. Nothing.

"Riot," I say, louder this time. No reaction.

"Alright then."

With a grand gesture of strength, I give him a shove. He lands with a thump in the middle of the aisle, an enraged growl following soon after.

Can't say I didn't warn him.

It takes him only a nanosecond to get up. Once he's back to his full towering height, he takes a threatening step towards me and I hold my hands up in defense.

"I'm already wounded, remember? You wouldn't hit the injured, would you?" I hold my side dramatically. The wound still sears with a vengeance, but it isn't nearly as bad as the initial agony.

He picks up the only bag of belongings we'd taken from the house and throws it over his shoulder.

"You'll heal," he mumbles lowly. And suddenly, I'm regretting my method of waking up the beast.

I happen look over at Senya and it's like she can feel my eyes as soon as they land on her.

"If you touch me I'll finish killing you," she growls, sitting up. Her once high and flawless ponytail is smashed and hanging loosely, ready to fall out. A large red mark runs across her cheek like an eyesore.

Riot growls. But this time, there's nothing playful about it. It's a warning.

"Lay a finger on her and I'll do more than just kill you."

Senya stands up, maintaining equally intimidating eye contact with him. Her shoulders are squared with his, and her chin held just as high. She remains silent, but her words are clear: "I'd like to see you try."

I breathe a sigh of relief when she starts to leave, then take it back when she pauses beside him.

"I'll see you behind the walls, brother." She presses something firmly into his palm. "House 18C. Romanov will be waiting for you at the Citadel at midnight. If you don't come to him, he'll come to you. So don't be late."

With that she shoves his shoulder roughly with hers, brushing past him and down the ramp. By now Riot and I are the only ones left, everyone else having already departed. I look at him and he looks at me.

It feels like an eternity before he finally holds out his hand. "Come on."

-

**Yay, I updated on time! Opinions so far? What do you think waits behind the walls of the Khopeski pack?**

**Thank you so much for reading! It really does mean a ton because I haven't been active lately so I really don't deserve your reads anymore so if you're still here then <333**

✧ ❄️

