

24 | Considered Dead

An hour later and this nightmare has made itself a reality.

A silky, knee-length dress hugs my body, making my discomfort levels skyrocket. The color of it is a light emerald, making the green of my ear ring stand out.

I stand on the doorstep of some looming, castle-like building on the top tier of the city. Beside me, Riot bangs the metal knocked on the door. He's also suited himself into formal clothes, and good lord if that suit wasn't made for him.

It looks absolutely ravishing, but it doesn't seem like the Riot I know. I keep having to take second looks at him just to make sure. Something about a suit and tie just contradicts his roguish appearance.

A servant appears at the door and leads us down a dark, stony hallway. I stick close to Riot, unsure of what to expect.

The dependence I've had of him as of late bothers me. But the fact that he hasn't been pushing me away makes it all worth it.

We come to a grand dining hall, the majority of the room nothing but open space. In the middle there's a table long enough to seat an army. At the end of it sits a smug-looking man with Senya seated at the nearest side.

Romanov. That's the name that Riot and Senya had kept mentioning before. This must be the man who it belongs to.

"Ah, Riot," he greets, dragging out his name. "I'm so glad you could make it. I see you found the clothes we left for you."

Riot remains unfazed as he walks over and takes the seat opposite of Senya. With one arm he pulls out the chair beside him, a gesture for me to sit there.

"What do you want?" He asks Romanov bluntly. It isn't the nicest of tones, but at least he's keeping his composure.

Romanov smiles, as if amused. His gelled-back hair blends into the shadows of the distant wall.

He slumps down, sitting as comfortably—and as informally—as possible.

"No need to rush. We have all night." He raises his hand and motions for a servant standing nearby.

In a flash, silverware and plates full of food are placed in front of us. Fancy wine glasses are also given, filled generously with their namesake.

Riot stares at the food skeptically before grudgingly picking up a fork. I, on the other hand, don't hesitate. The trip to get here was long and without luxury. At this point I'll eat anything I can get my claws on.

We all start eating, the so clanging of metal against porcelain filling the large stony and castle-like room. It's a few minutes into the meal before somebody finally speaks.

"Let's talk about all the bounties I've been receiving lately," Romanov lowers his voice a bit, "A couple dozen short of ten thousand, to be exact."

I nearly choke on my bite of potatoes.

After the initial shock of the number passes, I clench my teeth. Anger bubbles in my chest as I hold back a growl. I always knew that people feared and despised the Exiled Alpha, but I've never witnessed the full extent of the fact. I bristle at the thought of someone wishing for my mate's death. Too cowardly to try to kill him themselves at that.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Senya freeze at the same time I do. She glares daggers in Romanov's direction. Daggers so sharp shoot from her black irises that I find it hard to believe he doesn't react to her glare burning into his face.

There's something between the two. Something hushed. But what?

"It's not that I want you dead, particularly, but this city doesn't pay for itself. And your blood is worth a pretty penny right about now."

Riot puts his fork down, as if he'd suddenly lost his appetite. He nudges his plate away before shifting a bit in his chair. I can tell that he's on high alert now. As would be expected after someone implies their intent to kill you.

"I didn't poison the food," Romanov scoffs. "That would reflect badly on the chefs. If I kill you it will be with a blade against your throat. I brought you here for another reason."

The charisma he spoke so fluently with vanishes into thin air. He leans across the table and towards Riot, venom dripping off his tongue.

Maybe this is where Senya gets her poison; from keeping company like this.

"If you stay in Khopeski then we won't have a problem. It's mostly the outsiders who want you dead. The tribals and that pack you took over, Balaige. As long as no lowlife outside of these walls sees your face, then you're as good as considered dead. I keep the money, and you keep your life."

Riot lets out an agitated growl, likely one he'd been holding in. Under the table, I reach over and place my hand on his knee. His shoulders seem to relax a slight bit.

"Give her the antidote," he says.

"You haven't agreed to the deal."

A snarl rips from his lips, "NOW."

Romanov leans at him for a few seconds before nodding towards Senya.

In one fluid motion she stands up, then reaches down and pulls a vial from her leg. Wordlessly, she pours a blue liquid into my glass. The wine darkens, almost so that it's black. It reminds me eerily of the Sydneys' eyes.

Romanov's brow furrows, a bit of a testy tone coming with it. "I thought the antidote was purple?"

I go to pick up the glass, but Riot gets to it first. He brings it up to his nose, sniffing the contents with deathly concentration.

Once satisfied, he passes it back to me. It tastes overly sweet, as if someone had just dumped sugar in it.

"It is. The antidote was already in there. That was a placebo," she says, sitting back down. I study the glass inquisitively, wondering what the purpose of putting a placebo in could possibly be.

Unless the difference in colors wasn't supposed to be noticed.

Romanov's eyes burn angrily into Senya's as he leans towards her. He keeps his words low, like they're only meant for her to hear.

However, not much goes unheard to wolfish ears.

"I told you to wait."

"Do I look like one of your puppets?" She hisses in return.

As soon as the last drop of the remedied wine is gone, Riot shoots up from his chair.

"We're leaving."

Unable to imagine a reason why not to, I don't waste time in getting up. When I turn to look, my mate is nowhere in sight. I swallow nervously before looking back to the table.

"Uh.. Thanks for dinner," I force a smile. God, this awkward. He really had to abandon me, didn't he? First he drags me here, now he leaves me here. I knew I would regret pushing a sleeping wolf into the aisle eventually.

With a mounting sense of danger, I tuck my metaphorical tail and head for the corridor we entered from. My pace is kept just below a jog, an attempt not to make my eagerness to leave quite as obvious.

Fingers dig into my shoulder, spinning me around to come face to face with a scowling Romanov. His blue eyes are as cold as ice, yet they're just as toxic as a searing acid.

"Make sure your tyrant doesn't try for the crown," he growls lowly.

The crown. That's one of the differences in the hierarchy. Instead of an Alpha, the Khopeski pack has a king.

I narrow my eyes, challenging him. If he wants to threaten me, he'll have to try harder.

My chin raises. "Or what?"

"Or we'll have problems."

I stand up straighter at the dare, excitement buzzing inside me.

"Maybe you will, but I won't."

He achieves half a step forward before Riot appears in the blink of an eye, grabbing him by his neck and yanking him away. His feet come off the ground right before he's slammed against the wall with a thud.

The smell of blood hits me. Blood that carries Romanov's scent. Over Riot's shoulder I catch sight of his claws dragging across the bottom of the other man's jaw.

Senya rushes past me and separates them with alarming ferocity. She shoulders her brother back with an agitated snarl.

The room falls deathly silent, all except for the faint heaves of Romanov and Riot catching their breath. With the elegance of a viper, Senya comes nose to nose with her sibling.

Her tone is low and scalding with warning as she does. "These people took us in when nobody else would and you weren't grateful. You weren't grateful then and you're not grateful now. They're giving you another chance—refuge after all the shit you've done—and you're still blowing it right back in their goddamn faces."

The absolute raw anger in her voice is terrifying. It's so powerful in the air that all of us take an involuntary step back from her. All except for Riot. He remains facing her, their tense and readied shoulders only inches apart.

"They killed our parents!" Riot emphasizes every word of the phrase, "If you weren't so far up his ass you would realize that!"

Both shock and adrenaline flood my system. My muscles tense, waiting for the last thread between the two titans to snap before the fight can break loose.

Senya leans back, shoulders relaxed, as if suddenly surfeited with arguing. "They didn't kill our parents," she says, a fire still burning in her.

"A belligerent rogue did," Romanov adds through spite, located a few yards behind her.

With bared canines resting behind his lips, Riot takes a step toward Romanov, staring at him with those tantalizing black eyes. When Senya blocks his path again like an immovable barrier, he ceases to acknowledge her.

Instead he turns and storms straight in my direction. His hands hold tightly onto my shoulders as he spins me around and pushes me toward the exit.

Halfway down the dark corridor, Senya's voice echoes from behind us.

"Don't show your weak spot, brother. I've already exploited it once. Don't give everyone else the same temptation." Her words give me the same chill as if a snake were hissing in my ear.

Riot gives a short, bitter laugh and without stopping calls back, "Says the dog defending her master."

