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As soon as I reached house 18C I stomped straight upstairs and plopped down on the bed like a sack of wet sand. With my face buried in the pillow and the covers hugged tightly to my body, I forced sleep overtake me.

But it was restless.

I tossed and turned, huddled and pulled until the room felt hot and sticky. Like the teasing mistress it is, a good night's sleep has been avoiding me for nearly three hours.

Riot still isn't back. There hasn't been the slightest sound downstairs to indicate his arrival. Not a jingle of the door handle. Not the squeak of a door's hinges. Not even so much as a single bump in the night fabricated by my imagination. It's simply silence. And it's driving me insane. More than it ever did down in that godforsaken cave.

Eventually, when the clock strikes 3:00, I get up and throw the covers on in a tormented fit. I storm downstairs, my bare feet pattering against the wood. My hair is all over the place, frizzy and tangled. My clothes are worn and wrinkled, lounge pants rolled up to my knees. I look like an unholy nightmare, but I don't care.

As much as I hate to admit it, Riot is the reason I can't sleep. That pain in my ass made his way up to my head. And he doesn't seem to be leaving anytime soon.

He could've been ambushed by a party of bounty hunters, led straight into their trap by the spy. Or he could've went to find Romanov and settle whatever hard feelings is between them once and for all. Worse yet, he's lost control of his wolf and now he's rampaging around the city, spilling blood and killing innocents—no.

Stop thinking that way.

He's fine. Everything is fine. He's probably not fine, but for the sake of my sanity, he's going to be fine.

In desperate need of fresh air, I open the front door. Then stop dead in tracks.

Night air blows against my skin, but I can't enjoy it. My jaw drops and my skin prickles.

A figure is standing there. His clothes are darkened and wet in sporadic splotches. His face looks like he's had red paint splattered all over him. Except I know that it's not paint.

The same breeze that's so refreshing carries the thick scent of blood to my nose. It's overwhelming, taking the best of my efforts not to gag.

"Riot?" My voice is frayed. I want so badly to rush over to him, but I make myself stand solid, fighting my instincts.

He looks up, a fat drop of crimson liquid running down the side of his cheek.

The look on my face must be of horror.

"It's not mine," is all he says.

"The bounty hunter?" I ask. He nods.

I try to relax, but it's impossible not to remain on edge. Cautiously, I step through the threshold of the door. I notice his fingers twitching, claws out. Adrenaline is coursing through his veins like electricity in a circuit.

"Did you see anyone else?" His voice is distracted as his eyes shift all around, checking the shadows twice. He's paranoid.

I shake my head, mumbling "No." I would've killed for someone to have turned up. Any sound to break the maddening quiet I endured, I would have been grateful for.

He doesn't say anything else and neither do I. An uncomfortable silence falls over us, which is exactly what it takes for me to realize how inconsiderate I may be coming across as.

"Uh wait here. I'll be back." I fumble as I turn and head back into the house, leaving the door wide open.

I pad quickly up the stairs and into the bedroom. The bed looks like a hurricane just passed over it, the covers laying as violently sprawled as I had left them. I go to the duvet bag in the corner of the room, digging through it on a mission.

Once I pull out a spare set of clothes, I head into the bathroom and snatch a dark blue towel out of the cabinet. At the sink I soak it in water, wring it out, and leave it wet. I gather up all the items and rush back downstairs.

Outside on the porch Riot is sitting in a chair at the edge, glaring out into the nearby woods.

"Here." I hold out the towel for him to take.

A small annoying voice in the back of mind nags at me. What are you doing? You're suppose to wash his face for him. What kind of mate are you?

I can't help but to roll my eyes. Of course that's what Agatha would say.

"YOUNG LADY, GET BACK IN HERE! You can't just leave everything unattended!!!" Her old voice would shriek as she yelled at me. It always reminded me of a dying crow.

I looked to Alpha Andre for permission. He nodded at me and motioned me on. Obediently, I ran back to the house, my little feet pounding against the dry ground. I heard Nathan's fading 'oomph' as I went, telling me he failed to dodge once again.

I barely got into the door before my ear was being pulled on by crooked, wrinkly fingers.

"OWWWW!"

"Hurts, doesn't it? Maybe next time you'll learn not to run on. What business do you have out there scrapping like a dog? None, that's what."

She dragged me into the kitchen, the smell of burnt bread made me crinkle my nose. The sight of brown crust against the oven window made her shout even more when she saw it.

"What in Goddess's name did you do?!" She releases me and shuffles over to the stove. With mittened hands she threw the door open. Her jaw dropped.

The entire space of the oven, filled with a giant, bloated cloud of blackened bread.

"How much yeast did you put in?" She glared at me accusingly, her mouth bobbing open and closed like a fish.

Yeast... Which part was that again? I knew if I asked, it would only lead to another endless lecture.

"Enough?" I shrugged.

"Too much." She grumbled and began digging the charcoaled loaf out of the oven. If you could even call it a loaf anymore.

While she was preoccupied, I snuck my way back towards the door.

"Nagatha," I mumbled, so fed up with being treated like her doll.

"Excuse me?" She raised her voice behind me.

I slammed the door shut to avoid answering. And from there, I ran straight back to the training grounds.

Riot's fingers graze mine when he takes the towel. The sparks make me jolt a little, taken on guard.

As he wipes the cloth across his cheek I lean against the railing in front of him. He rubs the blood from his skin, darkening the towel with what will probably stain later.

It feels weird just standing here watching him. Somehow the silence doesn't bother me as much this time.

"I'm sorry I smoked," I finally say, embarrassed to be apologizing.

He looks up, a few dots of blood still sprinkled across the bridge of his nose. Suddenly he doesn't look as angry anymore.

"I didn't yell at you because of the smoking."

I blink. It takes a few seconds for me to understand what he's saying. When I still can't, I furrow my brow. "What?"

"I thought you were hurting yourself," he admits, looking away. He's nervous of what I think? That's the first. Somehow it makes me feel oddly powerful, the fact that I can make him—the infamous Exiled Alpha—nervous.

I laugh, feeling stupid that all of this misery came from one misunderstanding.

"Riot, that was years ago," I assure him, hoping he'll drop the subject in a whole.

"How many years ago?"

"...Okay, one, but that's over. I wasn't—I was just smoking. That's all." I'm in such a hurry to shrink the severity of the situation that my words come out in a stumble.

I can tell he doesn't like the answer. His expression darkens again and his eyes go out of focus. Shit.

"I won't smoke anymore." My voice is unintentionally soft as I stand up from the railing and step toward him.

He nods. "Thank you."

He reaches his hand out toward me. I take it, allowing him to pull me closer. Soon we're so close that I have to adapt by straddling his lap. I smile internally, feeling the warmth between us at his addictive touch.

"If you ever crave it, or feel whatever it is that makes you want it, tell me. Just don't hurt yourself. Do you understand?" His tone is firm yet gentle. Completely different from the one featured in our first conversation about the topic.

I nod, smiling. He meant well before. He just doesn't know what it means to act rationally. When he starts to lean in, I stop him. My palms press against his shoulders, holding him there.

"I would, but I'll taste like an ashtray."

"Shut up," he laughs. With that he pushes easily past the invisible barrier, intentions of pressing his warm lips passionately to mine. I bend down, meeting him halfway.

My nerve endings come alive as he squeezes the sides of my thighs and pulls me closer as if I'd be jerked away at any second.

Eventually we pull apart, panting. Our foreheads are pressed together, my hair falling down to create a makeshift curtain around our faces. Separating us from the world. How ironic.

I readjust myself to sit sideways on his lap and lay my head on his shoulder. His arms wrap around me protectively, like I'm some kind of prized possession that all the other kids on the playground are trying to touch.

The air is liberatingly cool. Past the edge of the roof I can see the bluish-black sky, starless and bare except for the gibbous moon acting like a nightlight. An owl hoots somewhere nearby, making it all the more whimsical.

This porch is like a safe place. So quiet and peaceful. Maybe it's not so much the porch that makes me feel safe, but rather the neurotic beast clinging to me like a teddy bear.

I look over at Riot. A thin slice of moonlight is shining on his face, illuminating him. If only the world could see him how I do. Maybe then they wouldn't be so willing to drop their life savings for his death.

But then again, I don't know the side they do. Having spent a good portion of my life locked several feet below ground for months at a time, current events aren't exactly my best subject.

I wasn't free three years ago to witness the election or listen to the gossip when he conquered Balaige. But I do remember the way everyone acted when the word of his exile came about. How scared they all were. How utterly panicked. I shudder at the thought of the tyrant on top of the world.

"You're cold?" His concerned voice brings me back to reality.

"No. I'm fine. I like the cold." I answer, snuggling deeper into his side anyway.

I start to drift off, batting my eyes tiredly. The teasing mistress of sleep is back, and she's finally decided to grant me mercy. The last thing I remember before she takes me is Riot carrying me up the stairs and the feel of the cool sheets on my skin.



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