

30 | Ruby Red Eyes

A snarl rips from my throat as I thrash wildly, trying to throw my attacker o. The movements are so familiar that it feels like a flashback I can't snap out of.

30

A thick arm slides around my neck like a noose. A hand grabs my snout, attempting with great effort to twist my head sideways. A er all, a broken neck would be quicker than strangulation.

I come to a sudden stop and flip over on the cobblestone like I'm trying to put out a fire. The air is crushed out of the monkey on my back, causing their hold to break just long enough for me to slip out. I don't take my opportunity for granted, making quick work of pinning the attacker down.

31

I find myself staring into the eyes of Romanov, their icy irises paradoxically burning with rage. My paw finds its place against his neck, the tips of my claws just barely entering his skin. I curl my lips back in a snarl.

32

I had expected to see some form of fear cross his face. A bit of uncertainty at the least. But his air of arrogance and anger doesn't falter.

"Shit back," he demands, though demands aren't usually made by the one on the ground.

Or what? want to ask him. But he saves me the trouble because it's like he reads my mind. Something pokes my underbelly, a sharp, fine point. A needle.

33

"Unless you want another dose of Senya's silverbane." There's the threat I had been anticipating. The reason why he let himself get pinned so quickly. He has a secret weapon he knows I won't oppose.

A vile memory pops into my head. How badly it hurt when Senya drenched me in it. The sheer pain and acid-like burning as the liquid ate straight through my flesh and down to the bone, along with the nauseating feeling that followed. I don't want another taste of that, whatever the hell it is.

34

With a baleful glare, I slowly step o of him. The more I encounter of this bastard, the more I hate him. I loathe every single particle of air that has ever kept him alive.

"Now shit," he barks. He's to his feet now, wielding a syringe full of a metallic, silver substance. His thumb is poised on the plunger, ready to make good on his threat.

I trade my pride for logic and do as he says. My bones crack and realign. Sinewy fibers stretch and pull back together in new positions. Seconds later and I'm standing with humility heating my face. I fight the urge to cover the burn scars, covering my private parts instead.

35

I open my mouth, a slew of curses right at the top of my tongue. Somewhere nearby, a horrifying scream rings out, jolting me. Except this time it's not only screams. A monstrous roar echoes, so powerful that the very core of the city shakes.

36

It's close. Painfully, terrifyingly close. It's like an electric pulse shoots through my brain. My senses are dulled yet very much alive. Pounding footfalls approaching behind me, charging rapidly. At the last minute, intuition controls my body.

With a rolling leap to the side, I make it out of the way just in time. Seconds later comes the thick impact of flesh meeting flesh.

I snap my head over to look. A giant wolf is standing over Romanov's body, plowed into the concrete by the impact. Its dark fur is spiky and wet from the rain, the hairs bristled to a point on its back.

Riot.

37

I watch, speechless, at what unfolds a few meters away from me. Riot's canines sink into Romanov's shoulder right before he's turned into a life-sized rag doll. My eyes are widened like saucers as I observe.

38

Romanov is flung across the plaza as if he were weightless. Threads scream as his shirt is clamped in Riot's jaws, fabric tearing as its wear is sent slamming into the ground.

39

In that head jerking movement, I catch a flash of Riot's eyes. It turns my blood cold.

Red. A flash of glowing, ruby red.

40

My heart throbs in my throat until I swallow it back down.

He's lost control...

41

A ripple of panic surges through me like an unrelenting tidal wave. I've only seen those eyes twice before. The fourth and final stage. The eyes that incite raw terror in their onlookers no matter how brave you are. The eyes that raise a survival hysteria within you, building and building until you break and the predator takes its prey. The eyes of a dire wolf's descendent.

42

Thunder cracks simultaneously, as if to deliver that very omen of ill will.

43

Riot's wolf is at the surface and its out for blood—the very thing that now splatters all of the gold in Khopeski.

44

Romanov crashes into the street, impossibly cracking the stone pathway. He bounces back to his feet with a slight stagger. Crimson streaks run down his partially bare chest, soaking into the torn fabric. In the blink of an eye, his form takes that of a wolf, his fur a hint blacker than that of his opponent's.

45

The two beasts clash again, this time in a more equal match. The vicious snarls and barks drown out the dull roar of the storm. A voice at the back of my head nags me to get o my ass and do something, but I remain frozen in place. It would be suicide with a loathing if anyone stepped foot in front of that monster.

46

It goes on like this for half an eternity. Claws and teeth drawing blood and potential death bliss being traded like cards. I want it to end so badly.

Clumps of fur scatter across the ground, mixing with blood and rain.

47

A shrill whimper breaks above the rest of the noise. The kind of whimper that makes your stomach drop due to the finality of it.

The fighting has stopped. Amidst the rain bouncing o the street lays one of the wolves. Its dark fur blurs its shape. I take a shaky step forward, hesitant.

48

The smell of blood is weak in the air, diluted by the rainfall. The smell of Riot's, however, is what makes my cry catch in my throat.

He stands above Romanov's body, Riot in human form now. Scarlet streams roll down his back, looking more like weakly dyed water rather than blood. A giant lump of flesh is missing from his shoulder blade. Where the hole is, is a grisly, gaping bite mark.

49

I resist running to him. Everything worried thought my wolf is screaming at me is drowned out by other things cluttering my head. Uncertainty. Awe. Fright. Disbelief. But most out of all, curiosity.

Because he doesn't look like he's done just yet.

50

He kneels down beside Romanov's canine shape, rolling him onto his back. I'm surprised when his seemingly dead body comes to life, clawing and kicking at Riot with frantic ferocity. While his body writhes, his head never moves. It's as if he's been strapped down from the shoulders up.

51

A broken neck. How ironic.

52

The bastard tried to snap mine twice within the hour. A part of me is pleased to discover that karma is so petty. Though another part tells me that karma had nothing to do with it.

53

I watch unwaveringly as Riot, with a clawed hand, reaches forward and flicks his wrist at the base of each of his foe's limbs. Oddly in a slicing motion. Directly a erwards, Romanov stops struggling.

Then, Riot's hands move to his enemy's chest. I can't look away, nor can I hide the shock on my face.

He claws his way through the pelt, through the flesh, and through the very cage of bones meant to prevent this. As he does this, Romanov's mouth opens wide as if to scream in agony, but nothing comes out.

Riot reaches forearm-deep into Romanov's chest. He murmurs something as he does. Though I can barely hear it, I shudder at the pure hatred dripping o each syllable.

54

"I'll give it to my sister. She can watch it rot."

55

He suddenly jerks his hand back, setting o a shower of blood spewing from Romanov's torso.

56

Riot's hand is painted crimson. Stained and dripping. In his palm is the very thing that life revolves around, the most vital of organs.

57

In his hand, is Romanov's heart. A distorted, oval shaped lump of tissue and valves, leaking blood like a watered, oval.

58

It hits the stone with a callous thud, landing beside it's owner.

59

I can do nothing but stare at Riot. His entire body is flawed with various gashes and bites, claw marks and wounds still bleeding. My chest aches at the sight— though I'm sure not nearly as much as Romanov's does.

60

My eyes meet those of the monster bathed in blood. My breath catches in my throat.

61

There they are, those ruby red eyes glowing like demonic candles in the hapless night.

The aura they give o makes me want to run. To cower and scream until the nightmares go away. But I'm not scared. In fact, I'm the complete opposite of scared. A sense of pride swells in my chest.

62

That's my mate.

63

He's capable of all this. He's a savage killer, an infamous tyrant, and a rogue as heartless as an inanimate object. Yet by some miracle, I get to live on his good side. It's a privilege I'll never lower from the pedestal I hold it on.

64

As he approaches, I don't move a muscle. I stand perfectly still as he embraces me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders and pulling me into his mauled chest. I try to avoid hitting any of his wounds, but it's physically impossible. Instead of wincing, he breathes a sigh of relief.

65

He pulls away to inspect my throat, gently turning my head side to side as if he were a doctor checking for swollen tonsils. It's then that I'm sure my guess was correct. Romanov's broken neck wasn't simply a coincidence a er all.

66

Once he's satisfied with what he sees— no bruises or even a trace of a hand having ever been there— he gives a small growl of approval.

67

I feel like I should speak or say something, anything, but no words come. His black irises are still present, the red glow still illuminating them.

The rain lets up, lightning streaking through the sky.

"We should go," Riot says, running the pad of his thumb along my jaw. He's never been so so before. It's like he's afraid I'll crumple at his touch. I nod, remaining speechless. What is there to say? A er what I just witnessed, silence seems appropriate.

68

As soon as I look up, I realize we have an audience. The streets branching o from the circular plaza are swarmed with citizens. They all stare at us, their mouths gaping widely. All of their eyes are unblinking, disbelieving. I study their expressions further, expecting to find fear and distress. Instead I find their faces surprisingly blank, landing somewhere between shock and awe.

69



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