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At the head of one street is a group of bounty hunters— trademarked by their sinister black apparel and deadly tools strapped to every body part. They stand out from the rest of the crowd for more reasons than their clothing. They're visibly distraught.

The first expression they've ever portrayed in front of an audience, and it's one of grief. The hunters' shoulders are slumped, gloved fists balled at their sides. Some of their mouths are twitching, lips quivering as they try, in great effort, to keep the poker faces they were trained to.

Rather than going into a blind rage from looking upon their leader's dead body, they seem... shattered.

Romanov was their kingpin while they were just numbers under his control. That's what I had thought at least. Looking at them now, standing frozen in place with shock, maybe I was wrong.

Senya...

She's a bounty hunter just as they are, but her distressed-tinged face isn't among them. She isn't here and the leaden feeling spreading in my stomach tells me that's a good thing.

"Riot," I dare cautiously, "We need to go. Now."

He doesn't respond. My mate is standing just as statue-still as the bounty hunters staring at us across the diameter of the plaza. Except his countenance is achieving exactly what the hunters would covet: a cold, unreadable expression.

It's as I look between the two opposing parties that I realize I'm not the one being stared at. Just like the punishments back in Visari, my presence isn't even acknowledged. No. They're staring at the wolf standing tall beside me, poised and ready to achieve his bloody feat all over again. He remains stoic-faced, despite a whole city's worth of werewolves' eyes staying glued on him. The same eyes of the people he's expressed so much hatred for.

In front of all of us, his ruby red eyes start to fade. The red glow dies out, leaving obsidian irises surging with wisps of deep grey, like a monochrome fire burning inside them.

He's unaffected by the attention, completely emotionless. Possibly even a bit disdainful. It's the exact same demeanor he carried in Visari, and undoubtedly the same he had when he dominated Balaige.

And with it, he turns and walks away.

...

Never did I think I'd be so relieved to be sitting back in this giant hunk of iron and steel ever again. This time the train car is empty of anyone else but us. The night hours, Riot explained, aren't as popular among humans.

With a heavy sigh, I let myself sink down into the cushioned seat, for some reason thinking that it might be able to massage away the reality of it all.

"Exiled" isn't a strong enough word to describe what Riot is anymore. Nor are the thousands of death warrants on his head enough to describe his public image.

I followed Riot out of the city as if we were going on a casual stroll. He was as calm as a dead man while I was an overly anxious bundle of nerves waiting for a flaming arrow to stick into his back. When we approached the golden gates, the guards took one glance at the bloody wolf accompanying me and opened them without question. It was as if the news of Romanov's death had spread without a word.

Everyone feared the Exiled Alpha before. The whispers of the things he's done at Balaige made sure of that. Now it's like they're scared in a different way. As if they know now that it isn't the title of 'Alpha' that he's a threat. And if they don't, I do.

If he killed Romanov Lashveiska, the very man nearly ten thousand people turned to trust in bringing the tyrant's death, then this is the end. There is no one else. There's no other being left to bring him down.

Riot Sydney has come out on top. They all know that.

The very wolf whose name is known across the werewolf world is sitting a mere foot away from me, leaning back in the seat with his eyelids closed.

"Riot?"

"Hm?" He doesn't open his eyes.

"What was Romanov like?"

"You met the bastard. You should know." He crosses his arms and slides further down into his seat, unfazed by the question. But I've caught on to him. Everything he does is the opposite of what he thinks. It bothers him, the mention of that name even though its owner is dead.

"You wanna know what I think of him?" I pull my legs up under myself, trying to act like there's not a punchline dancing on the tip of my tongue.

He opens one eye as if to ask what?

"I think he's heartless." I barely get the words out before my lips crack into a smile and I suppress my childish laughter.

Riot closes his one open eyelid again and lets his head fall backward. He exhales heavily through his nose, telling me just how disappointed he is better than words ever could. But his mouth curls into a grin anyway.

Soon I let my laughter out and he joins me. He drags his hand down his face as he quietly chuckles to himself.

"I hate you." He murmurs, though he looks over at me in a way that says just the opposite.

I offer him a cheeky smile. "I know."

...

After a handful of hours nodding off on the train, I'm reminded of how long and miserable the ride back home is. At least this time there are no humans around to inebriate my senses.

We get off the train at a different location than where we had boarded with Senya. At the sight of the unfamiliar surroundings, I'm fully prepared to let another wave of panic set in. Riot, thankfully, seems to know where we are.

With a gentle yet confident hand on my back, he leads us away from the asphalt of human society and back into the woods my wolf has been calling for. The smell of nature— dirt, leaves, trees, and even the air itself— comforts me.

I was so sick of that city. It had a unique sense of undeniable beauty to it and was extravagant in every sense of the word, but there's toxins in the ground. The longer I stayed there, the more I started to understand Riot's hatred for the place.

...

Another couple of hours was spent walking through the forest on no designated path. Eventually the trees started to become vaguely familiar; the place where I never got to finish my morning walk before being attacked by a blackmailing bounty hunter. The memory makes a question pop into my head.

"Do you think we'll see Senya again?" I ask Riot, looking over to where he strides along beside me. He seems lost in his thoughts.

"Not if we're lucky." There's no trace of humor in his cold voice. He was a lot funnier when he actually tried laughing. It takes a hell of a lot of willpower to resist the urge to tell him that.

A spike of excitement hits me when the cabin comes into view over the ridge. I notice Riot come to a stop behind me.

"You go ahead," he says, looking back in the way we came. His shoulders are tense and he seems distracted. He's been like that the entire trip here, though I've intentionally ignored it in attempt to give him space.

"They didn't follow us," I assure him, "We even took a different route." There's no way in hell any of those people who witnessed what I did would dare follow the same trail as Riot. I'm confident of that.

"I would dare follow the same trail as Riot. I'm confident of that." "I roll my eyes and continue toward the cabin.

By the time I reach the bottom of the small ridge, the darkness has become more prominent. Night is falling, casting shadows among the ground and dimming the sky.

With a pang of trepidation ricocheting in my stomach, I see the sliding glass door of the kitchen standing wide open. My senses kick into high alert, goosebumps prickling along my arms. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end as I approach the open door.

The inside of the cabin is a pitch black abyss of shadows. I stall for a few seconds, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dark. I ease through the house, subconsciously holding my breath to listen for even the faintest sounds of someone else's breathing.

In the middle of the living room, a chill runs down my spine. A scent is lingering ever so faintly in the air. A reluctantly familiar scent that makes me want to vomit.

Nathan.

That narcissistic asshole was in this house, his grimy hands pawing all over everything. The thought makes me want to light a match and throw it down.

Why was he here? It's been weeks since our last encounter, surely he's moved on from his delusion by now.

What I find odd is that Nathan's is the only scent here. There's no trace of anyone else, no pack members that might have been drug along with him to ambush us. He came alone.

He really is an idiot.

After a quick trip around the entire cabin, I'm irked to find his smell in every single room. I quickly start opening windows and doors, waving papers as fans and trying my best to clear the place out before Riot arrives.

I remember all too well how he reacts whenever anything about Nathan is mentioned. He hates his guts more than Romanov's, possibly even more than the entirety of the Khopeski pack combined.

If Riot picks up his trail here, I'm afraid he won't stop until he follows him all the way back to Visari. Ripping Romanov's heart out was one thing. His hunters were too grief-stricken and shocked to react. But if Nathan somehow ends up with a morbid death, the story won't be the same.

Alpha Andre isn't the grieving type. He prefers revenge instead.

Out an open window in the corner of my eye, I see Riot's figure approaching. Sprinting down the stairs as fast as I can and nearly wiping out at the bottom, I manage to reach the back door just as he's about to come in.

"Hey," I greet, only slightly breathlessly as I place myself in front of the doorway. "Find anyone?"

He shakes his head before looking at me suspiciously. "Why are you out of breath?"

Damn him.

"I fell on the stairs just now." Which isn't totally a lie. "Don't worry about it. I'm fine."

He seems to accept the answer as he goes to take a step inside. Immediately I block his path, masking the action by slipping my arms under his and turning it into a hug.

Once again I earn the same suspicious expression as his eyes scrape over me and around the inside of the house.

"Why are the windows open?" Despite the suspicion, he absentmindedly returns my hug.

Like a slow motion football tackle, I push him further out the door as I answer, "There was a musty smell." Once again, not a lie. "Come sit with me on the porch."

He stops me dead in my tracks, like a boulder not about to move another inch.

The length of his index finger under my chin forces my gaze up to him. His, however, is locked on my lips.

"Gladly," he says before softly pressing his mouth to mine.



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