

### 33 | He Threatened You

Early the next morning, I wake up in a mass of tangled blankets and ru led pillows. Besides myself, the bed is otherwise empty. The spot where Riot's body used to lay is bare.

Where could he have gone this early? There's barely even a slither of daylight outside and his pillow has long gone cold.

Whatever. He's not my responsibility. He can take care of himself.

A er a long, satisfying stretch, I get up with a yawn. My shoulder is sore where Riot's teeth had sank into it and my shirt is encrusted with brown, dried blood. I probably should have changed before going to bed, but I didn't have the energy to even think about it.

I peel it o , discard it to the floor, and replace it with another long sleeve one with blue arms and shoulders and a white body.

While my shirt was o , I caught sight of the mark in the corner of my eye. Scabby, red, and with a few areas still oozing blood. It'll scar over soon enough and become the mark that it's intended to be: a symbol that ties me to Riot. And his will do exactly the same.

Downstairs there's still no sign of him. His scent lingers faintly throughout the cabin, more than enough for me to track through the living room, down the hallway and out the back door.

Against the wall by the door I find my favorite tall grey boots, the ones I was wearing when Riot took me from my pack. It seems like it happened eons ago, a distant memory that I remember vividly.

I slip them on and head out the door, my sense of smell guiding me. Riot's scent trails o into the forest, in a direction I've never bothering going before. I've always been in the woods in front of and to the right of the cabin. Now I'm heading diagonally behind it, with only my nose to lead me.

Dead leaves crunch under my boots, the towering trees looking naked without them. The sky is just beginning to turn a bright blue, although the whole world looks a bit dim with the sun barely peaking over the horizon. There's an autumn chill in the crisp air with a rejuvenating bite to it.

A er a little while, not having even walked that terribly far from the cabin, I spot Riot ahead. His back is to me and he's sitting on a stump in a small little clearing among the trees. I notice his shoulders and head hanging lowly, dejectedly. He seems focused on something in front of him.

He hears my footsteps as I approach, his back muscles tensing. But he doesn't raise his head, nor show any blatant sign or acknowledgement of my arrival. When I'm close enough to see over his shoulder, my heart drops at what's holding his attention.

Two graves, side by side.

They're covered in a blanket of red, orange, and yellow leaves, just like the rest of the forest. The only aspect that's recognizable as a gravesite are the duel rounded headstones sticking up. They're both a beautiful obsidian black, an exact match to a dire descendent's eyes. Engraved into them are two names, one for each stone.

Raines Sydney and Searna Dela

Carved into the stone below each of the names is a symbol I've seen before, and one that if I move my eyes a few inches to the le I can see in the living, breathing flesh. The same stigma that's branded into the back of Riot's neck: the snarling head of a dire wolf encased within a bold pentagon.

A mere three feet in front of me and six feet down lie Riot Sydney's parents.

Not only is he a dire descendent, but one with double the dose from both his mother and his father. Meaning he's more closely related to the original and now extinct species than I had thought.

The venomous words he said to Senya at the Citadel flash in my mind. "They killed our parents! Maybe if you weren't so far up his ass you'd see that."

This clue was obvious enough to give the strong hunch that his parents were dead. Hell, that's basically what he said himself. But something about looking at him sitting here, so dejected and crumbled, makes the grief feel fresh.

"Your parents," I pause abruptly. This is thin ice that shouldn't be treaded, but the curiosity is burning overtop of it like an oil fire. "How long's it been?"

His answer is quiet, painfully so. "Four years."

"I'm sorry," I whisper, laying my hand gently on his shoulder, the one without the mark. He doesn't lean into my touch like he usually does when he needs to feel it, though he doesn't pull away either. This small lack of action is frightening. It's a prime example of just how easy it would be for us to go back to the beginning.

"I don't want your pity," he grumbles bitterly.

His hostile tone, not to mention the rejection of my sympathy, snaps something small within me.

"I wasn't giving you my pity, I was being a decent fucking person," is what I want to say. But the teeth clamping down on my tongue stops me.

He's hurting, and badly. I can almost feel the ache of loss in my own chest due to the phantom touch of the mate bond. It's unimaginable, the sorrow he must be feeling.

Instead of lashing out, I try in vain to comfort him.

"You avenged them." I move around to his side, stepping closer to him. "Romanov got what he deserved. Although I guess that still doesn't make it ri--"

"I didn't do it for them," he says abruptly, cutting me o .

I pause, furrowing my eyebrows. "What?"

"The Hierarchy killed my parents. Not Romanov." He talks in short sentences, as if each piece of vague information should be explaining it to me perfectly.

My forehead creases with even more confusion and frustration. He acts as if it would kill him to say a word more than the bare minimum.

I stumble over my words, not even knowing where to begin. "Wait, what? The Hierarchy? If Romanov didn't then why did--"

"He turned my sister against me."

"That's why you killed him?" I ask, not skeptically, but quizzically.

"No."

I suppress the urge to let out a loud, angry groan. My voice is a bit shaky in order to keep it level. "Then why?"

He turns and looks up at me. His eyes are on the edge of a dangerous, surging black.

"I know that he threatened you." Those dark irises find mine and the sense of vulnerability they evoke make me want to shrink backwards. It's like he can see straight through my skull and right into the very thoughts stored there.

But I don't let myself crumple under his gaze, no matter how badly I'm tempted. "Yeah. So?" I counter, sincerely hoping my air of nonchalance is believable.

He stands up and squares his shoulders with mine. A faint shadow is cast over me, his body standing in the way of the rising sun. It makes me feel small in comparison to him. I can't decide whether I hate that or cherish it.

"He threatened your life if you didn't make sure I obeyed. I could have gotten you killed, Adrienne!" He growls, raising his voice an octave. The edge he had been balanced on is unbalanced now. And it tipped in the direction of anger.

Shame settles on my shoulders like gravity is pushing it down. I did nothing wrong and yet I'm being scolded, which in turn results in watered down flurries of pointless guilt. My gaze drops to the ground to study a peculiarly orange leaf.

As if realizing that I'm not going to feed his flame, his voice so ens. "Why didn't you stop me? You knew what would happen if I stepped out of line."

I meet his eyes again, and for once sarcasm or a snide comment isn't the first thing I want to say. It's something sincere this time.

"I'm not going to control another person's life," I state firmly, "I know what that feels like and it fucking sucks."

As I continue, passion and pent up hatred from the past seeps out. "You should know what that's like. You said that the entire city acted like babysitters toward you. Well I had babysitters, too. One was a fickle Alpha and the other was a hardass guard that didn't speak a single word to me and whose backside I can still remember to this day. So no, I'm not, nor will I ever, tell you what decision to make."

I pause to take a breath, "Besides that I'm not your babysitter. Find somebody else for that job."

He stares back at me unfalteringly. There's not a single trace of a tear or any redness around his eyes. His pain is completely internalized. Just like every other emotion.

"Let's go," is all he says before walking away. My teeth grind together in agitation. Maybe I missed the point here. Or maybe he's just being a vague asshole to get on my nerves. If I had to bet money, I'd go with the latter.

I trail a er him past the graves and further into the woods.

We hike uphill through the forest. Every step is more exhausting than the last. Although the cabin stands on a flat plain in a massive hillside, the main section of the mountain climbs higher.

Despite spending my life exploring the mountainous and heavily forested terrain of the Visari territory, my legs start to burn with fatigue. It's like the ground goes straight up in some places. At one point, Riot and I are both on our hands and toes, grabbing for roots and rocks buried in the dirt in order to heave ourselves up.

Finally, we reach the top. Riot rounds a massive ancient oak tree, one so huge I doubt if my arms could even reach halfway around. On the other side of the monstrous tree is a small flat area. Bushes and weeds stand high above my head, fully capable of swallowing me whole. I keep my eyes glued on Riot's back like he's a life ra floating through a storm at sea.

He stops and my head slams into his shoulder blade.

"What are you doing?" I ask, blinking to reclaim my sight.

"Look." He gestures in front of us and pulls aside a giant leafy weed. I'm guided forward by his hand on the small of my back. As soon as I can process what it is, my mouth drops open at the sight before me.



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