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It's like we're on top of the world, looking out across it. There's a vast sea of trees below—an entire valley of woods nestled in the basin of a circle of forest covered mountains. It's as if those mountains were hiding this place from the rest of the world, an impressive feat considering it's a world all its own.

"It's beautiful," I finally manage, at a complete loss for words. Beautiful doesn't even begin to describe it. There's something here, something in the air itself, that's eerily noticeable. There's a weird feeling swirling inside me just as indescribable as the place itself. Like power is radiating from the ground. Like something tragic took place here, lost within the grand scheme of time.

I'm astonished beyond utterance, but I'm still confused. "Why are you showing me this?"

He gives a small shrug. "You seemed homesick. I thought this kind of looked like your old territory." He's right. It does remind me a bit of the forests and mountainsides of Visari. Visari is a home that I can't go back to, a land I love with every ounce of my being. But not even Visari can compare to this.

The fact that Riot was thinking of me, of me missing my home, warms my heart. There's a little flutter in my chest, making me realize just how happy I am to be stuck with him. I may miss the place I grew up, but I would trade it for this any day. For a cabin hidden away in an unclaimed forest with my mate.

I smile and move toward him, wrapping my arms around his torso.

"Thank you," I breathe into his collar bone. He hesitates a little before returning my hug. As if he didn't expect me to appreciate the gesture.

Over his shoulder, my eyes land on a massive strip of natural debris. It's an enormous landslide of boulders and dirt. Judging by the grass, weeds, and wildflowers that grow on it, it fell a long time ago.

An irrational and impulsive thought pops into my head. An image of me trapped beneath the landslide when it fell. Sealed off from any air besides the meager supply that was trapped with me. Air that I would waste by screaming and clawing at the rocks, trying to find a way out. All while ignoring the knowledge that if someone did hear me, they wouldn't be able to dig far enough to save me.

I find myself squeezing Riot tighter. Within his chest, his heartbeat speeds up, pounding in my ear. I look up at him with a gleam in my eye.

"You know I hate you, too, right?"

He chuckles a bit, pushing my hair back over my head. "I know."

I realize with a pang of excitement that he's smiling. A full blown, undeniable smile.

Holy shit I've witnessed history.

I've caught him grinning before, or even suppressing a smile. But never have I seen one as immensely happy as the one on presently on his face. And it's all because I hate him.

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The trip back down the brutal mountainside is spent with me trying to use any method possible to accidentally make Riot fall the rest of the way down. So far, none of my attempts have succeeded.

He tries to counter my shenanigans with little pushes and shoves of his own, but his wolf scolds him before anything can happen.

About five minutes after I tried tossing a rock under his foot to trip him, his hand presses between my shoulder blades and gives me a small nudge. I lurch forward for the force, only to be immediately jerked back into place by his iron grip around my arm.

"Riot!" I shout through laughter, having been over this before. "It doesn't count if you catch me. We've been through this."

"This is a stupid game," he grumbles. He's clearly only grouchy because he's losing.

"Yeah? Well you have a stupid face."

I can feel him roll his eyes at the back of my head.

By the time the house comes into sight, the sun is fully up and it's got to be at least noon.

I'm studying the cabin from afar when I stop dead in my tracks. Riot bumps into me from behind. "What?" He asks, laying a hand on my shoulder to get my attention.

"Um..." I point awkwardly in the direction of the cabin. Someone is walking along the backside of it. Riot's eyes follow my finger just in time to see the figure slipping around the corner and out of sight.

His growl rumbles in his chest, and as a result sends vibrations traveling through my back. He then storms passed me and straight towards the house on a clearly marked war path.

"Shit," I curse under my breath, hurrying to catch back up.

I follow on his heels as he rounds the corner of the cabin, right where we'd seen the stranger go. When the front porch comes into sight, a boy is standing there. At the sound of dead leaves being stomped under our feet, he turns to face us.

"Who the hell are you?" I ask, trying to give him a chance to explain himself. Since my irrational comrade isn't much for talking, it's up to me to get as much information out of him as I can before Riot gets his hands on him.

Or not.

The stranger is slammed against the front door, held there by Riot's fist clenched around his collar. Fear flashes across the boy's tanned face and the bit of dirty blond hair across his eyes does nothing to hide it.

"I'm a—"

"Rogue," Riot finishes with a low growl. He loosens his hold on the rogue, as if somehow that vouched for his innocence. He nods at Riot in confirmation, silently thanking him.

I join them on the porch, coming up beside the both of them in order to inspect the rogue closer. To attempt to read his intentions through his eyes.

"Why are you here?" Riot snarls, stepping back to give him room against the front door he was previously pinned against.

"I heard what you done to Romanov. Everyone has." The boy seems to get a bit more comfortable now that canines aren't snapping in his face.

Riot looks at him skeptically, as if asking, "so what?" He truly doesn't realize how revered he is, be it through fear or admiration. And if he does, he doesn't care.

"You're the only wolf that's ever beaten him. You killed him," he speaks with awe in his voice. Almost like he idolizes Riot. Like a little kid with a gleam in his eye while meeting his childhood hero.

I audibly snort, earning a sideways glare from Riot as I try in vain to hold in my laughter. This has to be some kind of joke. Riot? An idol? Never.

Despite my skepticism, he seems serious. The longer he goes on, the more passionate he becomes. "That asshole has been hunting and cutting down rogues for years. He got what he deserved."

"What's your point?" I interrupt before he can praise Riot further. If he's not careful it'll go to his head, then I'll be the one listening to his ego.

"I'm sick of having my self worth measured by how well I grovel at some Alpha's feet," he says, "And if I have to be in a pack then I don't want some mightier-than-thou prick at the top. You're a rogue. You should understand."

Like me, Riot snorts, almost laughing at those words.

"Did you miss the 'exiled' part of 'the Exiled Alpha?' Entering Balaige territory means death. No other pack smiles at me, either." There's a bitter lining to his tone. Bitterness towards having to admit the power he lost.

"No. I never said take over another pack. The packs have nothing to do with this. You don't need on their territory to run your own," the rogue replies slickly. He's thought this through, and thoroughly so.

Riot's eyes are cold as they gaze down on the boy standing on our doorstep seeking out his leadership. He can't be any more than fourteen years old, the very age Riot was when his parents took him to Khopeski. They have undoubtedly faced the same prejudices that come with being a rogue. The only difference is that one embraces it and the other wants out.

"Find a different Alpha," Riot says, and with that he turns him away.

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Ever since we watched that boy walk away, Riot has been quiet. More so than usual. For the past seven days his eyes have often been blurry. Lost in his own thoughts while I try to guess them.

He's sitting on the leather couch, the very same one that's been put through the wall and flipped across the living room countless times. The fireplace burns brightly in front of him, giving light to the entire room. I roll over the back of the couch, plopping down in the seat next to him.

"I finally fixed the claw marks in the hall upstairs," I say, trying to sound happy over the tedious task with the hope that maybe it would wear on him.

"Good," is all I get as he continues staring meaninglessly at the fire.

And that's when the last straw is pulled.

"Alright," I sit up straighter, "What's wrong with you? You've been braindead for a week, what's the deal?" I pin him with a weighted stare. He's not getting out of dodging this question. I've let him alone to sulk for long enough.

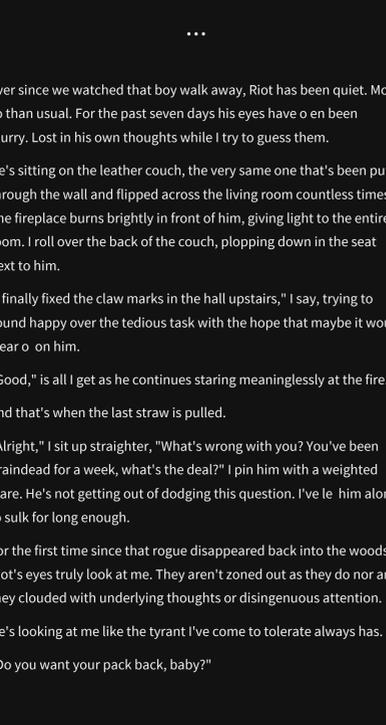
For the first time since that rogue disappeared back into the woods, Riot's eyes truly look at me. They aren't zoned out as they do nor are they clouded with underlying thoughts or disingenuous attention.

He's looking at me like the tyrant I've come to tolerate always has.

"Do you want your pack back, baby?"

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AHH last chapter!! Next up: the epilogue <3



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