

## 16 | I'm Still Here

It suddenly stops. A few seconds of silence pass, then it starts again. Something ramming against the bedroom door. The sharp crack of wood snapping sounds out as it gives in.

I scramble for the clothes on the counter and throw them on with record speed; an oversized white v-neck and black sweatpants hanging loosely on my hips. My frantic hands fumble with the drawstring, pulling it tight only to drop it again.

The banging is drastically louder, now at the door of the bathroom. I barely get it knotted before the only barrier between me and whatever the hell is out there falls to the floor.

A bleach blond barges in, his alert eyes scanning the room before finally landing on me.

"She's here!" He shouts over his shoulder before turning back to me.

His face is vaguely familiar and the ring in his ear matches mine. He's from my pack, although I can't remember ever speaking to him before. I can hear Aimee's humorously exasperated voice in my head, "That's because you don't speak to anyone."

When all I do is stare, he breaks the silence for me. "Nathan sent us to take you home," he says.

The look on my face must be misleading, because his tone turns so and comforting. Like the fear-me-not way you would talk to a child on the verge of tears.

"It's okay," he says gently, as if he's wary of his words, "He won't get you again."

Then it clicks.

They're trying to save me.

They think I was kidnapped. Which technically is true, but by my mate. Does that even count?

A short haired brunette bursts through the doorless doorway, sharing the blond's highly alert energy.

"Get her and let's go. He could be back at any second," she barks before turning and leaving just as quickly as she'd came. I'm an object to them, that's clear to see. Nothing more than an objective in their rescue mission.

At her orders, the blond steps aside and gestures with his hand.

I give him a cynical once-over. The fact that they think I'd ever want to go back is appalling. During my punishments they shunned me, too; the entire pack did. Yet there's a guilt that weighs heavy on my mind.

There's someone I le behind there. The only person who ever cared about me. And in return I disappeared without telling her goodbye.

They'll show me the way back and then I can gain my bearings as to where I am. Once I explain this to Aimee, I'll have no obligation to be there any longer. But what about Riot?

What will he do when he realizes I'm gone? It's a crazy thought, irrational at best, but I might be able to make the trip and back before he returns from wherever he's gone.

Finally, a er biting my lip hard enough that it begins to sting, I nod. I follow the boy through the bedroom, down the stairs, and through the living room.

I'll be back, Riot. Just trust me.

I hesitate again at the door, like an invisible force is pulling me to a stop. Something gnaws at my conscience, something that makes my wolf whine. I shake my head and push it away as I shut the door behind me, catching up with my walking compass.

"How do you know he's gone?" I ask, my eyes grazing over the edge of the forest, where the trees become denser. There are three wolves sitting in the distance, watching us and our surroundings like hawks. I can't help but to feel like that giant, rage-induced wolf is going to leap out of the shadows, just like the night of the ceremony.

"We've been watching the house for a while now. He le about ten minutes ago, o the other way. Don't worry. You're safe now," the blond reassures with a calm, level voice. He's been trained well. I know the comforting tone he's using is fake, but he manages to make it sound genuine.

"Creep," I mumble, not even loud enough to be considered a whisper.

"Huh?"

I smile. "Lead the way."

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As they lead the way I try to lag behind, but not far enough that they'd notice. One of them mentioned it once, to which I excused it as being sleep deprived for the past couple of days. They seemed to believe me.

Every couple of minutes I would scratch the bark o of a tree or stand a stick up against the trunk while they weren't looking. Occasionally I would drag my feet a bit—another symptom excused for being awake for too long—turning the leaves up in an obvious manner.

The cabin had been on a flat area on the side of a gigantic mountain, concealed by the trees. Not the mountain, but the cabin. Nothing could hide something that enormous. Even a er reaching flat ground, it was a long walk until I began to recognize my surroundings.

When the Visari camp comes into view, the three who remained in their wolf forms kept walking. The blond stops abruptly, turning on me. His expression is completely di erent, like he took his sleeve and wiped o his stage paint.

His hand grabs my throat, shoving me roughly into a tree. His face is inches from mine, my back pressing into the scratchy bark. I suck in a sharp breath through my teeth.

"You're a terrible liar," he snarls, "I told you we watched the house. That means we saw you getting all cozy with your captor." He tightens his fingers around my neck. "Stockholm syndrome only goes so far, Adrienne."

He presses me harder against the tree with his hand, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of watching me gasp for air.

I put my palm on the arm holding me and extend my claws. With a steady pace I inject them all the more gently into the very muscle fibers.

"Someone likes sni ing everyone's business but their own," I croak out, grimacing at my burning lungs.

He leers at me, staring holes through my face. He breaks eye contact only to glance at the claws steadily digging into his flesh. As if making a split second decision, he releases me. Gravity pulls me forward, revealing that my feet had been nearly o the ground. When he steps back blood flows from the fresh holes in his arm, dripping onto the dirt.

He acts as though he done me a favor. "Nathan is waiting for you in his o ice. He doesn't know. I'll let you deal with that."

He pivots on his heel to walk toward the camp with a cocky sway. He turns his head, calling a warning back over his shoulder, although I'm sure it's not meant to help me in any way. "Don't expect to be welcomed with open arms."

I rub the red marks on my neck as I watch him walk away. I stare harshly at his retreating form with hopes of him catching fire, but he never does.

The path I follow through the mountainous terrain of Visari territory is familiar and well traveled. A sense of deja vu washes over me at how many times I've walked through these woods alone.

This is the only place where freedom exists. So I came here to find it. Nobody cared to follow me up the path when I went on my runs, which meant there would be nobody to turn a deaf ear on me or shout orders in my face.

Now I'm just stalling up here, looking down on the small houses nestled in the wintry hollow. The surrounding mountains shield the camp from the weather. That's the thing about the Visari valley. It's protected. Safe.

Which is why Riot Sydney's arrival shook them so much. He's not safe, and not even our beloved mountains could protect us from him.

Taking one last deep breath, I turn o the path and head for the bleak little village below.

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As I passed pack members the only acknowledgement they showed me were cold stares. None of them said anything, and I didn't bother to ask why. It feels too much like the past and the old anxiety starts prancing in my chest.

That blond bitch spread rumors. That's all.

I go to Aimee's house first, with an all too familiar "scowling Nathan, he can wait" mindset. She isn't home, my repetitive rapping on the door proving as much. A dusting of snow covers the deck of her front porch. No footsteps are disturbing it besides mine, meaning she hasn't been here in a while. Somehow that makes a pang of worry settle in my stomach.

The only person I came back for, and she's not even here. Disappointment fills me, knowing this was my last chance to see her. To explain myself to my best friend.

I stall for a while longer, sitting on the bench on her porch. I watch whirlwinds of snow dance in the distance, manipulated by the breeze.

Time passes and still no Aimee.

Giving up on waiting, I decide to rip the bandaid o .

I don't knock before I reach the Alpha's door. I open it slowly, peeking my head inside when my body follows.

Just as expected, Andre and Nathan have taken their house back now that Riot's done renting it. Their scents fill the area fully, restoring their claim over it. Not a single trace of the tyrant remains. I'm confident they've made sure of that.

I find Nathan at the desk in his father's o ice. An o ice that would've been his if things had gone as planned. He looks upon my entry and his eyes seem to brighten a fraction.

"Adrienne," he sounds relieved. As if realizing that himself, his eyes flicker away from mine. When they come back, his attitude is changed; more business-like.

He flips open a magazine on his desk. "Come pick out your dress."

I raise an eyebrow. "Dress?"

"The wedding is postponed until tomorrow. There's not much time to get all that ready," he gestures up and down my body with his hand, "So we're starting now."

A pang of agitation shoots through me. He really isn't letting it go, is he? A forced marriage, what more could he want from life?

"I would slit my own throat before I say a single vow to you. Find some other bitch to blackmail," I snap, my voice dripping with hatred.

I don't know what's sadder; the scumbag sitting in front of me or the fact that I mean exactly what I say.

He stands up from his desk abruptly, no doubt with an aching ego. "Oh and I suppose you'd rather go back to the bastard who dragged you o ," He retorts sarcastically, as if that would make me leap into his arms over the alternative.

Something then comes over me, a sudden anger blossoming in my chest. I barely catch my growl before it can slip out through my growling canines.

"You mean Riot?"

"Riot," he laughs bitterly, "That's one word for him That mutt is nothing but a waste of oxygen."

My fists clench at my sides. "And you're not? Oh, that's right. You replace it with all the hot air you blow. Besides that, it seems to me like that waste of oxygen kicked your ass pretty easily."

A low and provoked growl rumbles through him. It satisfies me in knowing that I've hit a nerve.

"Why are you defending him," He asks, although he's the one with the defensive tone. Even from all the way across the room I can see that prominent vein rising in his neck.

My arms cross over my chest and my weight shi s as I give him a calculating stare.

The natural light leaking in the windows has been fading and is finally gone now. Outside the sky has turned grey and angry, and there's a so thunder rolling in the distance.

"Wouldn't you like to know," I sneer.

He takes a step out from around his desk, coming threateningly closer. "I would actually. Are you going to tell me willingly or does there have to be consequences?"

I can't stop the smirk from creeping onto my lips. Something comes over me, something I'm not fully in control of. It's like my subconscious makes the decision for me.

I'll never be free here. My pointless optimism that things would work out and go back to how they were when I was a kid is gone. I know my way out and he can't threaten me anymore.

So I mock him for the first time without so much as thinking about a punishment to come later. "What are you going to do? Sick your daddy on me? Because he solves all your problems, right? Only the best for baby Nate."

His shoulders tense at the mention of his long lost nickname. He stopped getting called Nate at the same time I stopped being included in the family: when I started taking our training more seriously than he did.

But I don't stop at the name. That's only the beginning.

"That's right. I remember. Ignoring something doesn't make it go away, Nathan. You should have learned that a long time ago because I'm still here."

He doesn't respond. The storm casted shadows of the unlit room hide whatever expression he wears. The atmosphere starts to press down on us, making me feel awkward now.

When he doesn't speak, I answer his question quietly, yet plenty loud enough for him to hear.

"He's my mate. If you really wanted to know."

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**What are your predictions for what will happen? Where's Riot and what will Nathan do now that he knows the two are mates?**

**Thanks for reading!**

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