

18 | You Had A Choice

The wolf is so preoccupied in its own misery that it doesn't even notice my presence.

My lip quivers as a desperate, grieving pain takes hold.

I scamper over the shattered glass strewn across the tile, dropping to the floor when I reach him. I throw myself over his back and shoulder like a blanket, clinging onto him as if my life depends on it. Glass shards dig into my knees, but I don't even feel them. The pressure is there, though the pain is a ghost.

"I'm so sorry," I breathe out, my face buried in his silky pelt. I'm beyond sorry. Sorry doesn't even begin to graze the surface of what I am.

His muscles ripple beneath me as he shifts, the cracking and popping of bones filling my ears. Instead of soft fur, my cheek is pressed against smooth, hot skin.

Within seconds he's turned around and sitting up, pulling me into his lap with ferocious force. He doesn't seem to care that I'm sopping wet with hair plastered against my face. His arms lock around me, pressing me flush against him. Like clockwork, my legs go on either side of his torso and my arms wrap around his neck tightly, hugging his head against my collarbone.

"I shouldn't have let you," I murmur against his shoulder. My fingers drag across his skin as they curl into fists, holding onto him for dear life.

He inhales fervently, taking in my scent.

His wolf was making his life hell because he was fighting it. I knew that, yet I still let him alone to deal with the anguish himself.

I'm an idiot. A fucking moron.

"Riot... Say something. Please," I beg. His silence has always been frustrating, but I'm not frustrated anymore. I'm terrified. Terrified of what I might have done.

He tightens his arms around me, squeezing me. Even if I wanted to, the possibility of breaking away now is fictional.

"Why?" He croaks out against the junction of my neck and shoulder. His hot breath makes goosebumps rise on my back.

"Why?" I repeat. Why what?

He pulls back, his hands moving to grip my sides as he looks at me. Something flashes in his obsidian eyes. Something I can't even begin to understand the meaning of.

"Why did you go with them?" His voice is jaded. I can't tell if he's broken inside or building a fire.

"I had to."

"I come back and you're just gone. Strange scents were everywhere," his growl lowers to an even deadlier level, "Mixed with yours." His fingers are digging into my sides and the growth of his claws isn't exactly subtle. Nonetheless, I hold back the wince.

"You don't know how badly I wanted to track them down and rip them limb from limb," his eyes darken as he talks, as well as his tone until the point that I see canines flashing behind his lips. "Just because their scents were on yours."

Before I can even state my claim, another foreboding growl leaves his throat. "And you let them."

He suddenly lets me go of him, sitting me carelessly on the floor beside him. He gets up in a hurry, walking out of the kitchen before I even have the chance to blink.

Amidst the shattered glass, I there for a minute, letting the sparks of his touch fade away. In that minute I feel nothing. Emptiness. Until the anger sets in.

Somehow the blame always falls back to me. This time, however, I'm not letting it.

My pride says to follow him and argue on my behalf, but my conscience says to leave him be.

Just like when I let him here, I go against my better judgement.

"You're blaming me?" I fume as I follow him into the wrecked living room.

He pivots around on a dime, his chest heaving like it's a bomb set on a timer. When he opens his mouth, that bomb explodes, "YOU WENT WITH THEM WILLINGLY!"

"I didn't have much of a choice!" I fire back, though my volume is far from the same level as his.

I catch a blur of movement in the corner of my eye. My hand flies up as reflex and the sharp smack of flesh meeting flesh follows. I don't break eye contact as I process what's just happened. His knuckles are pressed into my palm, his fist held in my palm only mere inches from my face.

"You're not defenseless, Adrienne. You had a choice." His burning gaze is enough to make any wolf crumple. But if Alpha Andre couldn't break me in the seventeen years he's had at me, Riot Sydney isn't going to in one try.

"Yeah," I say, glaring right back at him, "I did have a choice. And I chose to come back." I drop his fist from my grasp, throwing it back to his side as if to make a point. My point being that his is irrelevant.

His face is like a stone precipice; an unreadable slate looking down on me. When I begin to think he's not going to respond, he finally asks, "Why did you come back?"

I shrug. "The same reason you brought me here in the first place."

We both have questions, and he's capable of answering all of them. If playing mind games is what it takes to get those answers, then so be it.

Blackened irises roam over my face, memorizing every line and every contour. Ever so slowly I can sense the distance between us growing shorter as his body gravitates closer to mine.

"And what reason is that?" The hot-blooded timbre of his voice makes me shiver.

His fingertips graze my waist tentatively, beckoning me to come closer. I notice his lips slightly part as he leans in, his eyes clouded with something I haven't quite seen before.

"You tell me."

My heartbeat is thumping inside me, pumping pulsing blood through my veins. My fingertips and hands tingle to touch him.

Due to our close proximities, his lack of apparel suddenly becomes obvious. I resist looking down, knowing exactly what I'll see there. Heat other than his breath rushes over my face.

"Go put on some pants."

And just like that, the intensity of the moment goes up in smoke.

A quiet growl leaves him as he pulls away. Not like the life-threatening ones I'm used to hearing, but one of vast annoyance.

A small smirk pushes its way onto my mouth as he steps back. It may be just my imagination, but I think I see the edges of his lips turn upward as he turns away.

Once he's gone I calm myself down by taking in the state of the house for a second time. With a drawn out sigh, I flip the couch back over on its legs and put it back to where it was to begin with, which is in front of the fireplace. I find a broom and start sweeping up the various debris thrown across the ground.

I come to a spot in the floor that's splintered and morphed something awful. Small trenches are cut deep into the wood, albeit nearly prying the boards up. Beside that, a single three-clawed mark carved into the oak peaks my interest.

For some reason I can't take my eyes off of the mark. Something inside me stirs at the sight, a strangely familiar aura coming from it. Soon I'm kneeling down beside it, gently tracing over the splintered trenches.

The quiet creak of the stairs causes me to leap to my feet, heart racing. A clothed Riot comes down them— clothed from the waist down at least. His torso remains both without a flaw nor a shirt.

Without a flaw, that is, except for the three long scars running diagonally across his right pec.

Turning the other way, I go back to sweeping. It takes me about five seconds to realize what I've missed. And when I do, my blood runs cold.

The mark on his chest matches the one carved in the wood almost exactly. The one on the floor he left in the midst of his torment, but the one on his chest...

He scarred himself... but why?

"Here," his husky, nonchalant voice snaps me out of my trance. He's holding out a pair of clothes to me.

Hesitantly, I reach out and take them from him, forcing a nod of thanks. I had completely forgotten about my sopping attire, too immersed in other things to care. I wonder off down the hall and into the downstairs bathroom to change.

No matter how hard I try or how many scenarios run through my head, I can't push out that one question. Why?

I snort to myself as I close the bathroom door.

Such a hypocrite thing to ask: why?

He has to have his reasons. Yet it's so much harder to understand when looking through someone else's point of view. From the outside in rather than vice versa. I can't even fully understand when looking through my own, much less Riot's.

Forcing it out of mind, I strip down quickly and toss my waterlogged clothes into the shower. The cigarettes in my pocket I stash away in the otherwise empty medicine cabinet. My hands seem to shake as I do.

After closing the cabinet, I glance down at my bare stomach for only a brief few seconds.

Why?

Maybe the question was never meant to be answered.

I hurriedly slip on the dry t-shirt and sweats, which seems to be my only sense of fashion as of late.

I come back into the living room to find Riot rearranging the pieces of furniture that aren't completely trashed. Without a word, I reclaim the broom and resume sweeping the floor.

Time passes in an uncomfortable silence. It's been nearly an hour of quiet cleaning, and even then the house still looks like a mess.

I'm focused on picking up a broken vase, piece by piece, when I hear a loud, agitated growl.

Riot is slumped down on the couch, his hands covering his face as he looks towards the ceiling. "What the fuck are you doing to me?" He groans out. I stand up from my crouching position and slowly make my way towards him.

"I can't even be in the same room as you without feeling all fucking weird around. I want you near me but you're so close yet so far. I have to walk around with your scent everywhere and I fucking hate it because I can't get enough of it."

By the time he's done rambling I'm standing in front of him, grinning down at my mate who once again seems so stressed out. He stares at the ceiling with glassy eyes, the whites of them tainted with little red, squiggly lines.

"Riot," I say gently, barely touching his knee, "I told you— it's okay."

He catches my wrist in his hand, steadily pulling me closer.

I sit down on the couch beside him, turning my body towards him and tucking my legs beneath me. My knee is touching the side of his thigh, and although the contact is minimal, it somehow means so much.

He still holds my wrist, showing no sign of letting go. His gaze searches my face yet again, going over every millimeter like he's sketching me in his mind.

"I hate you," he finally says.

I smile, sliding my fingers between his. "Good."