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Nearly a whole day. That's how far away I am from the cabin in the woods, and even further from my home.

Home I almost laugh at the word.

Home is a place where you can always go to seek refuge and comfort. The Visari territory is a place I can never go back to. Not as long as Andre or his narcissistic spawn hold the title of 'Alpha.'

So no, the Visari pack isn't my home anymore. So where is?

Beside me, Riot tugs on his disheveled hair for about the millionth time.

We're walking along a towering stone wall, one I have to crane my neck to see the top of. The closer we get to the large golden gates in the distance, the more anxiety I can sense rolling off of my mate. The big infamous Alpha is nervous? I never thought I'd see the day.

"You're gonna go bald," I comment. "And I'm not waxing your head when you get sunburnt so you might as well stop."

Suddenly he growls, loud and thunderous. Okay... guess somebody's not in the mood for jokes.

"I smell your blood," he grits out.

"Yeah? What else is new?" I say sarcastically.

The wound had started bleeding through the bandage again. My shirt is so oversized that it hasn't gotten into the red mess yet. Although I didn't think it was bad enough to smell yet either.

He comes to a sudden stop, grabbing my wrist and jerking me to face him. "Why didn't you tell me you were bleeding again?!"

"What would you have done? Thrown me on the ground and started open surgery?"

He growls louder, almost a roar. "Adrienne, you could fucking die! Stop treating your life like it's a joke!"

I snort. "Isn't it though?"

He makes a grab for the hem of my shirt, but I dodge his hand just in time. He follows me and tries again, this time with me smacking his hand away.

"Let me see," he warns with a deadly undertone.

"No."

He lunges at me in a slew of mumbled curses, catching me between his arms. My back is pinned against his chest, his growl rumbling lowly in my ear. As he's reaching for my shirt again, a spike of adrenaline kicks in. I smear my palm against his face, trying my damndest to push this big bastard away and disorient him in the process.

"Get off of me!"

Something warm and slimy swipes across my hand. In an instant I jerk it back, mortified. Did he just...

"YOU SICK FREAK!" I wipe my palm frantically against the side of my leg, hoping that if I rub hard enough then the spit will just disintegrate.

He takes my moment of weakness as his opening. The side of my shirt if halfway up before I can retaliate by doubling over and bear-hugging his arm, as if strangling it would actually work.

"That must be them." Somebody whispers and both of us freeze.

"Who else would it be? Hurry up, open the gates!" A voice hisses back to the first.

Riot and I's heads snap up simultaneously. There are two guards who are glancing warily at us as they scramble to push the large golden gates apart. Senya must have told them to expect us... among other things.

With a dignified glare towards Riot—one which he returns—we start forward again on the sidewalk as if the altercation hadn't happened.

"Riot Sydney. I didn't think we'd ever see you again," the guard to the right, the one furthest from me, speaks.

"That sister of yours really knows how to get her way, doesn't she?"

Before he can even answer, the guard on the left joins in.

"Who's this?" The man looks at me curiously. "Don't tell me you've found your mate earlier all this time. Damn, she must have a high tolerance."

"Only for alcohol," I mumble while keeping my eyes on the ground.

I earn a hearty chuckle from the guard before Riot abruptly pulls me in front of him, away from the man. He places his hand on the small of my back, guiding me forward.

He doesn't respond to them. Not verbally at least. A tense silence falls all except for the sounds of their armor shifting as they scramble back to their posts. When I glance over my shoulder I catch sight of Riot's black irises. That's all I need to see in order to know how he shut them up.

This way he handles people, he doesn't use his words. He uses intimidation. I can't help but to wonder at that.

I remember with dread what Senya had told me.

"Some dire were so far feral that when they did shut back, they didn't know how to speak."

But Riot isn't a dire wolf. He's only a descendent of one. So that doesn't apply to him... right? She also said that that only happened due to extreme cases of isolation. Which would make sense with his exile— if he were dire wolf.

Inside the Khopeskian walls, it's as beautiful as it's rumored to be. The city is tiered, smaller stone walls built into the ground to separate each other. The houses are all made of white brick and trimmed in shining gold.

Pink rose bushes line the brick street we walk down. Lampposts stand between the bushes, just starting to light up as the sun sinks behind the distant mountain, outlining the city horizon in light.

"This place is amazing. Why'd you leave?" I look around in awe, wandering down the middle of the street.

That was a dumb question. If beauty was enough to make a person stay somewhere, I would still be among the green forests of Visari.

"It's not important," he answers from behind me. I had walked ahead of him in my excitement and he doesn't seem interested in trying to keep up.

"So? I want to know."

I absentmindedly pluck a rose from a bush, feeling the soft petals between my fingers.

"Too bad."

"You called it a prison."

"Because it is."

Ugh. Having a conversation with him is like teaching a rock to communicate: impossible. It only enforces the fears already in the back of my mind.

I slow my pace, falling into line behind him. He leads us up a winding sidewalk on a hill. Giant oak trees provide a natural roof over it.

At the top there's a single, two story house. It's architecture style matches the rest of the city: white bricks and gold accents. There's a little porch on it with rows of purple flowers leading up to the stairs.

On the wall beside the door there's a metal plate. In gold lettering, it's engraving reads 18C

Riot pulls out a key to unlock it, opening the door to the pitch black inside. Before my wolf's night vision can even kick in, the door slams shut behind me. My legs are swept out from under me and my uninjured side is pressed against a hard torso.

Judging by the movements, he carries us up a flight of stairs. I recognize the sound of a door bumping against a wall as it's swung open. Seconds later, light floods the room, forcing me to blink a bit to adjust.

He sits me on the counter of an enormous bathroom whose color scheme isn't surprising. Yep. White and gold. Considering the magnitude of this place, there's no doubt in my mind that it's all real gold at that.

Riot is in front of me. With his large hands grasped on my knees, he separates them in order to move closer. Before I can process his intentions, he reaches for my shirt. Except this time, there isn't a guard to provide a distraction.

"Riot, don't."

He rages the fabric just enough to expose my stomach and the bandage wrapped around it. Sure enough, it's being bled through, bright red staining the crisp white.

His movements are slow, as if he's waiting on me to stop him. His fingertips linger over the end of the bandage, brushing my skin ever so faintly and forcing a shiver through my entire body. One little pull of that bandage and my stomach is exposed.

And he just so happens to be holding it between his fingers.

Like a streak of lightning, my hand is on top of his.

"I'll take care of it. Don't worry," I say, hoping my eyes don't look as pleading as they feel. I hate the fact that my voice is quivering against my will.

He stares at me intensely. His eyes darken, even more so than when he gave the guards his silent warning to back off. His jaw tightens and I know I've messed up.

"Let. Me. See." I shrink at his tone. It's deadly. So much so that I don't dare to wonder the result of opposing it.

I let my hand fall from his, lying limply in my lap.

There's no use in covering it anymore. Sooner or later, he would have to know.

With a gentle pull, the bandage unravels. It falls to my waist, exposing my bare stomach.

His breathing grows heavy, nostrils flaring with every exhale. His chest is heaving like that of a rabid animal, one who's rising aggression could be sensed from miles away.

He raises an unsteady hand, a clawed finger gingerly running over the raised tissue before firmly pressing his palm against my belly.

"Who did this?" His voice is like frigid stone, shaking with intensity.

"Nobody did."

"WHO. DID. THIS?"

Deafening silence follows his roaring outburst. A silence that's waiting for my answer. One I don't want to give. His irises are a deep black, the dark grey wisps, almost like flames, flowing through them.

I remember my mistake the last time I pushed him. And I remember, very vividly, the ruby red glow in the dark of the living room. I remember the fear, the panic growing within—not of him, but of what he'd do.

I don't want to see that again.

I push my shirt back down and reach up to touch his face, running my thumb over his cheek.

"Riot," my voice is barely a whisper, though as clear as I can make it, "I did it."

The anger drains from his face, falling away just like his hand from my stomach. Immediately, my skin is cold without his touch.

I look him firmly in the eye, preparing to calm whatever storm is about to break loose. "It's okay."

"It's not fucking okay," he snaps, "Those are burn marks, Adrienne!" I wince at the term burn marks, picturing the horrid scars littering my abdomen. Indentations pressed into the flesh, shiny new scar tissue discerning them from the rest.

My eyes flick up to his face to see his jaw hardening. His gaze is blurred, locked on my chest but looking through me.

No more silence. For the love of the gods, no more silence.

"It was a long time ago," I lower, as if that would smooth over whatever issue is eating at him.

These are demons I buried a long time ago. Ones that I've moved past even though they're right behind me, breathing down my neck. Just like any other problem, if you don't grant it acknowledgement or concern, then it becomes, for powerless.

Now here they are, laid out on the table between my mate and I, seeking attention in the most desperate of ways.

"How long?" Riot asks. Although his tone is impersonal and lethargic, I'm not fool enough to believe it. My answer is critical to whichever direction this is going next: north or south.

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