

## 23 | Things Changed

"Adrienne. Look at me." 21

Even if I hadn't turned my cheek to him, I wouldn't be able to see him. Unshed tears turn my vision watery and staring at the tiles on the floor has become a key objective in keeping them just that: unshed.

I shake my head. "It doesn't matter. I don't want to talk about it."

I wait for his outraged objection. For another outburst maybe, telling me how stupid I am and how only a crazy person would do what I used to. After all, only someone who's insane would harm themselves, right? That's what they all say at least. 25

My blurry eyes widen when strong arms wrap themselves around my shoulders. When my face meets his warm, inviting chest, the dam breaks like a piece of glass. Tears flow silently down my cheeks, soaking into his dark shirt. 28

Damn it! Hatred for myself bubbles up in my stomach, rising until there's a lump in my throat. I thought I was over this. I thought I'd finally beat myself at this stupid game, but that's all just proving to be a hopeful mirage.

My time in the cell is over. My time at Visari is over. So why does the aftermath still follow me? 32

Riot tries to pull me off him but I cling on tighter. I shake my head and mumble a stupid "no."

He tries again, this time with more determination. Once plucked off his chest, I sit there staring at him miserably. 34

I don't even want to imagine what I look like right now. A puppy face smeared with tears. Red, glassy eyes that only inspire pity.

With one swift movement he brushes my hair over my head. Taking away my last resort of concealment. I feel so exposed right now that even running naked through the streets wouldn't even compare. I'd kill to be able to shove these tears back in their ducts and put on a mask to hide what's under the surface. But that's not an option. 33

His expression is solemn. Unreadable. But his voice is gentle, nothing like how it was moments ago.

"Tell me why," he says, just above a whisper. 32

I let out a small laugh along with a shrug. "I don't know. I was locked up so it was a distraction."

He goes rigid. 30

I've said too much. 33

"Locked up?" He growls, raising an eyebrow. 33

I wave dismissively. I don't want his wolf back. And that subject is the perfect bait for it.

His obsidian irises never waver. They stare holes into me until I finally give a reluctant sigh. My explanation is kept short. "Every time I mouthed off or did something wrong Alpha Andre would lock me in an underground cell and order the pack to shun me when I got out." 33

A sharp crack sounds out as the marble countertop beside my leg breaks off into pieces and clatters to the floor under his hand. His eyes are squeezed shut, as if he's stuck in his own livid head. 34

I'm so tired. The old emotion of dealing with dead demons has drained me and now Riot's very much alive one is stirring again; his wolf.

I lazily lean forward and toss my arms around him, resting my chin on his shoulder. "Please don't," I beg. 31

The inconstant vibrations from his growling stop and he goes still within my hug. I hear him suck in a sharp breath through his nose. Other than that, he doesn't move. It's as if his muscles have turned to stone beneath his skin. 31

Relief floods over me when he finally returns my embrace. 31

How the hell did that actually work? 31

His deep inhale against my neck causes shivers to shoot down my spine. 31

"Can we just go relax?" I ask, almost whiningly. As soon as I say it I realize how childish it sounds, but I don't care. All I want right now is to lay down somewhere comfortable and just... exist. 31

To my pleasure, he nods silently against my shoulder and pulls away. In a quick minute he finishes re-bandaging my burning side and scoops me back up off the counter. 31

Downstairs it's just as dark as we'd left it. He manages to find the couch among the darkness and we both sit down heavily, as if letting ourselves break then and there.

I find myself burrowing up against Riot, inserting myself under his arm and against his torso. I close my eyes and welcome that lightless place that always waits for me there. 31

A much valued eternity of silence passes. Nothing fills it except for the occasional rustling of fabric and the sound of Riot's heart beating calmly in his chest. Then I hear him take in a breath and open his mouth. 31

"Where are your parents?"

I turn around and stare at him, confused.

"Did I...?" He trails off, his gaze trained on the front door. 31

I blink. "No. You didn't kill them," I stop my sentence there, resisting the urge to add "when you attacked my pack." 31

When it seems he's waiting on me to elaborate, a strike of panic slaps me on the head. How do I even begin? This is my small, exclusive window to share something with Riot, something personal. I can't screw it up.

"I don't know them," I blurt out, afraid of my opportunity ticking away. "Andre raised me. He found an infant leopon in the woods, about to drown in the rain. Turns out it was me," I smile cheekily, waiting for a reaction. 30

His eyes darken and his brow furrows. He's perplexed, and since he's Riot, angrily so. 31

"He treated you like shit, Adrienne." It sounds like an accusation. A harsh contradiction to what I said about my upbringing. It stings slightly, not the way that he said it so much as the fact that it's true: my only father now treats me like a parasite. 31

"It used to be different," I say, the sudden—and stupid—urge to defend Alpha Andre arising. "Nathan and I, we used to be friends. Best friends. Andre raised me almost as if I were his real daughter. I lived in their house, I was a part of their family. But things changed." I feel the spirit drain out of me as sadness weighs me down.

I can still feel his eyes on me, but they don't feel angry anymore. He's reserved when he asks, "What changed?"

I laugh. "Everything. Andre started training us. With fighting, leadership, anything an Alpha would need. But Nathan didn't take it as seriously as I did and when that started to show it became a problem." 31

I clench my fists, feeling my claws lengthening at remembering the violent frustration I harbor at the both of them now.

"It was always in the back of Andre's mind that I wasn't really his," I recall bitterly. "And that bothered him. It bothered him because out of the two kids that he raised it was the one unrelated to him that showed more promise. So he had to sever ties before he started favoring me over his baby boy." 30

I only realize that my jaw is clenched shut when a sharp ache shoots through my tooth. A finger underneath my chin startles me as my eyes are raised to meet Riot's.

"I would favor you, too." He says it without a smile or any trace of amusement on his face. He's being sincere. 32

I smile and hug him, "You're the only one." 31

He takes my hand in his, playing with my fingers and running his over my knuckles. "So where did Gage come from?" 31

The coincidence of the situation causes me to tilt my head. "It was written on my palm when they found me." 31

"What about your first name?"

I give him a pointed look and slowly say, "Adri... Andre." It only makes everything all the more painfully ironic that he named me after himself as well. 30

But I'm sick of this subject.

"What about you?" I poke his shirt where the scar would be. Sure enough, my finger lands on one of the raised ridges. 31

He grabs my wrist gently and begins massaging my palm with his thumb. 31

"Another time."

As he stares at me I can tell his gaze is unfocused. His attention lost somewhere in his mind. If only I could hear his thoughts. Then this would be so much easier. He wouldn't be as complicated and I wouldn't be being guessing what's going on inside his head. 30

"We should get ready," he says, moving to sit on the edge of the couch. I groan loudly, throwing my head back with dread. The mere concept of seeing Senya again exhausts me. As if the hard feelings between her and her brother isn't enough to turn my hair grey, then the added edginess from her threatening atmosphere is. 30

"You're kidding." I look at him with hope in my eyes. Hope that this is all some cruel joke.

"I'm not."

"Please don't make me," I beg. He's supposed to be merciless, but maybe I can buy mercy if the puppy dog eyes are strong enough. 31

He leans towards me, stabilizing himself with his hand beside my hip. His breath tickles my face when he speaks he's so close. And when he does, it's low and sinister. 31

"You remember when you woke me up on the train?" 39

Oh no... 31

My eyes narrow into thin slits. "You ruthless bastard." 34

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**Should I go back to updating Tuesdays and Fridays or only Fridays? I can do either ;)** 31

**Thanks for reading!** 31

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