

## 29 | Shattering Screams

Cold stone against my skin. Ropes tied tightly around my wrists. Those are the first things to welcome me back into consciousness. I sit up, bones popping with stiffness.

I recognize with a stab of trepidation the face sitting only yards away: Romanov. He's sitting cross-legged across the room, staring at me with the intensity of a scorned animal. His face is unreadable, yet somehow I can read it just fine, having had plenty of practice with Riot. I have an idea as to why I'm here, but I don't want to believe it as true.

"She's awake!" Romanov calls, not breaking eye contact for even a second, "Bring him in."

While we wait in silence for "him" to arrive, I take the chance to stake out my surroundings. The room is large and circular, with floors and walls made of cobblestone. The ceiling comes to a hollow point above in the shape of a turret. Small windows dot the walls, like that of a medieval watch tower. Outside the windows the sky is a dark gray, an abyss of angry storm clouds brewing over the white and gold city. Rain drizzles down heavily, so dark that you can hardly tell it's day instead of night.

At the side of the room it begins to square off into a descending stairwell. From that stairwell comes a boy, every piece of his apparel black and every part of his body laden with a weapon sheathe. One feature jumps out at me with a chill, and those are the dead eyes in his skull that are fixed on the ground, void of emotion.

Something oblong and large is draped over his shoulder. It's wrapped in black plastic and looks eerily life-sized. He drops it carelessly on the ground beside me. It lands with a dull thud. Romanov gets up and the bounty hunter he'd called in steps back. With a gloved hand, Romanov pulls away a portion of the plastic.

I cringe, the rancid stench of decaying flesh burning my nostrils. The corpse's skin is pale. His eyes are still open, staring hauntingly up at ceiling. They're glazed over, the expression of fear frozen inside them. Half of his face is completely gone, torn off down to the dirty white of the bone. His jaw is slack, only a slither of flesh holding it together.

"Do you recognize him?" Romanov asks, almost accusingly. This is why I'm here? To play guessing games for the name to a mound of mutilated flesh?

"How could I? He barely has a face," I say, my palm mulling my words.

Romanov growls, apparently displeased with my answer. "Smell again. Closer."

"Sniffing the dead isn't really my thing."

"NOW!" He barks, shoving my head next to the dead man's.

I only stop recoiling when realization hits me like a ton of bricks. The color drains from my face, just like his did.

The blood that Riot came back covered in smells exactly the same as the blood dried to this corpse's torn and flayed flesh.

This is the hunter from last night. The spy that snapped one too many twigs in the bushes. Of course that's why I'm here. Romanov made it very clear; if Riot breaks any law, any at all, then this entire deal is over. Possibly along with other things, such as my life.

For once, I hate the fact that I'm right.

This is him. And his is what Riot done to him. He ripped him apart. Dissected him like a frog. And now I have to answer for it. For letting the tyrant "run loose."

Romanov must notice my pale face and gaping jaw, though not as pale and gaping as his friend I'm sure. He bends down and throws the plastic blanket back over the body.

"He's only the first of many I've found in the last 24 hours. So maybe you'd like to tell me why my scouts are dropping like flies." He steps threateningly closer and I scoot cautiously back.

His fist lunges forward, grabbing the portion of rope between my hands and yanking me to my feet. My eyes are wide and my heart is thumping mercilessly in my chest. A strand of feather-light hair falls across the bridge of my nose as I'm held face to face with the mercenary hired to kill my mate. I'm so close that I can see every one of the pores in his skin and each singular hair that makes up his beard.

I shake my head, not trusting myself to answer and keep my throat un-slit.

His hand shoots up, gripping my jaw with an iron claw. He tilts my head up, squeezing tighter as if with a vengeance.

"I told you to keep him under control," he snarls through gritted teeth. His dark eyes are hot, boiling in fact. He spits his words at me like they're venom capable of burning me. "I agreed to this fucking deal because that's what Senya wanted. And now nobody's happy, all because you couldn't do your fucking part."

Guilt fills my stomach. Romanov is right. I had a part, one given to me through menace and warning, but I had a part nonetheless. One that I didn't fulfill.

Why did I let Riot leave? I should have kept him with me. I should have made sure his claws stayed fingernails and his canines teeth.

But I didn't. I'm not his keeper. So why the hell am I feeling guilty over this?

Then I realize what Romanov's doing. He's manipulative. He's the kind of person whom controlling others comes easily to. Somehow it reminds of Senya, which makes all the more sense. I have an inkling that they're close, meaning it's only logical that they be alike in some ways.

"Then don't... send people... to watch us," I wheeze out, the heel of his hand crushing my throat.

"I'll do whatever I want," he seethes, "There was no agreement against that."

I have his attention. I can't afford to lose it. It may be my hopeful imagination, but I think I hear a microscopic slither of defense in his voice. Actually, I'm certain that I did.

I squirm against his hold until it's loose enough to breathe.

"You wanted this to happen," I accuse bitterly, "You know what sets him off. And you know that surveillance is one of them. You just wanted to make killing him easier on your conscious."

"I don't give a shit about his petty little temperament issues or his life."

I shrug my shoulders nonchalantly. "You may not, but Senya does."

I remember what Riot told me about his life in Khopeski and how much he hated being watched by the townspeople. The more I think about it, the more I'm sure of myself, and the more I'm sure that Romanov had a plan all along.

"If you at all value your hunters' lives as much as you claim to," I jab a finger blindly towards the covered corpse, "Then you wouldn't have sent someone as easy to find as he was. If that's how all you train all of them then it's no wonder you're so eager to cash in on Riot's bounty. That's a ridiculous price considering the poor service the people are getting back."

It's as if as soon as I'm done we both remember his hand on my neck. I take a gulp of breath right before he reestablishes his crushing hold as a punishment.

Bastards the only word I can think of as I feel my face reddening and my lungs screaming for air.

My vision starts to blur and distort, black splotches appearing at the sides. My head starts spinning at the lack of oxygen.

Then, screams shatter the air. A multitude of them, bloodcurdling and terrified. I can't tell if it's hallucination or reality. Romanov's grip lets up. It takes a minute for my eyesight to return.

His head is turned, senses alert to listen. I don't question it. My mind is running so fast that it freezes in place and instincts take over as compensation.

With a hard shove, I break away from Romanov. In a flash I'm bent over, sawing at the bindings on my ankles and wrists with sharpened claws. The rope severs within seconds.

I stand up just in time for a hard fist to connect with my cheek. It knocks my head sideways and forces a sharp pain through my lip, my teeth undoubtedly slicing it open. Pain pulses through my face, but the time to process it is a luxury I can't afford.

Fear and adrenaline drive me to the only conclusion I find reasonable. My body shifts into a cream colored wolf and with a roaring snarl I lunge at Romanov. His back slams into the stone with great satisfaction, my weight driving him further into it. Almost immediately his hands curl around my snout, slamming my snapping jaws shut. I retaliate by clawing at his chest, tearing his shirt and digging down into the bloody flesh.

From the corner of my eye, the other hunter is running towards us. I leap off of Romanov's writhing body before either of them can pin me down.

Using my experience with Senya as an indicator, I quickly choose flight over fight. Bounty hunters don't play fair, and melting my skin off a second time isn't present on my list of ambitions.

I dive head first down the winding staircase, towards whatever waits for me at the bottom. It's only midway down when I make a sickening realization, and that's that I'm running straight towards the sound of the screaming. And it's anything but a hallucination.

Outside of the tower, the rain pounds down with intentions of shattering the cobblestone streets. Anxiety rises in my gut, giving me the desire to hurl as I come to a sudden halt. I'm trapped in a terrifying vortex of panic. Behind me is a man who wants me dead and in front of me are the ear-piercing shrieks of an entire city thrown into chaos.

I make my decision and gamble with my chances. Out of the shelter of the tower entrance, the downpour immediately soaks my fur, making my pelt ten times heavier. But I keep on, sprinting through the streets despite the thunder shaking the ground. Despite the high pitched wailing rising too close for comfort, only three streets away.

A shiver of alertness shocks my heart. There's nothing like the expression of vocalized horror in a throat-tearing cry to send your nerves over the edge. Not to mention what sounds like hundreds of them.

Damn this city!

There are so many twists and turns and pointless detours solely for the purpose of decor or extravagance. I trot to a stop at a fountain in a lavishly designed circular plaza that I've never seen before. Fuckkkk.

The array of screaming is coming closer. Eerily in a way that sounds like the people are being herded. No. Herded isn't the word for it. Chased.

My chest heaves for air, my fur completely soaked. Hysteria makes everything worse. The pounding in my ears. The spastic beating of my heart. Where is the goddamn exit? Indecision clouds my thoughts. All I know is that I want out of this place—this prison—that I'm in.

I sense hyperventilation coming just as my breathing jars and accelerates.

Find peace. Just find peace.

I start thinking of the forests. Of the fresh air, of the silence, and of the freedom. I close my eyes in an attempt to pull myself back together.

Suddenly I'm back walking in the forest by Riot's cabin. I remember the chill of the air, the quiet sun painting the sky an array of so colors.

And then I remember what happened next.

I'm thrown harshly back into reality when a giant weight drops down on my back. Deja vu that's all too real.

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