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Isaac tilts his head down to look at my hand. He reaches for it, playing with the band of my ring and tracing the Greyhound insignia with the pad of his thumb.

"I'm not angry at what needs to happen, Alpha. I'm just-"

Isaac's brows knit together as he tries to search for a specific word. The scrunch of his face tells me he failed and frustration begins to bleed into his expression,

"I just didn't think that the first time I'd set foot into Duskfall since then, it would be because we'd need to see how intact it is for future settlement. I would've thought that when I did come back, years after leaving, it'd be because I was ready. It'd be because I'd finally set things right and avenged each and every one of them."

Isaac lets go of my hand but doesn't look up. His shoulders slump forward.

"It's been over four years for me. Been that way since I left for Gamma training. The day I left, I never expected anything to change when I'd come back.

He lets out a dry laugh imbued with self-deprecation,

"Didn't think I'd come back as the last living pack member, that's for sure."

"You're not alone. I'm right beside you. So is Noah."

I remind him, knowing that anything else I say wouldn't have as much meaning for him than that.

"I know. And I thank the Moon Goddess for that everyday, even if I hate her for everything else. That's why I want you to take it, Selene."

Isaac shuts his eyes,

“Take Duskfall. Take my home back. Take it for her.”

His eyes open and the smile on his face becomes heartbreakingly nostalgic,

“Take it so that you finally have that chance at life Alpha Oliver and Dad wanted to give you.”

I don't respond. It's clear he doesn't need me to. We don't say much of anything after that. The sound of water rushing down between the rocks fill up the space left between us. And if his eyes began to mist over just before he discreetly rubbed at his face, well, I wasn't going to bring attention to it.

I slid my hand on top of his.

Where words seemed to fail, actions made up for it.

The next week had been the busiest I've ever been since taking the Alpha title.

After discussing the suggestion about merging Ignis Red, Greyhound and Duskfall with Isaac, everything else seemed to fall into place. Raizel hadn't been surprised when I told him I wanted to proceed with the proposal. He'd expected it, if the lack of surprise he had on his face was anything to go by. And when I asked him of what his thoughts were about the idea, he'd readily given his approval.

The news gave Williams reprieve over the topic of ownership of Duskfall. Apparently the other Alphas had been insistent on finally occupying the territory after years of desolation. While he hadn't

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been keen to hand it over to just anyone, more so because Isaac was still alive and had more rights to it than anyone else, the constant badgering was finally taking its toll on him. He couldn't keep postponing it. It was bound to be taken one way or another.

Isaac's agreement was what put Williams' apprehension to rest.

And now, tomorrow was the day we'd been scheduled to visit. Isaac had been withdrawn the last few days leading up to tomorrow. He kept to himself but he was slowly beginning to open up again. Being back in Greyhound and associating himself with the other pack warriors had kept him from being completely detached. Noah hadn't been any better, being a constant annoyance over his ear. He may not say it out loud, but Isaac appreciated the support. The constant small talk kept his mind off Duskfall and gave him the mental breather he needed.

He was way better off now than when I spoke to him at the Capital.

I wished I could say I was confident about our visit as everyone else seemed to be.

After four long years, I was going to set foot in Duskfall again. I wasn't sure how to feel about the fact. On one hand I knew the sorrow and regret would never completely vanish. The guilt that always accompanied me would never cease to exist. I knew that, and part of me accepted it, but there was also that lingering anticipation.

Anticipation to see the first home I ever had. Excitement to see it bustling with life once more. Duskfall was never meant to be abandoned. It was never supposed to be the shadow of the greatness it once was. Now, we had a chance to revive the place that gave so many people happiness. And although the grievance over what was lost will never be gone, we can only move forward.

Of course it was easier said than done. We still had to draw up plans about how exactly we would divide the territory and which sections would go where and how our people would respond to the expansion. All in all, we had our work cut out for us.

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It's why I'd been going back and forth to Greyhound and the Capital this whole week.

Noah had also been complaining non-stop since then. Drowning in paperwork wasn't the way he wanted to go, so he says.

"Walker's trial had been pushed up to the same day as the Dixons. With Chamberlain, Val and Benicio's confessions, we have enough to make sure the Beta doesn't get off. For now, Walker's in solitary confinement. His lovely wife is on house arrest here, in the Capital. The Chancellor decided to wait until the pup was born to indite her. She won't get off easy though. She still knew about the attack and so readily condemned you to die there too. As Luna, well,"

Meredith's sharklike grin is lethal,

"She should've come clean about the attack even if she was given the title until after the fact. Falsely alleging an Alpha as her mate doesn't give her any points either. With your recount of the events, along with the confessions, they're all as good as f ucked."

The ex-Alpha slid the folder containing all the details about their cases over to me. I glanced at the first few pages, noting that upon investigation, it was found that Benicio still had contact within Reddusk. A childhood friend, apparently, who still fed him information about the happenings within the pack.

It's how he knew about Lila's existence.

But how he knew I was close to her was still unanswered. Leaning back against the chair, I tapped the nail of my finger along the surface of the table. I let out a considering him,

"We have three confessions,"

I peered up to Meredith who rose a brow at what I was getting at,

"Why not make it four?"

The meaning behind my words hung in the air for some time. It was no secret that the fate of the rogues were as good as damned with or without my intervention. We had enough confessions to make do with, but it wasn't enough for me. Meredith's face brightened with understanding the second she realized my intent. Her confusion twisted into a pleased smile,

"Fio... yes, we've let her off for too long. Her mate's already used up his importance. Why not see if little Fio has anything new for us?"

The little huff my wolf let out made me grin. She was in agreement.

Yes. Yes, we have let her off for too long.

Admittedly, the subject of Fio had been secondary to everything else thus far. I had no real belief that she knew anything more than Val did. The duo hadn't held much importance to Xeneron, that much was clear. They might've been among the higher ranks, but Xeneron was the type to keep his cards close to his chest. I doubted anything substantial would come from our game but even so, I owed little Fio a visit.

It'd hardly be fair if I played with one and not the other.

Shifting my attention back to the documents scattered over the desk, I moved the first few pages from the pile until I found what I was looking for. My eyes pinned onto the image of Fio. Rather, the

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ghost of her. Dark matted hair clumpy from oil, sunken cheeks, dark circles emphasizing how exhausted she must be, and the delicate curve of her throat looking fragile with how much fat she lost. Those dark eyes stared back at me.

I couldn't postpone it any longer.

I had a promise to make good on.

Breaking Fio had been easier than dealing with Vat.

She laid on top of a metallic psychiatric bed, strapped down by her wrists and ankles. The thick bandage lined with silver in her mouth was put there to prevent her from biting down on her tongue.

"She's been rabid since the confrontation with Val,"

Opal explains, calmly observing the woman in question from the two-way mirror.

"Her refusal to eat put her at risk, so we had to transfer her here. The mate bond is wearing her down. The separation from her mate is driving her mad more so because she still feels Val's emotions no matter how faint. Her control over her wolf is slipping. We aren't sure how much time we have left before she gives in."

Standing before her now was peculiar.

She was far smaller than before. Her bones protruded from her skin, highlighting how malnourished she was. Her refusal to eat hadn't helped with that. In some way, this

must've been her final revolt. She knew she wasn't going to get out of this mess so she's trying to end it. She's trying to find refuge in her death.

The dazed demeanor she presents didn't change upon my entering the room. She stayed unnaturally still, eyes fixed unseeingly at the ceiling. If she hadn't been blinking ever so slowly, I would've mistaken her for dead. This dream-like state had been a shock to burst in on. It was so unlike the fiery deviant I'd known her to be.

"You must be tired."

I say softly, moving closer until I was sure I was within her eyesight. Reaching out, I held onto the top rail of a chair and dragged it over to me. The screech of its legs scrapping against the stone beneath us irritated my wolf but she wisely kept silent. I kept my attention of Fio whilst sitting down.

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"Tired of being stuck down here. Tired of the silence, the dark, and the never-ending cycle of fighting against your wolf."

Fio remains motionless, but her breathing picks up a notch. Her consciousness was still there. Buried as it may be, it was attentive enough to feel something at my taunts.

"You must be so tired of being alone."

A finch.

"You know, I don't like to be cruel. But sometimes there's just no alternative."

The placidity within the cell begins to feel disturbed. There's a sense of energy, slowly building up as though it was waiting to gather as much as it possibly could before snapping. The atmosphere feels charged and that in itself is alarming.

"Your mate confessed to everything. He's told us all he knows. He's been taken into confinement, away from here. You could see him again, if you wish. Though of course, you'll have to give me something in return. Nothing is freely given in this world."

I get up to carefully remove the bandage preventing her to speak and sit back down just as quickly. She didn't try to bite me or retaliate. It's the promise of reuniting with her mate that sparks some kind of recognition in her expression. She blinks, lips trembling into a disbelieving open grin.

"M-my mate?"

She asks hoarsely,

"Y-you'll br-bring me to my m-mate?"

It's almost pitiful. To see what she's reduced to almost makes me pity the wolf she could've been. Should she not have followed Xeneron, should she not have been influenced by the drive to create a new order like so many other rogues feel.

"Yes, Fio."

She whimpers at my tone, the falsity of compassion giving her the sense of security her vulnerable state was in desperate need of.

"You could see him again. If you tell me everything, you could see your beloved mate again."

She looks ready to listen but a small flash of defiance makes her falter,
“B-but-”

“Unless you don’t want to. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you don’t want to see Val. What a shame. I’m sure he’ll be devastated.”

Theatrics always felt a little silly for me. Especially when I knew the minute I got up, Fio would scramble upon herself to make me stay. Her desperation would overpower any kind of doubt she’d have.

“No! NO! I’ll speak, I’ll speak! Wait! Please!”

She thrashes against the straps for more than a few moments but calms down when I make no move to leave. Wild, feral eyes search for me,

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“Y-you promise? You’ll bring him to me? You won’t break your word?”

The smile I gave her, I hope comes off as indulgent. She seems to be appeased by this as she lowers herself back to the bed. The hackles she raised lowered instantaneously when she sees me stay put. Fio’s heavy breaths sound frayed. The stamina her minor outburst consumed illustrates just how worn out she was.

Opal was right. She doesn’t have much time left.

I take her moment of compliancy to stand closer. I got so close to the point that I was very nearly hovering over her.

“You just need to tell me everything you know”

I coax gently, running my hand over her hair.

“-not a detail spared.”

The trusting glint in her eyes and the impatient twisting of her fingers lets me know that finally, I have her. So I wait. I wait until the truth she so steadfastly held onto from the very beginning spills forth. The entire time Fio speaks, I run it back in my mind to compare her words to Val’s. After every piece of information she gives me she steadily starts to get more confident. Once she started going, she couldn’t stop. She’d go on a tangent every few sentences, getting lost in her own thoughts. It’d take her some time to get back to it but she does. Eventually at least. The things she tells me are identical to those of Val’s words. There are no discrepancies, no confusion, nothing but identical statements.

“He always told us it was... necessary for the goal.”

She mumbles to herself. Her eyes glazed back.

“Told us he needed something in Nightwake... the gift.”

Her words give me pause but she’s too lost in her own mind to notice how I turn stock-still.

“Said it was important. That he needed it. Didn’t tell us what it was except that it was in Nightwake. It was too fragile to steal. Too many risks would put it in danger so he wanted to wait... until it was brought to him.”

Gift.

Sophie had said that when Hestia and I were still infants, Benicio had taken us to Ivory. To see if either of us had gotten the Goddess’ favor.

To see if we were gifted.

My heart thudded against my chest. The sound of my blood roaring in my ears momentarily blacks out whatever else Fio was saying. Before I could even begin to think about reassuring

myself with the video recordings, another spear of distress hits me.

Gift.

He's looking for the gift,

He's looking for Hestia- no, he's looking for me. It would make sense. I was Raizel's blessing, I was the one who was given a choice in mateship, I was the one who suffered the same fate as Luna. I was reliving the same story Luna did but on a bigger scale. It never fucking ends

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"We thought you died."

My head snaps back to Fio who went on and on unceasingly.

"Draxyn said he got to you. You and that-that little girl. Said he threw you two along with the Alpha and Luna. We sent another letter after that. I help write it, you know?"

Her face brightened,

"I was the one who helped Xeneron send out the threats to Duskfall. Told your father you died with that girl. We were trying to guilt him you see... Didn't work though... Draxyn must be so angry you're still alive..."

She blinks and then her face voids of emotion. All traces of her joy are replaced by this blank canvas. It's unsettling. The switch of her personalities puts me on guard. She cracked.

"Where's Val? You said you'd bring my mate."

There's a struggle now as she tries to swivel her head from side to side. She wants to get a better look around the cell. Perhaps she thinks her mate is here, just not in eyesight. Fio whines as she tries to pull free from the straps. Burns from the silver embedded into the harnesses marks her skin but she doesn't care. If anything it encourages her behavior.

"Val!"

She shouts, aggravated.

"Val! I'm here! Val!"

She turns her venomous glare at me,

"Bring him here you dead bitch! It's all your fault, all your fault! You should've stayed dead! Should've burned like the lot of them!"

She continues to screech and shout but none of her words mean much to me. The descent to her instability is awful to watch, but is isn't something I can feel guilty about. As cruel as it sounds, I can't imagine anything more fitting for her. She's unrepentant about what she's done. She only regrets being caught. I sigh, shutting my eyes for the briefest seconds.

That's how Benicio knew I was close to Lila. He must've connected the dots when he read the letter of my attempt to escape with her. But Draxyn... he

Idn't handle the humiliation of being bested by me. So he told everyone he killed me off...

"Your confession is appreciated, Fio."

It's the calm of my voice that lulls her back from her berserk episode. She snuffles, eyes teary and face pale. She licks her lips in consideration. The expression on her face twists once again to something more pensive.

"And Val?"

I can only offer her a nod,

"Of course. I keep my end of the bargain."

Her body sags in relief. I could feel her rage simmer and quell. She's at peace again.

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"Thank you... thank you.... thank you..."

She keeps saying it as I turn to leave her behind. She doesn't stop even as I shut the door on her.

I never tell her about Val's awaiting fate.

That his actions, and conspiracy with Xeneron had cost him his life. That he was going to be doomed regardless of her confession. That she shares the same fate as him.

I don't tell her, but she'll feel it all the same.

She'll feel the snap, the disconnect of their bond and she'll know what it means. She'll feel it and it'll be the final thread that kept her from completely snapping. In the end, she'll beg for death.

She'll feel the exact way I felt that night at Duskfall.

Helplessness.

Rage.

Heartbreak.

But she'll still feel that hope. Hope that she was misunderstanding something because I promised. I promised her she'll see her mate. I swore.

It's that hope that'll keep her breathing. The hope that will be mercilessly crushed.

Sometimes, hope is far more lethal than any kind of punishment.

The day we visited Duskfall was deceptively quiet.

When Raizel and I petitioned to claim the land, one of the biggest issues we needed to oversee was whether Duskfall was inhabitable. Four years of isolation and the prior attack on it would've been damaging to the area beyond repair. It wasn't the buildings that held importance. Those could be rebuilt or replaced with little to no issue. The priority was whether or not the land was fertile enough to prosper on.

The stress of realizing that we weren't completely out of the woods regarding Duskfall's condition doubled the concerns I had over what Fio had said about the gift. I couldn't say for certain I was the one Fio was talking about. I wasn't entirely sure it was a person they were looking for either. Looking at it from an objective standpoint, between Hestia and I, I found myself caught up in more trouble than anyone should ever have to be involved in. It would only be natural I'd also have a homicidal psychopath trying to hunt me down.

Keeping all of this to myself would be unwise. I knew that. On the off chance I was right about Xeneron, I needed as much people as I could on it. It's why I decided to speak to Raizel about my guesses after we visited Duskfall.

I didn't want to risk anything going wrong pre-visit.

"Are you ready?"

(000000ooooo I know you see me standing here-)

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I blinked up at the gated entryway and tried desperately to stop the shaking of my hands. No matter how much I told myself to breathe, calm down, I couldn't. Every single memory I had of this place flash through my mind like never-ending film strips. The happy, the content and then the absolute

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horrors of flaming houses and scattered bodies.

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Their screams of terror echoed in my head.

I'm scared

Mama...I'm scared

“Selene.”

The flinch from Raizel's sudden touch startles him. He watches me in minutely surprise, but then frowns in realization. His expression softens and I find myself in his arms, his big, firm hand brushing my hair back and away from my face.

“Breathe, my love. Breathe.”

The shaky breath I take in is bordering pathetic and I hate it. I resent the panic that still bubbles up in the depths of my chest when I think of that day. It's a testament to how little I actually changed-

“Stop.”

Raizel tightens his grip on me,

“You and I both know that isn't true.”

The conviction in his tone wasn't something I could argue. He whole heartedly believed that and to an extent, so did I. He was right. My self-doubt would only ruin everything. I won't let these unreasonable thoughts shatter the new beginnings we were trying to nourish. So I nod, and turn back to the gates.

A small tinge of unease settles in my chest.

Isaac wasn't faring any better.

Our bond is still, undisturbed, but his face is a different matter. The color from his skin drained until he was pale in the face. He stands there, looking at the entrance to the home he lost, and I start to feel the grief seep back into him. I know not to touch him right now, so I offer him what I could.

I send a wave of comfort to both him and his wolf.

I notice the minute he felt it. His back stiffens the tiniest bit before his muscles

He sent one back.

“Let's go.”

I whisper, lacing my hand through my mate's.

go

lax.

Williams had given us permission to enter and survey around Duskfall. He'd been too busy to attend with us but sent some of his men over to make sure everything went well. Half of their members were staying out side on guard as the others went with us.

wasn't sure what I was expecting to see when we get there. The burning of houses and the aftermath of the attack on Duskfall hadn't left me much hope on what we could salvage. I hoped to find at least one building still standing.

The heavy gates pulled open excruciatingly slow. Isaac was starting to feel impatient. His wolf prowled around in his head, pacing back and forth as they waited for the signal to go in. When the

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gates finally pulled open I wasn't surprised to see him immediately step inside. He didn't wait for anyone else as he strode his way through.

Raizel and I followed close behind along with Weston trailing after us. The Beta hadn't been able to stop his curiosity. He glanced around, his expression forlorn. Everyone was filled in about our histories. It hadn't changed how any of us saw each other, but it did garner a new type of understanding among all of us. A better sense of camaraderie, if that makes sense. Emerson and Noah (surprisingly) had opted to stay within their respective packs. Noah wanted to give Isaac space. I knew he wasn't comfortable with the idea of going into Duskfall. He felt like he was intruding, he told me as much. I hadn't tried to convince him otherwise. I could certainly see his point of view and knew Isaac would appreciate the gesture.

As we walked further into the heart of Duskfall around twelve minutes in, we began to see the remains of the attack on every passing building. There'd been rubble laying around the grounds. Scorch marks that never faded from the standing houses and whatever was left of the other structures, gutted me. Those were the marks of the end. It was so eerily quiet. What used to be a place so filled and bursting with life, was now a ghost town.

"Look around,"

Raizel ordered, nodding to the other warriors that went along with us.

"Check the water system and see if it still runs. Whatever you see that is essential to settling here, you make note of. I don't care if you see jewelry, or anything else, you don't touch it. It is not yours for the taking. If any of you even considers it-"

Raizel doesn't finish his sentence but the threat is loud and clear. No one waits a second longer before they go off in different directions, doing as Raizel bid them to. I was far too taken by the fact was actually standing here to really pay attention to anything else.

There were a lot of houses that burned down, but there were others that remained for the most part, intact. The library had been burned down to the very end, so was the community center. I can still remember the inner parts of the small indoor playground they had for the pups. Jason had always been so fond of the slides.

My heart gave a squeeze as we walked by Alpha Thompson's house.

It was half collapsed, the second floor was gone but the outer walls of the first floor was still in shape.

A few of the smaller houses made it out.

One of which, was Bentley's house.

The minute I saw the small cottage

Almost like it hadn't been through an

earest to the woods, my throat tightened. It looked so normal.

*mbush.

It stood, tall and nearly perfect with the only flaws being the broken down door and windows and a few stray scorch marks on the stone. It was still there. It was whole.

Isaac had naturally gravitated toward his father's house. I didn't stop him, but I did tighten my grip around Raizel's fingers,

"It's still there."

I whispered, transfixed at the little home I'd walked into so many times. It almost felt as though if I

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walked in, Bentley would be there to greet me with a warm smile and a cup of tea. Lila would be running around his garden and would giggle and shout when she'd see me.

Look, Selly! Look! I watered the daisies!

The brush of Raizel's fingers over my cheek brings my attention back to him. He smiles at me, small and sad.

"Do you want to go inside?"

I think back to Isaac. He's probably looking at whatever's left of his father. He'd want to scavenge what he could alone. This was his moment of closer, it was only his. I shouldn't intrude on that.

I shook my head,

"No,"

I give a short pause,

"I want to look at the garden."

He nods his assent and allows me to guide him in the back. My legs felt heavy the whole journey there. What was a few minutes felt like hours. I wondered if any of his flowers made it. If any of them remained and hadn't died without Bentley's tender care. The roses he so carefully nurtured

Against reality, I hoped at least those made it.

As we turned a corner, I had to hold my breath.

The garden filled with numerous types of flowers was nowhere in sight. There weren't any lavenders, irises, sunflowers... no roses in the wide plains. The only thing left behind was the over-infestation of weeds. That, and even more rubble. The battered watering can I used so often laid over the ground, tipped over. My heart sunk to my feet. I knew it was nearly impossible to hope for any of his flowers to survive. Hope was always so cruel.

You can't help but hold onto it against the odds.

"I'm going to fix it."

My own voice surprises me, but it doesn't stop me from going on.

"I'll return the garden back to its original state. I'll return the garden Bentley had to leave behind."

"I know

you

will."

Raizel tugs me into his chest. His touch washes over me like a breath of fresh air.

"And I'll be here to help with whatever you need."

Hope.

Hope is a fickle thing.

But it doesn't stop the seed of it to bury itself into my chest. It doesn't stop it from growing as I see Isaac step outside with a smile on his face. He's carrying a small red box. I recognized it.

Photos of his family.

The redness of his eyes betrays his smile but I know he feels it too. It may hurt right now but he feels the same anticipation I do.

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Isaac-”

I froze.

I turn my head into the direction of the woods and instantly my wolf stands alert. We scan the perimeter, and for a moment we think we were mistaken. We almost believe that it's paranoia getting the best of us.

That's when we see it.

It was quick, barely even a second, but we caught sight of it.

There'd been someone watching us from a distance. It was hard to notice at first glance but I was certain of it. Someone in human form with startling familiar molten grey eyes had stared back.

-Editor's Note-

Hi lovely readers!

Hope y'all are safe and healthy.

It's an honor and lucky for us to meet here.

Many thanks for your love and interest in this book.

We are very sorry that this is the last chapter that the author delivered to us.

At present, we are trying our best to let the author update more chapters as soon as possible.

Please give the author and us more time and patience, many THX!!!

LOVE Y'ALL!!!