

## 26 | Understand Me

My blood freezes in my veins at the sound of his voice. I wasn't trying to hide, per se. So what did I really expect? I feel sick with guilt, like I've done something terribly wrong.

I turn around, not bothering to hide the cigarette between my fingers. Riot is standing in the doorway of the house, his signature unreadable expression staring back at me.

Slowly, he approaches. His eyes are dead as a reaper's as he steps forward. I reciprocate with a step back. Another step forward, another step back. That's how it goes until my waist bumps into the wooden railing around the porch.

"Alright, fine. Yeah. I'm a smoker. So what?" I challenge, bracing myself for the worst. Maybe it's the suspense of the dead look on his face that gets to me, or maybe it's the guilt I already feel towards myself.

"Go ahead, tell me how stupid I am. Tell me how my lungs are blackening and how kissing me is the equivalent of licking an ashtray. Speaking of which, if you get lung cancer don't bother suing me. I'll reimburse you myself." I rant without stopping until I'm out of breath with my heart thumping in my throat. If I get all the jabs in at myself first, then he won't get the satisfaction.

While I was raving Riot was moving closer. Now his chest is inches from mine and for once the lack of distance is su ocating. As if in slow motion, he raises the hem of my shirt, exposing my stomach as if his unspoken point were written there. I don't make a move to stop him.

There they are: the various patches and streaks of raised, shiny scar tissue.

"Are you serious?" He asks, disbelief in his tone.

In the blink of an eye he grabs the cigarette from my hand and launches it across the yard. A growl thunders in his throat, aggressive enough to make a grisly bear run.

"ARE YOU FUCKING SERIOUS?!" He snarls in my face and I jerk my head away. I flinch at his volume, trapped between his body and the railing.

He snatches up pack of cigarettes peeking out of my jeans pocket. Within seconds the cardboard box is shredded in his hands and emptied on the ground.

"Hey! What the hell, you asshole!" I exclaim, although I would be more heard screaming into the void.

He stomps his foot down on the white rolls of paper, grinding them with a vengeance into the boards with his heel. With a burst of panic, I shove him away frantically. Then I crouch down, trying in vain to save the nicotine he's wasted.

But it's too late. Every single one: ruined.

Anger burns in my veins and heat rises to my face with the fury of a thousand suns. I inhale deeply, prepared to curse him out until the devil himself is taken aback. But he makes the first move, yanking me roughly to my feet.

He speaks in a deadly, strained tone. "Never touch a cigarette ever again. Do you understand me?"

When I don't answer, he repeats it even more slowly. "Do. You. Understand. Me."

I move my gaze from his chest up to his eyes. When they meet, I put as many metaphorical daggers into my stare as I can possibly muster.

"No," I snap, raising my chin defiantly, "If I want a cigarette then I'll get one. Do you understand me?"

But I'm not done there. I keep going.

"You think you're so perfect? We both have demons, Riot," I jab my finger into his scarred pec. "I know that came from your claw. So step o your goddamn high horse."

Blackened irises stare straight at me as he reaches down and pulls his shirt up, exposing the ridged claw mark. It takes an intense amount of self control not to look down and let my eyes roam over his torso.

"This is what got me my freedom," he says darkly, drilling his shirt back down. "Not wallowing in self pity."

It takes me a minute to process his words. When I do, my jaw begins to quiver. I try to decide my reaction, anything between livid and heartbroken.

Somehow, I remain calm, though only on the outside. On the inside a storm is begging to break loose.

Self pity. Why did I think he would understand? I'm a fucking idiot for ever expecting him to. I should've kept my problems hidden like I always do. It's simpler that way. So, so much more simpler.

I lower my voice and look him dead in the eye. "If you don't want ripped o then maybe you should inspect the product before buying damaged goods."

I sco bitterly and shake my head, "Now get the fuck out of my face." Venom drips o my tongue. I want away from this bastard. As far away as the earth's boundaries will let me.

I shove past him, moving him out of the way with a sharp elbow to the ribs. I only get a steps away when a hand curls tightly around my bicep and pulls me against a rock solid chest.

"Don't touch me!" I start to struggle but his arms clamp down around me like chains.

"Lister," he hisses lowly in my ear.

His fingers dig into me, followed by his subtle sni ing of the air.

A drop of water drips down from his wet hair and onto my cheek. It slides down my neck and absorbs into my shirt. He smells intoxicating, his natural scent mixed with the fresh smell of body wash and water. I swallow the lump in my throat. I should be comfortable around my mate, yet my heart is spazzing out in my chest as he holds me.

I blink and try to focus. There's something dangerous here. That's what my animal instincts are telling me. A shiver runs down my spine with alertness. So I perk my ears, picking through the silence.

There's a rustle of leaves out by the patch of trees beyond the side yard. Riot's hold tightens impossibly further. My eyes feel ready to pop out of my head, whether it be the intensity I'm searching the dark tree line with or the arms squeezing me with enough force to strangle an ox.

I hate myself when I realize I'm holding onto him just as tight, squeezing his arm back like he's the life ra in a raging storm. As if using him as a buoy will really make the bad things go away. I wish.

I expect to hear Riot growl in response to whatever's out there, but he stays silent. He starts sni ing the air subtly, so I follow suit. Sure enough, there it is: the scent of a person, a werewolf, watching us from the shadows.

In seconds, the calm night is shattered. A snarl rips from Riot's throat as he bolts towards the presence, leaping over the porch railing like a rabid dog. I'm le feeling more vulnerable than ever without the fleshy armor he provided.

Stupid mate bond.

Without a second thought, I take o a er him, vaulting over the railing with a manner of grace that surprises even me. I chase a er Riot, who, in turn, is chasing a er someone else. Why am I following? I have no idea.

Eventually Riot stops and I nearly slam into his back. His chest is heaving, each exhale coming out as a breathy growl.

"Romanov," he snarls, looking around the woods frantically. Patches of moonlight shine through the leaves. Other than that, everything is bathed in shadow.

I tilt my head, confused. "But that didn't smell like Romanov?"

"He sent one of his hunters," he says, nostrils flaring as he tries to pick up the trail.

That simple statement makes it all click. Romanov was hesitant with the conditions of the deal he agreed to. He was suspicious enough to bother with threatening me if Riot stepped out of line, and with the attitude he portrayed, he wasn't very confident that he wouldn't.

"He was making sure you didn't leave," I state.

His hand flexes at his side, claws curling out of sight into his balled fist. In the snap of a finger Riot is on all fours, dark fur shining in the dim moonlight. His massive paws scratch fitfully in the dirt, flinging dead leaves and unearthing damp soil. His snout moves erratically across every inch of the ground, over every tree trunk and every leaf.

I do nothing but stand there and watch, like I'm observing an animal in the wild.

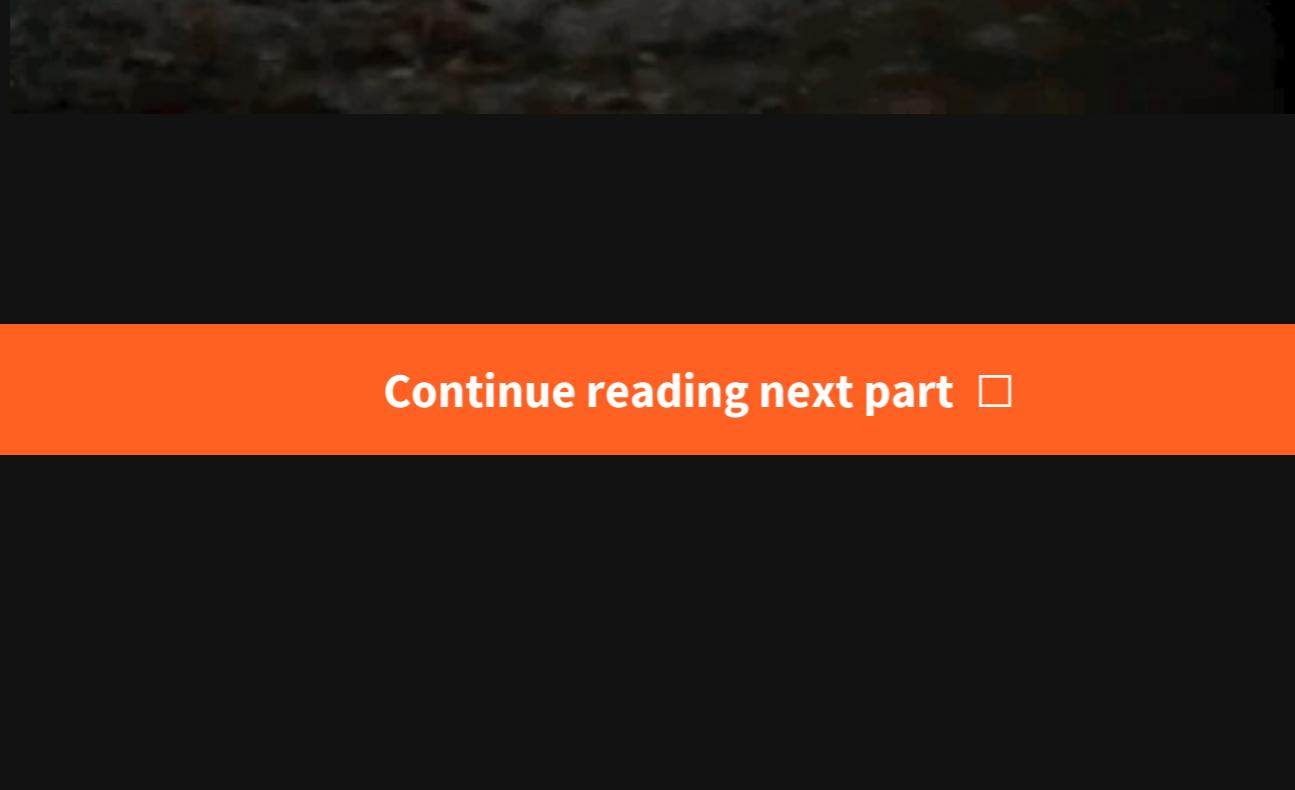
Is this part of the reason he le this place before? Judging by way he's acting, the way this went straight to his nerves, I don't think this is the first time this has happened.

I open my mouth to comfort him. I even raise my hand to put on his scapular shoulder, but I lower it just as quick, remembering where we stand.

If I'm so busy wallowing in my own pity, then it looks like I don't have any to spare for him.

Silently I turn and lumber slowly in the direction of the house. Fall leaves crunch loudly under my feet to announce my leave for me.

Riot is too busy with his manhunt to try and stop me. Usually my wolf would be driven mad over that and convince me that he hates me a er all. But now? I'm grateful for it.



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