

Chapter 4 - Agonizing Guilt

"Maybe there's more we all could have done, but we just have to let the guilt remind us to do better next time." — Veronica Roth

Present Time

"You would have been best friends with her wolf, Artemis." Sizzling pain swam through my heart, caging in a prison of agony. That was one of my favorite moments I shared with Nuria two months before she died. We had plans for our future. We had plans once we shifted for the first time. Our lives were made for us! *"You and Angelika would have been as close as sisters...like we were."*

"Oh, Kiya..." Artemis spoke softly. Her voice caressed me as hot tears swam down my cheeks. Each droplet carried a 'what-if'; what if Nuria was still alive? What if the rogues never came? What if I had listened to Steven? What if we had shifted together? What-if after what-if splashed on the ground near my toes, disintegrating into tiny droplets of broken dreams.

A broken future.

"Her death wasn't your fault. I would have loved

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o meet Angelika, but that's not possible. You miss her terribly; I can feel it from your heart. That's a beautiful memory you have of her. Treasure that."

"But Artemis... I took that from you. I took Angelika from you. I never gave you the love of a close friend like Nuria had given me. We've been friends since we were in the crib. She made me happy, and how did I repay her? By selfishly pulling her into my adventure, forgetting rogue sightings. They tore her away from me and I watched her get mauled to death. I couldn't do anything! I couldn't...!"

All the pain I thought I solved overflowed from its burial chambers like a clogged sink; the fluidity of agony filling me faster than air. No matter how hard I try, the guilt eats me like. Gobbling my heart with its sharp teeth piercing and tearing at each chamber. Many years after Nuria's death, I still feel responsible. The misplaced blame of the angel's death is not misplaced when I'm unable to free myself from its tormenting hold.

It killed me daily with every memory I have of Nuria. For my sake, I tried to push those memories away. Burn them, toss them, drown them as much as I could so I didn't selfishly have to feel the searing pain accompanied by their arrival. Nuria's smile is still as real as if she were alive today. I still

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remember the silkiness of her ebony tresses, the golden hue of her skin, the sparkling cerulean of her eyes, and her angelic aura. It's all real like she's standing in front of me, ready to take my hand to our latest bout of mischief.

I reach out hoping to touch an ember of warmth, only to be met with a blade of deep-seated guilt slicing through my palm. It made its home and hearth inside my broken mind.

I wish I can apologize. I wish I can take back my actions that day. I wish I was buried in the cemetery while she and her mother lived their best lives. Perhaps Luna Essie would have birthed more children or Nuria would have found her mate or went off to college. The future set up for them shattered to pieces by my selfishness and forgetfulness on that fateful day.

I can't even utter her name without my throat closing up and bile rising to my throat. Tears continue to bucket down my eyes, burning my cheeks with their searing heat. Why do I deserve this life? These avatar powers? This status as a warrior? How do I deserve any of this when I took away the hearts of the two purest people I've ever known?

How does Neron look at me? How does he look at me with love despite the knowledge that I'm the last

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person to see his sister and mother alive? They were killed while I helplessly watched. It's me, still alive and breathing while they lay cold six feet underground?

Nuria was only nine years old...

Her life hadn't begun, and it got snuffed out. Why did I convince her to come with me? Why did I make that choice to be daring and adventurous? Why did I do that?

Why?

Why?!

WHY?!

I deserved it. I deserved everything. I deserved the beatings. I deserved the starving. I deserved the neglect. I deserved the ra—

Dropping on my bare knees, I convulsed into sobs of regret and remorse. I didn't care who heard me. My pain is punishing me for a decade-old sin, and I deserved it. I deserved every moment.

I didn't know how long I cried. I didn't know how many tears I've shed over this memory of my best

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friend and my self-hatred in the involvement of their passing. Suddenly, a powerful scent of sandalwood and ginger clouded my nose, burying in the crook of a neck. My throat burned with sobs and my sinuses sunk into Neron's scent as he held my quivering body.

Even now, as I cry with his family picture to my chest, he expresses love. Concern. Care. All for an undeserving woman.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry..." I wailed into Neron's chest as he rubbed circles on my arm and back. It only made me cry harder. "I'm sorry..."

"It's not your fault, Kiya..." The Alpha whispered into my hair. "You didn't kill them. It was never your fault. Stop blaming yourself, please."

"Yes, it was!" I retorted. "It's because of me Nuria's gone..."

"No! The fault is on my uncle and his jealous rage! He lost his ways and took it out on two innocent people! He's the rightful recipient of all the blame, Kiya. He killed them, not you. You didn't know what would happen. Kiya, you were a child. A child who wanted to have fun with her best friend. That's all. If anyone should apologize, it should be me."

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My body jerked with sniffles and hiccups, but I said nothing. "I, for the longest time, believed you were responsible. Grief and anger blinded me. I lost my mother and my sister, and it hurt. It hurt so **bad**, and I hurt you because of it. I never took your word and branded you as a murderer. If Kwame hadn't slapped me in the face with evidence, and if I didn't hear it from the mouth of my wretched uncle, I wouldn't have believed it. I wouldn't have believed your innocence, and that made me a monster. I didn't believe a little girl and put her through years of terror."

Neron lifted my face from his chest to look into my red, puffy eyes. Goddess, I must look like an absolute mess because he has tears beginning to fall on his handsome face. The urge to reach up and wipe them away is strong, but I resisted.

"I'm sorry, Kiya. I'm truly, unequivocally sorry for hurting you. I'm sorry that you had to carry this weight for so long, waiting for others to take responsibility. I'll never stop apologizing. I know they won't change the past. It won't change that I've raised my hand against you. But I'll change the future for us, whatever that may be. As long as you're here, no one will hurt you. I'll make sure you stay safe up to your departure from my territory."

Neron's thumbs continuously failed to wipe the tears from my cheeks, but he doesn't stop trying. When

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one tear is wiped away, three more fall. It's a never-ending cycle of misery. He looks into my eyes, deeply, despite my vision cloudy his form into a swirl of color. Heavy warmth radiates from his hand and sunk deep into my skin, begging me to remove the guilt that plagued me for years.

'Don't believe him.' A foreign voice said in my head. *'He's still a monster. He still hurt you. He deserves nothing but suffering and misery for the years he brutalized you.'*

Neron and I stared into each other's eyes for a while. Silent messages passed through the small space between our faces. Blue shifted in shade; dark to light and light to dark. There's no sense of malice or deception in his words. He intends on keeping me safe. He intends on changing.

But is it safe for me to open up my heart and trust in him?

'No. It isn't.'

I...I don't know...

We can't have any emotional connection. I made that clear. It'll make our separation painful.

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Everything fucking hurts. Why is this so complicated?! Everything still hurts even when Neron pulls me into a bone-crushing hug. He's muttering soothing words in my ear that failed to penetrate the prison surrounding my heart. I can't get myself to admit that I didn't hold a role in Nuria and Luna Essie's deaths. I guess that's why I've been in therapy for so many years because there's still a lot I have yet to heal from.

I know this is Neron and I sharing a moment of vulnerability. I've never felt this exposed to someone before, especially someone that I harbored hatred for a long time. But that didn't matter at the moment.

I just needed someone to hug me.

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