

*Had I done something?*

No, I don't believe so. Nothing came to mind, so the chances of that being the cause seemed unnaturally low. In addition to that, Amari wasn't the type to keep her feelings to herself. It wasn't that she was terrible at hiding them. It was just that she was extremely vocal and obvious with her more romantic and personal feelings. Step on her toe or call her a name; sure, you'll never know that you angered or hurt her. But be a close friend that pissed her off; you'd be lucky if she didn't bring it up within the first hour of the act.

Such a reaction always served the two of us well, especially since I never really knew what was on her mind. Not the deep things anyway. She was known to ramble and speak of small, insignificant things. But the heavier things always seem to take a backseat. Whether it just slipped her mind or because she believed she was doing me and everyone else a favor by never bringing it up.

But since I doubted that I had done anything wrong, that only meant that something else had caused this reaction. None of the others were walking around in foul moods, so it wasn't because of them. Maybe she heard about something from her parents? They rarely got into contact with her, but when they did, the conversation either went very south or just barely resided in neutral territory. I couldn't think of any other problem, at least not one that was significant enough to make Amari behave like she was.

Glancing over at her, I watch as she fiddles with whatever rests within her bowl, her eyes trained on its contents but with a faraway look in them. She's been behaving this way for a couple of days with no signs pointing towards what the cause could be.

"What do you have planned today?" I question, placing my attention back on the phone in my hands.

"Nothing." A simple answer, but Amari never answered simply.

I sigh and lean in, "Amari? What's up? You've been walking around in a funk for the last few days."

“Nothing’s wrong,” she frowns, scrunching up her nose as if I had just said something offensive and ignorant.

“Come on,” I urge, leaning in and grabbing her hand, “talk to me. Please.” She manages a small smile, one that reaches her eyes but barely.

“It’s really nothing. Or, at least it’s nothing now. It’s over with, and I just - Crap!” Amari shouts, jumping back just in time to avoid the shattering bowl landing on her toe. Instead, it makes an immediate impact with the floor and sends ceramic shards throughout the kitchen.

“I’ll get the broom,” you mumble, getting to your feet to retrieve the tool and returning to find that Amari hadn’t moved. You find her shaking profusely, her eyes watering though the tears refuse to shed.

“Amari? What’s wrong?” You rush to her side, cradling her face and dabbing at her eye with your thumb, your heart racing. “Can you just tell me already? This is past me just being worried now.”

“I’m fine,” she mumbles, attempting to smile and failing, “it’s just a lot. I didn’t mean to break the bowl.”

“I don’t care about the damn bowl,” you growl, “I just want to make sure my girlfriend is okay.” You didn’t know how else to word it. What else to say or do to prove that you worried for her and her health. That seeing her like this was hurting you just as much.

“I just want to lie down,” she mumbles, squeezing your hand before escaping your grasp and leaving your side. She’s halfway out of the kitchen when she stops and comes back, reaching for the broom, but you shake your head.

“I got this. Just go lay down.” She squirms before finally agreeing and leaving me to clean. The action is done with only half of my concentration on it. My mind was still on Amari and what could possibly be the issue. Even part of me was starting to wish that her problem was with me, at least then something could be done, and it would be less of a guessing game.

Once everything is clean, I go to search for Sydero and Zillah who I find both relaxing outside along with Bradley. Zillah and Bradley both sit on a couch, Bradley’s attention

on his laptop and Zillah on his phone. Sydero is the only one refraining from looking at a screen but that was because she was lying in the nearby grass, her eyes closed.

“Do any of you have the slightest clue how to get Amari out of this mood of hers and what may be wrong with her?” I inquire, taking a seat on a spare couch and huffing, wishing she would just tell me herself.

“Get her some candy,” Bradley mumbles.

“Stop,” Zillah reprimands, “she’s not that childish.” He glances over at you, “there’s something wrong with her?”

“You haven’t seen how she’s walking around?”

“I heard something about a group of hybrids being killed,” Sydero yawns, “but I don’t know if she knows about that or if that would bother her.”

“Was it her parents?” My heart skips a beat, why wouldn’t she tell me something that important?

“Not that I know of,” Sydero stretches as she sits up, “it also wouldn’t be the first time hybrids been off’d and she’s never been bothered about it in the past. Or at least not to this extent.” I sigh, scratching my forehead. It made sense but then it still bothered me that she wouldn’t just come out and say this. It had to be more than just hybrids being killed that was bothering her.

“I’m going to go speak to her. Maybe this time she’ll actually tell me what’s going on.” None of the others say anything more to me as I turn and walk back inside, finding Amari in her room, her phone in her hand but she was hardly paying any attention to it.

“You up to talk?”

“Of course,” she says but I can hear the doubt in her tone.

I take a seat on the edge of her bed, “Syd told me that some hybrids had died. Is that what’s eating at you?”

She rolls her eyes but sighs deeply, “yes and no. Hybrids die all the time, right,” she attempts a smile but fails. An action that seems to be happening quite often now and discouraging me further and further. She continues on. “I haven’t talked to you about it because I barely understand it. I saw it on the news, but then my parents called me to see if I heard. It was a group of vaewolves, all wiped out by who knows.” She sighs, shrugging her shoulders as she places her phone on the bed.

“I don’t know why they always think they have to call me about these things. But they do. It went into a discussion about safety, and I just felt like a kid again. And they talked a lot about safety when I was a kid. I crossed the road this one time and this purple car, a really pretty purple car. It had all of these designs on it and -” There was no need for me to stop her since she does it herself, a task that she’s been getting better at. Most of the time, none of us stop her ramblings, understanding that it was just part of her. Well, that was a lie. Sometimes we stopped her during hunts, but that was due to being on the clock ...

“So that’s what got to you?” I question, “your parents treating you like a kid?”

“No,” she frowns, “what got to me was the safety conversation. I know I have all of you.” She giggles, “I mean, only people who come after us are those on our level or above, and even then, it’s kinda silly. Imagine an ant or no, I like ants. They mind their own business, and they’re powerful... and ... sometimes I don’t feel safe.”

I follow closely, blinking several times when she finally voices her concerns.

“Seriously? But you just said -”

“I know. And that’s why I didn’t say anything. It’s silly. Most times, I feel like I’m cocooned by all of you, mostly you. But there’s sometimes where I think someone will come, like how my pack did, and that’s it. It doesn’t matter what you guys do. I’ll be wiped out. All because my father peevd off the wrong people.”

I open my mouth to speak but then close it a minute after, attempting to find the best words and the best way to placate her worries and fears. It wasn’t that I didn’t know what to say. Words were easy to come by for something like this. Simple reassurance and a touch of logic could do wonders. But that’s not what I felt like she needed. If that was the case, then this would hardly be much of an issue.

Somewhere between me trying to find words and deciding against them and then looking around, an idea comes to my mind. It was a silly one, perhaps one that would only distract her for a moment. But it was an idea, nevertheless.

“Hey, Amari, get up.” She frowns but doesn’t question me, standing as I begin to rearrange a few things and then take the comforter off her bed.

“What are we doing?” I refrain from answering for a while as I continue my work, grabbing additional blankets and pillows before finally turning to her with a hopeful grin.

“We’re going to make a blanket fort.”

Her eyes widen much like I thought they would as she glances from them to me, “I never made one before.”

“Seriously?” I question, grabbing the main blanket and stretching it out before draping part of it across the dresser and the other side along the bed frame. Amari wanders to my side, shrugging her shoulder as she holds the end of the blanket while I go and secure the other end to keep it from moving.

“No, I did, once. My parents had left me alone in a motel and ran off, hoping it would confuse the people after us. It was still pretty early, so I still wasn’t in control of my feeding.” You watch as she grabs a pillow, a melancholy smile on her face as she grabs the next blanket and passes it to you. “I tried to control myself, but I ended up ripping the throat out of this older woman who was staying a floor below us.” She scratches the side of her face, her eyes growing distant once more. “She smelled deeply of pine and lavender as if she was trying to scrub the smoking smell off of her skin.” She closes her eyes and inhales, “her blood tasted like chemicals. I threw up constantly after that.”

My movements are slow as she retells her story, wishing to hug her but not wanting to do anything that would cause her to stop and lose her train of focus.

“I was terrified that someone had seen or that the people after us would magically find out about what I did. And so, I hid in the room. I created a pillow fort and stayed right there until my parents returned.”

“How long was that?”

“Days,” she answers matter-of-factly, “I remember just being scared and lonely, and every little sound had me on edge. I never felt safe, like really safe, you know? What do we do with this one?” she questions, holding up a smaller blanket. I direct her to where the third and last blanket should go. We work in silence, Amari watching me and acting on my cues. I don’t know what she’s thinking about, probably everything, but I was still pondering over her words.

Her not feeling safe with us did sound silly, but only because every single one of us would fight to our last breath for her. But I also understand that sentiment alone would not ease her fears.

With all the blankets now situated, I turn my attention to the inside of the fort and begin setting up the last blanket and situating the pillows. We head inside, and before she can get comfortable, I wrap my arms around her, pulling her into my lap.

“Amari, there’s not much I can say, but I hope someday you find yourself comfortable and safe around us.”

“Don’t say that,” she laughs, wrapping her arms around me and snuggling in. “I do. Feel safe, I mean. Just sometimes, old fears come up. And they’re silly, but they’re there. Like I said, I’ll get over it.”

“I won’t lie,” I sigh, trailing my hand across her jaw, “I’m not used to this Amari, but I’m glad to finally see her coming out.”

She frowns and turns to look at me, “you’re happy to see the pessimistic, downer Amari?”

“I wouldn’t say pessimistic. More so, the Amari that understands that the world isn’t all sunshine and happiness. Don’t get me wrong, I love your optimism. I love how you constantly smile when the rest of us feel like nothing we do will ever make a difference. But I know that’s not how life is. If you were always happy, then I’d think there was something wrong with you.”

She smiles, placing a long kiss on my cheek. “I think you did a good job on the fort.”

“Do you feel all cozy and protected?”

“Cozy, yes. Protected,” she snorts with a broad smile, “I feel like that whenever you hold me. So I didn’t need a fort for that.”

“Oh, stop it,” I laugh, placing kiss after kiss on her cheek, “you’ll make me blush.” My actions slow as I move towards her lips, daintily kissing the corner before claiming her lips with my own. The kiss starts off as soft as the previous kisses, nothing more than a faint touch where our lips meet but not much else. And yet, the more times they make contact, the faster my heart begins to beat, and I begin to crave her.

I angle her body differently in my lap, so she is now straddling me, never breaking the kiss. As soon as she’s comfortable, my hands begin to wander: her shoulders, then her sides, her thighs, and then back up to her stomach. Her body, right then, was mine to learn and discover, and I wished to know it all.

“I was serious,” Amari whispers, moving back just enough to speak, her breath ghosting across my face. Our closeness allows me to spot everything, the raw emotion in her heavily-lidded eyes to her soft panting and racing heart. “About feeling protected with you. Sometimes I worry, but whenever you hold me, all those fears go away.”

“Well, then you never need to worry about feeling vulnerable because there’s no way I’m letting you go, Amari.”

She leans back to study me, those brown eyes once again taking my heart and throwing it in the air carelessly. Though I trust her inexplicably to catch it each time.

“Roe?”

“Yes?”

“Why the fort?”

“What do you mean?”

“You could have just pressured me to answer you and tell you what was wrong. And don’t get me wrong, I love it. It’s comfy and so cozy and fun. But it came out of nowhere.”

“You weren’t the only one who made pillow and blanket forts when you were young. When my parents died, and I was still getting over it, I made them all the time. I would stuff a bunch of stuffed animals and fall asleep inside while clutching a family picture close by.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I sigh, resting my head against her chest, letting her hug me as I stare at the makeshift fort that we had constructed. “But forts always made me feel safe. Like it was the one place where the monsters and the outside world couldn’t get me. I don’t know why. Children’s brains aren’t the easiest to make sense of. But I do remember that. And I guess ... I hoped it would do the same for you.”

She pulls back, resting her hands under my chin to pick my head up, so now I was looking at her. Her actions are soft, but soon a smirk appears.

“Should I tell the others that Roe is just a big ol’ softy?”

“No,” I chuckle, “you’ll not only ruin my reputation, but that side is explicitly for you.”

“I’m telling,” she jokes, and I playfully but with careful actions push her off my lap.

“Traitor.”

“I can’t believe you did that!” Before I can answer, she pounces on me, the two of us wrestling, though not for dominance, it was simply to wrestle. Both of us got in quick kisses, our hands brushing along the other’s skin and causing us to freeze before laughing and continuing on. I fear that we would bring down the fort, but it withstands our assault. In a short amount of time, the two of us are breathing heavily, lying with one another, and glancing at nothing in particular as we cuddle. Amari’s breathing tells me that she’s currently napping, and I pull her closer, running my fingers through her hair as I place a kiss on the top of her head.

“I got you.”